

Interim Progress Assessment: School Board Monitoring of the Use of ARP Funds

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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 school board members.

- The document first sums up the guiding principles and considerations provided last year.
- We then provide a series of questions aimed to help school board members assess how well they have incorporated these principles and recommendations in their activities and oversight over the past year. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list. Rather, these questions are designed to prompt discussion about current policies and practices and to suggest potential next steps.
- 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 school board’s oversight activities meet any of these criteria it should signal the need to rethink or refine its leadership approach.

Guiding Principles for School Boards

The Council’s [investment guidance](#) from June 2021 underscored the point that federal funds come with some risk, but they also come with enormous opportunities to innovate, rethink what works, and improve the overall quality of what public education does on behalf of our children. Nowhere do these things converge more convincingly than at the school board level. School boards have the responsibility to reflect the values of their community, encourage bold thinking, ensure equity, and monitor the effectiveness of administrative action.

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School boards have a critical role to play to ensure school systems meet their academic and other goals with the federal relief funds and with school system resources in general. Research suggests that a school board can better move the needle on student outcomes if it devotes more time monitoring student growth toward the board's goals (*progress monitoring*) than monitoring program inputs, purchases, and contracts (*project management*). There is likely to be an uptick in the number of contracts that the district issues over the relief fund grant period, but if this is where the board devotes most of its time, the important work of overseeing student results is likely to be compromised. Evidence also suggests that school boards that evaluate themselves for how well they are fulfilling their oversight and monitoring roles perform more effectively than boards that do not hold themselves responsible for their work.

Interim Progress Assessment Questions for School Boards

1. How is the board providing high-level guidance to district leadership in setting investment priorities and determining desired outcomes and objectives?

- Communicated the importance of using federal relief funding to safely reopen schools, address unfinished learning, and establish sustainable and equitable systems of operation.
- Identified investments and activities that should not receive federal relief funds.
- Identified equity as an overarching principle in the spending of federal dollars and assessed the administration's plans to ensure alignment with that priority.
- Worked with the administration to identify how success will be defined based on the district vision and goals, what metrics of progress will be employed, and how and when reporting will be shared.
- Articulated data, measures, or information the board needs to help gauge the district's overall progress in meeting investment goals. These measures privilege indicators of student performance outcomes including achievement, well-being, and student engagement.
- Requested the evidence of effectiveness the administration is using to decide how and where to allocate ARP funds.
- Reviewed and approved the district's plan for the use of funding. As a prerequisite for approval, ensured that the district's plan allocates resources in a way that is consistent with the board's overall vision and goals.
- Other: _____



2. How is the board monitoring progress and holding the district accountable for the strategic and effective use of federal funds?

- Set a regular calendar for reviewing and monitoring district progress in spending federal relief funds and the results attained to date.
- Reviewed and discussed how the spending of federal relief dollars augment and reinforce the district's long-term strategic plan.
- Monitored how federal relief funds are being used to advance the district's equity goals and build district and staff capacity.
- In partnership with district leadership, assessed investments to ensure sustainability and long-term impact, mitigating any potential fallout from the three-year "funding cliff."
- Ensured that funds are adequately and regularly tracked, discussed, and reported separately from the general budget.
- Monitored the academic progress and wellbeing of students through regular and scheduled reports on established measures of unfinished learning, mental health, attendance, and engagement.
- Monitored the progress of specific student groups by tracking student outcome data disaggregated by race, socioeconomic status, language, and disability.
- Ensured compliance with various federal and state requirements on the use of funds. In collaboration with district leadership, developed a schedule of compliance updates and reports to assist in monitoring.
- Other: _____



3. How is the board advancing transparency and dialogue with the community around the district's investment strategy?

- Solicited ideas and suggestions from the community about what the outcomes should be for investments made with federal relief dollars.
- Established a process and regular calendar for the community to receive updates and provide feedback on the implementation and effectiveness of new initiatives, programs, and projects.
- Helped communicate the district's investment priorities and the rationale behind allocation decisions to the general public.
- Helped to build understanding and buy in for the district's investment plan among all members of the community, even if all decisions were not unanimous.
- Other: _____





STOP

WARNING INDICATORS

- The school board is focused on project management and not tracking how federal relief aid is impacting student outcomes.
- The school board did not review the district's spending plan for alignment to the district's goals and vision.
- Investments are not focused on improving student outcomes or meeting the needs of the students most impacted by the pandemic.
- Majority of funding is spent on hiring new staff.
- There are no regular intervals established for reviewing and monitoring federal relief spending.
- Spending of federal relief dollars is not meeting established timelines.
- The school board mandates specific programs, materials, or projects to be funded with federal relief funds.
- Individual board members expect their suggestions to be implemented by the administration, even when not part of a board decision.
- Board members who disagreed with a board decision compromise the public messaging of a new initiative, program, or project.

***If any of these statements describe your district's school board efforts,
you should rethink your strategy.***