



EDUCATION STABILIZATION FUNDS

Rethink K-12 Education Discretionary Grant Program

May 2020

BACKGROUND

As part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), the U.S. Department of Education made available almost \$3 billion for the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEER). As governors across the country decide how to spend GEER funding, some are also applying to the Department’s [Rethink K-12 Education Discretionary Grant Program](#). At \$180 million, this program is comparatively small compared to the other funding streams available under the federal government’s Education Stabilization Fund, which is also part of the CARES Act. Still, it has the potential to impact millions of students, especially in states where the coronavirus pandemic has revealed stark educational inequities. The Department estimates the average discretionary grant will be \$15 million.

PROGRAM PURPOSE AND PRIORITIES

The Department is accepting applications from states seeking to address “specific educational needs of students, their parents, and teachers in public and non-public elementary and secondary schools.” Proposals must outline how such needs will be met in the context of remote learning.

Any state can apply, although those with the highest “coronavirus burden” receive preference. The Department used four measures to calculate each state’s burden. They are the percent of: population without broadband access; students ages 5-7 in poverty; share of confirmed COVID-19 cases per capita; and students in rural local educational agencies.

States can choose to apply to the program under one of three priorities.

3 Priorities of the Rethink Program

1. **Funding for remote learning through microgrants to parents and students.**
2. **The development or expansion of a high-quality course access program or a statewide virtual school.**
3. **Another strategy related to remote learning that meets a state-specific need.**

Priority 1: Remote Learning Through Microgrants

States proposing microgrants would target funding to parents who could use the money to access “high-quality remote learning options from a list of education and related services, expenses, and providers.” The idea is for states to provide parents with multiple options from multiple providers, both private and public, allowing them to tailor the educational experience to each child’s needs.

For example, parents could use a microgrant to pay for computer hardware and software, testing and tutoring fees, fees associated with dual enrollment, or therapies and services for students with special educational needs. So long as a state proposes a process for securely distributing funds and reaching out to the most disadvantaged students, it could propose a range of eligible services related to remote learning.

Priority 2: Statewide Virtual Learning or Course Access Program

States may also propose to establish or expand a statewide virtual learning or course access program. Under this priority, the Department is looking for states to make “a broad range” of online courses “available and free” to all students. Virtual schools, whether implemented for the first time or expanded, should offer both a full-time, and supplemental education program available to all students in the state.



Priority 3: Other Remote Learning Strategies

While the first two application priorities outline specific program features, the third and final type of application the Department will accept allows states more flexibility to propose their own program relevant to helping students access high-quality remote learning. Under this priority, the Department will consider proposals designed to “create, develop, implement, replicate, or take to scale field-initiated projects for remote learning.” This priority allows states to flex some creative muscle or build upon remote learning efforts already underway.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR STATES

Infrastructure

Develop or expand high-quality virtual schools and learning management systems.

States could **establish, expand, or improve virtual schools**. In doing so, states should look to providers with proven track records of quality.

- The [Florida Virtual School](#) (FLVS), for example, has refined its programming over more than twenty years. During that time, it has created curricula aligned to state standards and assessments and developed professional development programs for teachers. States could propose to work directly with FLVS or a similar provider, or they could look to these models for examples of what works.
- States should also consider the process for **procuring a statewide learning management system** and how to provide high quality professional development for teachers.
- As they invest in remote learning, states should support all schools and districts in **conducting technology audits** to understand who has access to technology, the quality of technology that students and families have, and the extent to which students and families are comfortable using technology. Such audits are a first step in understanding and closing the digital divide.

Curate a library of high-quality courses and instructional materials.

Whether in the form of a microgrant that allows students to access courses with their own designated funds or a statewide virtual school, the Rethink grant encourages states to make a broad range of high-quality courses available to all students.

- States should develop a protocol for vetting courses—understanding whether and how course content aligns to standards—and consider which courses or combinations of courses lead to specific credentials.
- States like [Louisiana](#) provide examples of how curating high-quality curricular resources impacts student learning.
- Applicants for the federal grant program could propose their own system to curate a high-quality course library or partner with an organization that could audit courses offerings and rate them for quality.

Access

Families can use microgrants to access a range of services.

Remote learning microgrants will go directly to families, who can use them to access a range of academic and other services from public and private providers. Grants should be flexible, so that families can customize them to student needs. Opportunities that families might access with microgrants include but are not limited to:

- A statewide telehealth / teletherapy system (particularly to serve students with special educational needs), [Texas provides a model](#);



- Technology for counselors to support the socioemotional health of all students, especially in the event of another crisis or long-term school closure;
- College and career counseling and/or fees related to credentialing for older students.

Articulate the population(s) you want to serve.

State leaders should decide which populations of students should receive priority under a new microgrant program.

- Students most likely to be impacted by the digital divide include low-income students and students in rural communities.
- Students with special needs may have difficulty with some remote learning programs, even when they have Internet and device access. Programs may be tailored to serve students with a range of special needs.
- Effective proposals and programs clearly outline which populations a microgrant would serve and in which order. They also delineate processes for determining access when the number of eligible applicants exceeds the number of available spaces in a program.

Innovation

Leverage existing and new investments.

The *Rethink K-12 Education Models* grant provides an opportunity for states to do something different in these unprecedented times; it also provides states the opportunity to expand new or existing initiatives.

- States could offer applications that expand offerings created with other CARES funding, such as programs or initiatives established with GEERS funds.
- States could also invest in remote learning opportunities currently in a pilot phase. Using all available data on student needs, state leaders should think boldly and consider how to positively impact as many students as possible with this discretionary grant.
- Initiatives that complement and/or expand upon programs initiated with GEER funding stand to impact more students and families.

Plan for long-term impact.

Congress provided education funding under the CARES Act to serve states, schools, and students in times of emergency, but *Rethink* grants also provide an opportunity for states to implement initiatives that could be expanded over time.

- States that choose to open a new virtual school could begin by developing courses in core subject areas and grow offerings over time.
- States that choose to provide microgrants to students and families might later expand the program to a statewide education scholarship account program.
- Planning backwards from a long-term policy goal, states can leverage federal funding to fundamentally redesign aspects of an educational system that doesn't work for all students.