

American Rescue Plan Funding in New Jersey

Key Details and Strategies

The federal American Rescue Plan (ARP), signed into law in March of 2021, provides an unprecedented investment in education, giving states and school districts access to funds to help safely reopen and sustain the safe operation of schools. In addition, this funding is intended to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the needs of students more strategically.

This quick guide outlines key details of the ARP funding in New Jersey and offers specific strategies so that schools, educators, families, parent groups, and community stakeholders can better advocate for systemic changes that intentionally target the education of students with the greatest needs, including students with disabilities.

How much of the ARP funding is available for New Jersey?

- ☀ The ARP package includes over \$2.7 billion for PreK-12 education in New Jersey. While the state education agency (NJDOE) can retain up to 10 percent of the amount, at least 90 percent (i.e., over \$2.4 billion) will be allocated directly to school districts with the specific amounts sent to each based on population and poverty. [See school district allocation table PDF](#)

How can the ARP funding be spent by the NJDOE and districts?

- ☀ The NJDOE must use 5% of retained funds to address learning loss, 1% for summer enrichment programs, and 1% for comprehensive after-school programs.
- ☀ While the NJDOE must abide by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) restrictions when spending the specifically reserved for special education funding, the bulk of district funding comes with much more flexibility. [See state plans here](#)
- ☀ Districts must use at least 20% of the ARP funds on evidence-based interventions to address learning loss. In addition, districts must ensure that the programs and interventions respond to students' academic, social, and emotional needs and address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on students living in poverty, English learners, racial and ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities.
- ☀ The remaining 80 percent of funds may be spent on any activities authorized by the ESEA, IDEA, Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance and may also include expenses related to professional learning for educators, access to and purchase of educational technology, and certain types of facilities improvements.
- ☀ The ARP contains a new Maintenance of Equity requirement for states and districts. More information on this requirement is available through [guidance issued by the United States Department of Education in June of 2021](#).
- ☀ All state and district funds must be obligated for use by September 30, 2024.

How should districts and schools spend the ARP funds?

To optimize the positive impact of the ARP funding on addressing the needs of students with disabilities, districts and schools should consider the following strategies in key areas:

School Operations and Facilities

- ☀ Work with broad range of stakeholders, including education experts, families, advocates, and community-based organizations, to review and revise any district policies and procedures to ensure health and safety, maximize instructional time, allow flexibility and innovation while maintaining transparency and accountability. For example, set up community health clinics in schools to administer COVID-19 testing and vaccinations, partner with community service agencies to provide related services, or work with [NJ's Parent Training and Information Center](#) to train educators, district professionals, and families on understanding and implementing special education services.
- ☀ Improve school building facilities to facilitate full and safe access for the entire school community. For example, ensure all windows can open, improve ventilation systems, use transparent space dividers, and increase physical accessibility.
- ☀ Ensure building modifications are guided by [universal design principles](#), allowing facilities to be accessible to all.

Screening, Assessments, and Special Education

- ☀ Conduct various assessments, including assessments as part of the special education evaluation process, to provide valuable data to IEP teams, including parents, as they determine eligibility for services. If eligible, the assessment data provide a baseline for present levels of academic achievement and functions performance levels.
- ☀ Review testing materials and ensure they reflect best practices in assessing culturally and linguistically diverse students. Use [assessment materials that are high-quality, relevant, and culturally sensitive](#) allowing students to be identified more quickly and equitably.
- ☀ Implement robust multi-tiered system of supports (e.g., [New Jersey Tiered System of Supports, or NJTSS](#)) to ensure that high-quality interventions for all tiers are available to students, whether they are attending school in person, virtually, or through hybrid model.
- ☀ Provide ongoing coaching to all staff to ensure implementation fidelity in delivering screeners and interventions. Also, consistently update educators and parents on the student progress and make data-driven, collaborative decisions.
- ☀ Address the backlog of referrals for special education and update Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). For example, consider creating a "referral response team" by coordinating contracts with multiple providers (e.g., social workers, school psychologists, speech/language therapists, and occupational therapists). This team can quickly address the backlog of evaluations and assess the current performance of students to ensure accurate knowledge of current strengths and needs.
- ☀ Use members of the "referral response team" to lead IEP team meetings and collaborate with families to develop updated IEPs and plans to address learning loss.
- ☀ Use extended eligibility for special education available for students with disabilities who will age out of IDEA in 2022 and 2023 to focus on transition services and community-based experiences. [For additional information, see S3434 Fact Sheet.](#)



- ☀ Address the inadequate provision of related services and supports. Create a multidisciplinary team, including Child Study Team members and families, that will review student data to develop a clear understanding of who needs which services. Also, this team in collaboration with the local Special Education Parent Advisory Group (SEPAG) should create a directory of local service providers and begin forging working relationships to ensure the provision of needed, and potentially compensatory, related services and supports.

Trauma, Mental Health, and Social Emotional Supports

- ☀ Enhance Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) systems, including Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), with trauma-informed practices by partnering with expert consultants or organizations, like [New Jersey Positive Behavior Support in Schools \(NJ PBSIS\)](#).
- ☀ Provide ongoing training to all staff to build their capacity around the impact of trauma and early detection techniques in anticipation of an uptick in behaviors stemming from trauma.
- ☀ Refine protocols, data systems, and interventions to ensure alignment to trauma-informed practices.
- ☀ Ensure school-wide practices and strategies are trauma-informed and support the whole child, focusing on [restorative justice](#) and [social emotional skills-building](#) rather than punitive discipline.
- ☀ Prioritize building students' executive functioning skills and social emotional development.
- ☀ Engage community-based organizations to provide access to mental health supports for students, families, and staff.
- ☀ Examine and improve policies and practices to prevent and reduce the use of exclusionary discipline, especially the restraint, seclusion, referral to law enforcement, suspension, and expulsion of students of color and students with disabilities.
- ☀ Invest in training and coaching for staff on positive behavior supports, self-awareness, and implicit bias.
- ☀ Coach and build staff skills around verbal de-escalation techniques to prevent crisis behavior.
- ☀ Use Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs) to collaborate with staff in developing behavior prevention plans, safety plans, and direct support to students.

Learning Impacts and Opportunities

- ☀ Identify opportunities to expand learning time, such as summer school, after-school, and extended school year programs, to provide students with the critically needed increase in time with instructional staff.
- ☀ Ensure such programs are not offered in place of extended school year services, which typically address skill regression after the summer break for students with disabilities and are decided on by each student's IEP team.
- ☀ Expand implementation of evidence-based practices and tutoring programs shown to achieve equity and positive outcomes for specific populations. [See IDEAs That Work](#) for effective strategies supported by evidence and research.
- ☀ Use multiple sources of teacher and learner data, disaggregated by subgroup, to make decisions.
- ☀ Provide professional development to staff to ensure implementation of best practices for high-quality instruction, including smaller heterogeneous groupings and accelerated learning models, as well as differentiated instruction, and accommodations/modifications.



- ☀ Schedule time for general and special education staff to work together to ensure additional programming is complementary and aligned to developmentally appropriate expectations.
- ☀ Provide coaching to all educators to ensure they are implementing new practices with fidelity, and high-quality instruction is available for all students, especially students with disabilities.
- ☀ Build school-wide capacity around [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#) by investing in comprehensive professional learning for staff on the implementation of UDL principles.
- ☀ Invest in one-to-one technology devices, Internet access, and assistive technology for all students to increase virtual and hybrid learning opportunities at home.
- ☀ Provide special educators, general educators, students and families with ongoing training and support on digital literacy, accessibility features, and selecting and using various technology platforms.

Families and Community Engagement

- ☀ Ensure diverse family members and community-based organizations serve as members and facilitators in a full spectrum of district- and school-level decision-making groups, including Board of Education, [Special Education Parent Advisory Groups \(SEPAGs\)](#), Title 1 committee, bi-lingual committee, school climate, school health, and school reopening committee or pandemic response team.
- ☀ Anticipate that families may require language interpretation or translation services to meaningfully collaborate with schools. Purchasing translation services for written and phone communication and hiring culturally and linguistically diverse staff are critical steps towards encouraging authentic and equitable family partnerships. For additional strategies to build diverse family engagement, see [Quick Guide “How Can SEPAGs Build Diverse Family Engagement?”](#)
- ☀ Support local SEPAG to facilitate ongoing two-way communication between families of students with disabilities and the district, discuss concerns and solutions, share resources, and provide direct input to the district on policies, programs, and processes impacting students with disabilities and their families.
- ☀ Contact the [START-Engaging Parents of Students with Disabilities \(START-EPSD\) Project](#) at SPAN Parent Advocacy Network for assistance related to developing and sustaining SEPAGs, best practices for including of students with disabilities in general education, literacy strategies for families, and NJTSS resources.

References and additional resources:

- ☀ [The Rising Tide that Lifts All Boats: Investing Stimulus Dollars with an Equity Focus](#)
- ☀ [Quick Guide COVID-19: Key Questions to Ask Before Schools Reopen](#)
- ☀ [American Rescue Plan Act Fact Sheet](#)
- ☀ [New Jersey ARP ESSER State Plan Highlights](#)
- ☀ [Comparison of ESSER Fund \(CARES Act\), ESSER II Fund \(CRRSA Act\), and ARP ESSER \(ARP Act\)](#)
- ☀ [The Road Forward: Engage, Recover, and Reimagine Education in New Jersey](#)
- ☀ [ED COVID-19 Handbook, Volume 1: Strategies for Safely Reopening Elementary and Secondary Schools](#)
- ☀ [ED COVID-19 Handbook, Volume 2: Roadmap to Reopening Safely and Meeting All Students’ Needs](#)
- ☀ [NJ Tiered System of Support Resources Collection](#)
- ☀ [Quick Reference Mental Health Guide \(NJDOE and NJDCF, November 2020\)](#)
- ☀ [Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports](#)
- ☀ [“Embracing the New Normal: Toward a More Liberatory Approach to Family Engagement”](#)



For a complete guide to starting and supporting a SEPAG in your school, district or community, visit the START-EPSD Project web-page (bit.ly/startepsd) and/or connect with a Parent Group Specialist in your region.

**Access the SEPAG Guide:
tiny.cc/SEPAGguideEnglish**

**bit.ly/startepsd
start@spanadvocacy.org**

