

Policy Brief

April 2020

How Wisconsin Should Spend its CARES K-12 Funding

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CARES Act & K-12 Education

Last week, President Trump signed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) Act. This legislation provides up to \$2.2 trillion of relief as the country deals with the coronavirus shutdowns and aftermath. In addition to helping businesses and families, the CARES Act invests about \$30 billion into K-12 schools and higher education institutions.

Governor Tony Evers and school districts will have the authority to access millions of federal dollars and decide how to use the funds to benefit Wisconsin's education systems.

With many Wisconsin schools, both public and private, not prepared to switch to distance learning with such short notice, Governor Evers and school districts must allocate the federal dollars to address immediate and future concerns within a year of receiving the funds. Schools and communities are facing challenges right now, like ensuring students will still receive meals and helping families access resources like broadband and devices to do schoolwork. Too many Wisconsin students

Takeaways:

1. The CARES Act is a massive influx of funding into K-12 that needs to be spent soon to provide relief to schools struggling with COVID fallout. Policymakers should tailor the money to Wisconsin's K-12 needs.
2. Through the Governor's Emergency Education Relief, Governor Evers has discretion on where to spend federal dollars.
3. We provide a number of recommendations to Governor Evers, including helping teachers and schools with online learning, incentives for literacy programs, and covering costs for remedial education.
4. Also, the CARES Act directs funds to local educational agencies (LEAs).
5. LEAs could expand summer school, develop virtual courses, purchase sanitizing equipment, fund an educational expense account for low-income families, among other recommendations we provide.

were already struggling in school and falling behind their peers; the reality of distance learning will likely exacerbate both the racial achievement gap and summer slide for students.

The CARES Act is a massive influx of funding into K-12 that needs to be spent soon. As such it represents challenges to policymakers, requiring thoughtful decisions to be made quickly, collaboratively, and transparently.

Some states are already preparing for this. Arkansas Governor Hutchinson announced the [creation of a steering committee](#), made up of representatives from the state legislature and the administration, to direct the federal funding.

Below we explain the two main pots of money Governor Evers and school districts can access and make recommendations on how the federal funds can best be tailored to meet the needs of Wisconsin.

Governor's Emergency Education Relief

The CARES Act allocates \$3 billion towards the Governor's Emergency Education Relief, to be divided among all governors according to a formula. Each governor has an immense amount of discretion to determine how to spend this money. The [only restriction is that the Governor's fund](#) must be used to help K-12 schools or higher education most significantly impacted by the coronavirus and any support to education-related entities in the state that the Governor deems essential to carrying out emergency educational services to students. Governors have to apply for this money and the process will likely start by the end of the month.

With so much discretion, Governor Evers will have the opportunity to empower school leaders and help address these challenges. But it is crucial that the Governor uses the funding to target programs that are working and can help students that are in jeopardy of being left behind due to the fall-out of the COVID crisis. We recommend Governor Evers explore the following:

1. *Give teachers a stipend to help with professional development, focused on distance learning.* [Florida's Department of Education](#) is partnering with the state's virtual schools to provide school districts' teachers support for working in an online environment. This would make sense for Wisconsin's teachers since many of them have not taught in distance learning environments.
2. *Fund expenses to schools for online learning.* As schools switch to distance learning, there are costs to create a school based on distance learning. For example, online educational subscriptions for students, costs to provide each student with an electronic device, materials for teachers, among others. According to a 2019-2020 survey of school districts, only [60%](#) of Wisconsin districts have 1:1 devices for students grades 6-12. Federal funds could be used to help schools, districts or community partners defray these costs.

3. *Aid nonprofits already working to address Wisconsin student's learning gaps in reading and math.* Organizations like the Boys and Girls Clubs provide [programming](#) to help students of all ages work on important subjects like reading and math.
4. *Support "education-related entities".* The CARES Act does not direct federal money directly to private schools, so they are dependent on public schools to provide them access to services funded by these federal dollars. As we've [documented](#), there are private schools - like St. Augustine Prep and GRACE in Green Bay - that are doing great work for the community during the COVID crisis, such as providing meals for all residents, making masks, and providing assistance to low-income families. They do this while continuing to work to educate their students.

As an "education-related entity", Evers can direct federal dollars to private schools so that they are prepared to meet the educational and community challenges of COVID. With over [120,000 students](#) being educated in private schools - including at least [41,000 low-income students](#), it is imperative that he do so.

5. *Stipend for teachers in low-performing schools.* Many of the state's lowest performing schools serve low-income and minority children, many of which are part of the racial achievement gap. Pre-COVID this was the state's biggest challenge. But COVID risks expanding the racial achievement - already the worst in the country - and teachers will need additional support to combat the myriad of challenges that will arise.
6. *Create incentives for literacy programs.* On the 2018-2019 state report cards, Wisconsin student's [reading proficiency declined](#) and less than 40% of students are proficient in reading. Federal funding could be used to create incentives for a statewide literacy program that encourages reading development for students.
7. *Encourage summer learning camps.* Distance learning makes hands-on learning in STEM courses and FAB labs more difficult. While Project Lead the Way curriculum has been modified for the schools that participate, many students are still missing out on some of the hands-on learning. Federal funding could be used to create summer camps that would help bridge these gaps for students.
8. *Cover remedial education for incoming college freshmen next fall.* High school seniors should not be penalized for schools that struggle to adapt to virtual learning for the spring. But this could result in more high school seniors taking remedial education classes in college. Federal funding could go towards institutions of higher education to help defray the costs of the remedial education courses. The funding could be distributed as new scholarships to incoming freshmen who will need to take these classes.

Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund

In addition to the Governor's Fund, the CARES Act allocates \$13 billion to local educational agencies (LEAs), which include school districts and public charter schools. Wisconsin's school districts will receive its share and the money will be distributed by the Department of Public Instruction via grants to local educational agencies. The [CARES Act identifies a wide variety of ways](#) that school districts can use the funding, for example to help respond to the coronavirus crisis, including activities like funding for principals and school leaders, programs and services to help at-risk students, like students with disabilities and low-income; and provide training and sanitation relief for schools.

The Department of Public Instruction and school districts will have a similar opportunity to use the federal funds to address local and individualized challenges. We recommend that DPI and school districts consider the following:

1. *Distribute the money to empower school leaders and teachers* – not keep the funding at the administrative level. School leaders must be given funding to address school's individual needs.
2. *Expand summer school options.* Eventually school buildings will reopen, and students will need supplemental education to help prepare them for the upcoming fall. Expanding summer school is one way to help students be better prepared for the fall.

For even more flexibility, school districts can apply for a [waiver from the state](#) and change their start date, perhaps starting earlier to give students and teachers extra class time to address the lost classroom time during distance learning this spring and the anticipated summer learning loss.

3. *Development of virtual courses.* According to a 2019-2020 survey of Wisconsin school districts, [66 school districts](#) out of 421 have implemented virtual learning time. This means that many districts are playing catch-up. School districts should use the funding to develop and implement virtual course curriculum for their teachers and students.
4. *Create an Education Expense Account* for families with children with specific needs. The CARES Act specifically permits LEAs to use the federal funding for activities to help children that meet any of the following criteria: low-income, are of racial or ethnic minority, children with disabilities, English language learners, homeless or foster care. A school district could use federal funding to create an account that families could use to purchase activities or services to address their child's unique needs.
5. *Address student and school distance learning access issues,* including student access to devices and broadband. Distance learning is most effective if a student has a device that allows them to communicate with their teachers directly. With only [60%](#) of public students in grades 6-12 having one to one access to devices, 15% of the school districts

lacking mobile networks in their buildings, and with as many as [7 school districts](#) that do not have access to fiber connections, federal funding can help fill these gaps.

6. *Purchase supplies to sanitize and clean facilities* and provide training to staff on sanitation. When schools reopen, student and school staff safety will be vital. One way to ensure everyone's safety is to purchase the supplies necessary to clean the facilities. But it also important that school staff are trained on how to prevent the spread of highly contagious viruses in the future.
7. *Work with public charter and private schools* – as legally required (see below) - that are located within their boundaries. At a time of crisis and immense challenges, school districts should be working with schools from all sectors, so all children benefit from this funding.

Two MORE Thoughts

Finally, two more thoughts. **To our friends at private schools (and the LEAs that disburse the money):** The CARES Act requires that any money from either the Governor's fund and the Elementary and Secondary that fund a school district (LEA) must also include private schools. As usual, federal funding must be shared equitably with private school students and teachers. It is critical now more than ever than public schools fulfill their legal requirements by meeting and consulting with private schools about funding.

Second, as Wisconsin grapples with concerns about the budget and funding from tax revenue, **this federal funding may be a lifeline for Wisconsin's K-12 system.** The CARES Act requires that Wisconsin continues to maintain support for public and private schools. But this federal funding may help alleviate state and school budget challenges if state revenue is low. One way to do this is to use the federal funding to cover the gap between the expectation of state funding and the state funding that is allocated in 2021.

Conclusion

The CARES Act was passed to provide relief and assistance to combat the impact of COVID so the allocation of K-12 dollars must be considered very carefully. With these recommendations, we believe that Wisconsin can address the immediate K-12 issues arising from COVID and better position its students for next school year.