

# Interim Progress Assessment: Investing COVID Relief Funds in Facilities, Operations, and Equipment

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In the spring of 2021, President Biden and Congress approved an unprecedented infusion of federal funds into our public education system to safely reopen schools, address pre- and post-pandemic unfinished learning, and build lasting, equitable systems of teaching and learning. While these resources were badly needed, it was clear that the new funding would test the ability of school systems to properly manage and allocate the money in ways that most effectively address student needs.

To provide guidance and support in this endeavor, the [Council of the Great City Schools](#) assembled a high-level task force of urban district leaders to develop and release a toolkit entitled [Investing American Rescue Plan Funds Strategically and Effectively](#). School districts are now one year into their federally funded relief and recovery efforts. As we reach the anniversary of the release of the Council's initial investment guidance, district leaders should take the opportunity to step back and assess their investment planning and implementation.

## Purpose and Audience

This document aims to provide a framework for this assessment process, specifically designed for investments in facilities, operations, and equipment. Chief Operating Officers and their teams can use this document in the ongoing process of investment planning, implementation, and oversight to ensure that federal relief funds are allocated strategically and effectively.

- The document first sums up the guiding principles and considerations provided last year.
- We then provide a series of questions to help districts assess their facilities and operations work and investments to date. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list. Rather, these questions are designed to prompt discussions about current initiatives and to suggest potential next steps.
- The next section poses questions about how the district is tracking and measuring the effectiveness of its investments and communicating successes. These will be critical considerations in the coming months and years, as districts are called on by their communities, lawmakers, and the general public to provide evidence that federal funding has led to improved student outcomes.
- The document ends by identifying a set of “warning indicators”—problematic approaches or developments based on guidance last year on what to avoid. If the district’s operations and facilities investments meet any of these criteria it should signal the need to rethink or refine its investment strategy.

*This guide was developed by the Council of the Great City Schools with funding from The Wallace Foundation.*

## Guiding Principles for Expenditures in Facilities and Operations

The Council's [investment guidance](#) from June 2021 underscored the point that a portion of the federal funds allotted to school districts would need to be used to mitigate virus transmission, improve environmental health, and meet the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) health guidelines and protocols. Historically, the funding for facilities improvements in the districts have been reduced, resulting in crumbling facilities, decaying infrastructure, and accelerated deterioration of school buildings and their operating systems. While there are many unmet facility needs, federal relief funds should be focused on addressing issues related to keeping students and staff safe, keeping schools open, and building public confidence. These may include—repairs and improvements to security and communication systems; school repair and improvements to reduce virus transmission and support student health needs; inspection, testing, maintenance, repair, replacement and/or upgrade to improve indoor air quality and ventilation; and developing and implementing health, security, and emergency protocols.

### Interim Progress Assessment Questions for Chief Operations Officers

#### 1. How have you determined what one-time investments are needed to keep students and staff safe, keep schools open, and build public confidence?

- Conducted a systemwide facilities assessment to itemize the needs of each building in the district.
- Reviewed and addressed repair and upgrade needs related to school entry systems, security camera systems, external door locking mechanisms, classroom door function, and emergency communication systems.
- Identified immediate investments that needed to be made in equipment and supplies to reopen schools quickly and safely, and within allocated budgets.
- Monitored current CDC and other guidance to help guide these expenditures.
- Identified investments that would address immediate COVID-related issues and have longer-term payoffs. (This may have included upgrading HVAC systems, replacing windows, and updating water and sanitation systems.)
- Prioritized repairing or replacing existing equipment, mechanical systems, water systems, and life and safety support systems and critical components of those systems in school facilities that were in poor condition before COVID-19 and had the greatest inequities and negative impacts on students and staff.
- Identified facilities investments that could be made to support the social-emotional and mental health needs of returning students, teachers, and staff. This might have included modifications for softer lighting, plants, and background music.
- Outfitted school buildings with additional internet infrastructure, charging stations, or electrical outlets to support the significant expansion of instructional devices and online learning resources used by students and teachers.



- Exercised caution about using federal relief funds for addressing non-pandemic-related needs that might be better addressed through a local bond effort, state building funds, or other external funding sources.
  - Other: \_\_\_\_\_
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**2. How have you maintained critical life safety systems?**



- Inspected and repaired or replaced malfunctioning security cameras.
  - Implemented a monitoring system to be notified when security cameras are malfunctioning or have another error.
  - Inspected and repaired or replaced malfunctioning doors and door locking mechanisms.
  - Conducted monthly inspections of fire extinguishers and submitted work requests for replacements as needed.
  - Tested interior fire alarms and repaired or replaced those that malfunctioned.
  - Tested and inspected fire sprinkler systems, fire dampers, and similar devices.
  - Regularly inspected, tested, and conducted preventive maintenance of emergency generators.
  - Inspected and repaired or replaced deficient gas leak detection systems.
  - Repaired or replaced emergency lighting and illuminated directional signage.
  - Tested and repaired or replaced public address and emergency notification systems, as needed.
  - Other: \_\_\_\_\_
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**3. How are you addressing professional development, staffing, and other needs associated with new equipment, system, procedures, or facilities?**

- Identified any short-term staffing needs associated with installation of new equipment.
  - Ensured that long-term costs related to repairing, cleaning, and maintaining new equipment or facilities beyond the relief funding are built into the district’s operating budget.
  - Determined whether changes were needed to staffing allocations or workflow due to facilities or equipment investments. Modified job descriptions, staffing credentials, and/or contracts to address these changes.
  - Addressed any storage and warehousing implications of investments in equipment or supplies.
  - Assessed if there was a need to invest in new or enhanced inventory tracking systems for facility or equipment expenditures, and whether additional training was required for enhanced enterprise resource planning (ERP).
  - Other: \_\_\_\_\_
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#### 4. How have you maintained ventilation and improved air quality in schools?

- Changed return air filters in HVAC systems to a minimum MERV 13 filter (or equivalent) with the greatest depth allowed by the equipment, typically 2" where possible.
- Inspected all HVAC equipment and areas and rooms supported by these systems to ensure proper operation, paying particular attention to interior or sealed rooms, and repaired or replaced all inoperable HVAC equipment (e.g., blowers, exhausts, RTUs, AHUs, univents, fan coil units, and heat pumps).
- Referenced the [US Environmental Protection Agency's Indoor Air Quality Tools for Schools Action Kit website](#) as an additional resource.
- Replaced inoperable fresh air dampers that had burnt-out motors or damaged actuators and cleaned and lubricated remaining dampers, so they operate at the maximum capacity permissible.
- Repaired or replaced all roof exhausts to assist with air movement and air changes within the buildings.
- Repaired or replaced all toilet exhausts.
- Repaired or replaced all existing control systems so settings and schedules can be set to increase the times that the ventilation systems and fans are running for a minimum of two hours in occupied mode, with peak outside air rate, before students, teachers and staff arrive each day.
- Commissioned equipment, ductwork, and controls that meet standards and have a proper unit baseline for operations that provide the intended ventilation rate based on planned capacity.
- Installed doors and windows that can be opened two hours with a minimum of two windows that are operational with stops in place to prevent lower sash frames from opening more than 6".
- Repaired or replaced all supply, return, and exhaust fans so they are operating properly.
- Inspected, repaired, and cleaned air supply systems that have been unused for extended periods of time.
- Ordered quantities of filters and belts with appropriate size specifications so they are available to schools when needed.
- Acquired automated or hand-held devices to measure carbon dioxide levels in buildings and classrooms to determine if sufficient ventilation is being provided when they are occupied.
- Conducted regularly scheduled HVAC preventive maintenance inspections to ensure units and systems are operating properly and providing adequate ventilation.
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
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## 5. How have you improved water quality?

- Routinely tested potable water, either by the water purveyor or the municipality, to verify water quality and purity at the point-of-service.
- Ensured the potable water systems are frequently and thoroughly flushed at all access points; and, that fixtures (e.g., shower facilities and eye-wash stations in labs), which are used infrequently are regularly flushed after periods of inactivity during breaks of one week or longer.
- As part of a Long-Term Asset Management Plan, developed a program of regular onsite water testing and replacement of piping that has deteriorated due to numerous factors, including the pressure and velocity of the water within the pipes, the quality, pH, and mineral content of the water that ensures the water at the use points is of the highest quality.
- Retrofitted existing water distribution systems in the district's larger facilities so chilling and heating can be monitored and required temperatures can be always maintained within the systems.
- Acquired effective chemical treatment, such as chlorine to treat water systems with marginal issues; hydrochlorination for systems with significant problems; and copper-silver ionization or chlorine dioxide to control Legionella in potable water distribution systems.
- Acquired and installed ultraviolet disinfection systems as part of any of the district's water-cooling systems.
- Replaced or supplemented water drinking fountains with bottle refill stations.
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_



## Measuring and Communicating Success

### How are you monitoring the impact of investments in facilities and operations?



- Developed targeted outcome measures and goals for investments.
- Identified the data needed to measure effectiveness, including a subset of relevant Key Performance Indicators, and the process by which data will be collected, analyzed, and shared.
- Tracked the use of programs and resources to ensure the most vulnerable populations are benefitting from these investments.
- Engaged with the research department to design a plan for assessing and reporting on outcomes.

### How are you communicating the impact of investments in facilities and operations?



- Collected evidence and examples of how investments are positively impacting schools, students, and families across the district.
- Identified key stakeholders and the best avenues for sharing successes with each group (e.g., blogs, newsletters, board updates, town halls, radio spots, and television appearances).
- Collaborated with the district communications team on a coordinated outreach plan.



STOP

## WARNING INDICATORS

- Investments have been made in facilities, equipment, or infrastructure that may easily invite public protest and scrutiny given their tenuous connection to the pandemic and student safety (e.g., sporting equipment, athletic facilities improvements, parking lot resurfacing, or new furniture for district offices).
- The district has overspent on immediate, short-term goods.
- The district is not sufficiently tracking operational expenditures or the impact or effectiveness of these investments.
- Facilities investments have added to the school system's resource inequities.
- The district has not clearly communicated with stakeholders and the public about how and why funds have been spent on facilities, school safety, and related capital needs.
- Funds are allocated to fulfill departmental "wish lists" rather than being driven by a districtwide facilities assessment and spending plan.
- Upgrades to ventilation systems are not done in compliance with best practices or CDC recommendations.
- Ongoing inspections, repairs, or maintenance of critical school safety systems have not been completed for two years and are out of date.
- Significant staffing changes have been made that will result in long-term cost implications.
- Facility expenditures have been made without considering long-term maintenance and repair costs.

***If any of these statements describe your district's operational or facilities initiatives or investments, you should rethink your strategy.***