

The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021: Historic Opportunities for School Libraries & School Librarians

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The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 includes \$360 billion for state and local government and \$162 billion for K-12 and higher education. Additionally, over \$7 billion is available to schools and libraries for internet-capable devices and connections, as well as other funding. This massive infusion of funding represents an extraordinary opportunity for the school library community. Library advocates are urged to develop plans and engage at the state and local levels to ask for some of these funds to be allocated to libraries.

This funding will be distributed to address priority issues that communities face. School libraries are well-positioned to address challenges in schools and communities including learning loss, social-emotional development, returning to school in-person, reengaging students, rebuilding school culture, and expanding connectivity and access. School librarians and leaders should be prepared to advocate for funding to support their school library programs and staff.

This document outlines possible opportunities for states, localities, and school districts to consider. Different jurisdictions will have different priorities and opportunities. Accordingly, some ideas here might be adopted directly and others may stimulate brainstorming for different proposals or require tailoring for local fit. Of course, state/local considerations and examples should be incorporated in all cases. Governors and other officials will receive competing requests for funds; therefore, libraries need to plan ahead to make the case for how money from state and local sources would be well invested in school libraries. Remember that funding for K-12 schools might not explicitly include school libraries, just as funding in states for libraries could otherwise be focused on public libraries. It is important that you proactively advocate specifically for school library funding.

For each topic, we need to be clear how school libraries/librarians are part of the solution to a COVID-related or other pressing problem that decision makers face in the state/locality/district (e.g., WHY should the governor allocate money to school libraries?). Then, we need to clearly state what we need. Proposals that are easy for decision makers to implement will find the most appeal.

Expanded Library Hours

School libraries can offer expanded hours to make resources, programming, and reference support available to students and families. Expanded hours could include before and after school, on non-school days (such as weekends, or during school breaks), and especially during the summer. Funding can be used to pay for staff support during the extended times as well as new or bolstered programming and services.

Expanded hours would benefit students and families with additional literacy, technology, and curriculum resources to mitigate learning loss and improve access for studying, completing assignments, and enrichment. School libraries could also offer programming for social-emotional learning, technology, and academic competencies during the extended hours. The additional availability of school librarians would provide more opportunities for collaboration with and support of classroom teachers on new initiatives.

Reconfiguration of Physical Library Space

To address the urgent priority of safely reopening school buildings, school libraries need funding to reconfigure their spaces for optimal learning environments while also addressing health and safety guidelines. School libraries will need personal protective equipment such as masks, hand sanitizer, cleaning supplies and plexiglass; updated furnishings that are easy to clean and enable distance; replacement items that were lost during the pandemic; and adjustments to the physical space.

Summer Literacy Programs

In partnership with local public libraries, where possible, school libraries and/or school librarians can use funding to offer summer literacy programs to address learning loss. This collaboration, for example, could support the curation of a summer reading collection (physical and digital) and distribution/access to children and families.

In addition to the collection and materials, school librarians could be hired as summer fellows by the public library in order to work, within local contract limitations. As a summer reading fellow, the school librarian could supplement public library offerings by including curriculum-aligned activities. For example, the school librarian could focus on reviewing prior year content or preparing students for upcoming year content. Summer fellows could also support curbside pick-up and book mobiles for more touchpoints and access to literacy and reading materials.

Districts should consider local partnerships including parks departments, summer camps, farmers markets, and other places where school library staff can do outreach and connect with students.

Funding could be directed to school districts, public libraries, or other entities (e.g., parks departments). The desirability of a funding host will vary with local conditions, such as the willingness of an entity to host a program; school librarian employment contracts; and ease of funding administration for the decision maker.

Strengthening Ability of School Librarians to Respond to the Crisis

School librarians are well-positioned to contribute to reversing learning loss faced by so many K-12 students. School librarians offer direct instruction; develop, acquire, and offer in-library and online services; and collaborate with classroom teachers and other staff, contributing information and technology resources and expertise to curricular and administrative effectiveness. Additionally, by highlighting relevant content, school librarians have an opportunity to address Social Studies and Science content standards during library skills classes as a way to supplement instruction that may have been missed during the pandemic.

However, many schools and districts are without school librarians. American Rescue Plan Act funding should be used to hire school librarians and restore positions in cases where they have been lost. New positions should be established for three years, and school districts must certify that these hires would represent a net increase in school librarian staffing from the two previous academic years.

For states that have mixed levels of staffing across the state, additional funding opportunities might be considered to provide resources for districts/schools that have maintained staffing. In districts with school librarians, but no librarian at the district level, funding could be used to pay for a District Library Coordinator. This could serve as encouragement for continuation of staffing while other districts receive new funding for staffing. The District Library Coordinator could provide coordinated library services and resources to schools based on need and respond to critical needs effectively with responsive leadership. The result would increase efficiency and effectiveness.

In cases where certified librarians and district supervisors are already employed, districts might also consider funding school libraries to hire additional support staff to run library programming and provide streamlined coordination of library services and materials.

State School Library Digital Services

Funding could contribute to a statewide digital school library of K-12 content. Statewide licensing of content or expansion of existing offerings would provide additional benefits through a common set of resources that can be enhanced with instructional support, curriculum alignment, and other scaffolding documents.

The digital content in this state resource could include databases of all kinds, such as EBSCO or Gale, as well as ebooks and digital audio books. All school libraries in the state would be eligible to gain access. While such a resource would help all school libraries, the smallest and least-resourced school libraries would benefit the most, since they often lack the resources to obtain access to many (or any) digital resources.

This idea would necessitate a plausible home in the state government to manage this service.

Technology to Enable Distance Learning

Through the Federal Communications Commission, more than \$7 billion is available to K-12 schools and public libraries to obtain hardware such as tablets, laptops, and hotspots, and internet services for this hardware for students, school staff and teachers, and library patrons to use at home (and other locations). Though the program may resemble the E-rate program, it is different in material ways, notably 100% reimbursement (i.e., no match requirement) and funding for devices, not only the connectivity-related expenses. Also, the program is expected to allow for reimbursement for some expenses already incurred during the pandemic (e.g., tablets purchased during some portion of 2020).

A school library could obtain a set of devices and associated connectivity to enable remote classes, tutoring sessions, and general research and reading activities. As students return to the classroom part-time or full-time, these devices could likely also be used in the school library.

Specific parameters for eligible purchases and uses are now being developed and will be published by the FCC.

State Level School Library Coordinator

States may consider funding a school library coordinator position with the State Library or the State Department of Education. This position would positively impact school libraries and the critical work that they do by streamlining state communication, funding, professional development, standards implementation, and research. A school library coordinator at the state level, even part time, provides someone who can work to include school libraries in

appropriate initiatives. Where a part-time position already exists, funding could be used to make this position full-time. Larger states could ask for 2 or 3 FTE for this role.

In addition to re-establishing, establishing, or strengthening the state-level school library coordinator position, a further ask is for funding to support initiatives described elsewhere in this document. The amount of the ask varies for each state, of course, but generally think in terms of millions or at least hundreds of thousands of dollars, not tens of thousands.

The Mobile School Library

Just as some public libraries conduct outreach via bookmobiles (nowadays outfitted with technology), an analogue for school libraries can be created. Vans or buses could be purchased and outfitted with physical materials as well as computers and WiFi and staffed vans with a school librarian.

The Mobile School Library (MSL) would engage with students outside of schooltime (e.g., summer), or at schools without school libraries and librarians, particularly in low-income and under-resourced areas. The MSL could provide *temporary* relief and support to smaller and poorer schools but does not supplant the need for the establishment of a professionally staffed library in a school.

In addition to making stops at schools without libraries, the MSL has multiple other purposes. For example, it could stop at community centers, summer camp programs, and even the local farmers markets or fairs--basically anywhere children may congregate.

Tutoring and Enrichment Programming

Many families are in favor of extended-day learning or summer school options to help students catch up or enrich their academic and social-emotional learning. School libraries can offer wraparound supports and resources to provide tutoring and enrichment activities beyond the core curriculum. School libraries are equipped to support student-directed learning and inquiry and offer individualized materials for families or small groups to use to enrich school learning.

With support from the district, school libraries could survey families to find out what additional resources and learning opportunities could be made available beyond the core curriculum and learning standards. Beyond mitigating learning loss, this opportunity could help encourage an interest in self-directed and life-long learning, enriching students' academic and social-emotional development. School librarians can offer technology for check out such as Chromebooks or tablets, take-home maker spaces, learning games, individual projects, and book bags for families to pick up. More generally, school libraries could develop and deploy

new services to help to overcome the learning and social & emotional learning gaps from the pandemic, as well as strengthen existing services.

Conclusion

More than \$500 billion in supplementary funding—beyond the usual federal programs—will soon be going out to the states and localities. Local officials have great latitude over how these funds are allocated under the rubric of COVID relief and recovery.

WE MUST ASK FOR MONEY FOR SCHOOL LIBRARIES AND SCHOOL LIBRARIANS!!

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Resources

Institute of Museum and Library Services

Federal Government Invests \$200M in Libraries and Museums to Stimulate American Communities

<https://imls.gov/news/federal-government-invests-200m-libraries-and-museums-stimulate-american-communities>

Department of Education

American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief

<https://oese.ed.gov/american-rescue-plan-elementary-and-secondary-school-emergency-relief/>

Statement from U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona on Signing of the American Rescue Plan

<https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/statement-us-secretary-education-miguel-cardona-signing-american-rescue-plan>

Department of Education Announces American Rescue Plan Funds for All 50 States, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia to Help Schools Reopen

<https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/department-education-announces-american-rescue-plan-funds-all-50-states-puerto-rico-and-district-columbia-help-schools-reopen>

Biden-Harris Administration to Announce New Actions to Help Schools Reopen Safely and Meet Students' Needs

<https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/biden-harris-administration-announce-new-actions-help-schools-reopen-safely-and-meet-students%E2%80%99-needs>

Federal Communications Commission

FCC Seeks Comment on Emergency Connectivity Fund for Educational Devices and Connections to Address the Homework Gap During the Pandemic

<https://www.fcc.gov/fcc-seeks-comment-emergency-connectivity-fund-educational-devices-and-connections-address-homework>

Other

National League of Cities COVID-19 Response and Relief

<https://www.nlc.org/initiative/covid-19-pandemic-response/>

ALA Resources

American Rescue Plan information and updates:

<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/american-rescue-plan-library-relief>

ALA Resources (cont.)

What the American Rescue Plan Act Means for Libraries

<https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/what-american-rescue-plan-act-means-for-libraries/>

Libraries gain record increases for IMLS, E-rate in federal relief plan

<http://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2021/03/libraries-gain-record-increases-impls-e-rate-federal-relief-plan>

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