

American Recovery & Reinvestment Act

In the words of the Administration's web site, recovery.gov, "The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is an unprecedented effort to jumpstart our economy, create or save millions of jobs, and put a down payment on addressing long-neglected challenges so our country can thrive in the 21st century. The Recovery and Reinvestment Act is an extraordinary response to a crisis unlike any since the Great Depression. With much at stake, the Act provides for unprecedented levels of transparency and accountability so that you will be able to know how, when, and where your tax dollars are being spent. Spearheaded by a new Recovery Board, this Act contains built-in measures to root out waste, inefficiency, and unnecessary spending."

ARRA contains three "pots" of funds meant expressly for schools

- Funds through existing federal programs such as title I, IDEA, Title II Part D, The Education of the Homeless Act and Impact Aid
- Funds run through existing state formulas to both K-12 and higher education.
- Tax credit bonds for renovation and new construction.

While the original Congressional intent of the funding was to ease the economic troubles of states and schools districts, much of those efforts have shifted to a focus on education reform. This focus on reform will serve as the basis for the administration's efforts on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary based on the four assurances listed within ARRA:

- Improvements in teacher effectiveness and commitments that all schools have highly qualified teachers;
- Progress toward college and career-ready standards and rigorous assessments that will improve both teaching and learning;
- Improvements in achievement in low-performing schools, by providing intensive support and effective interventions in those schools.
- That they can gather information to improve student learning, teacher performance, and college and career-readiness through enhanced data systems that track progress.

The one outstanding issue when it comes to flexibility is district eligibility to reduce their local maintenance of effort under special education. The Department is not following Congressional intent on this provision and thereby restricting the eligibility of school districts to utilize this flexibility. The only way to correct this situation now, is for Congress to weigh in with the Department.

In addition, the Department of Education has released several sets of proposed regulations this summer, including the metrics/ data to be collected under the four assurances of the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund, the parameters for the Race to the Top applications, the new focus for school improvement dollars and a proposal for states to increase the amount of Title I and IDEA dollars they can keep at the state level. All of these proposals will have a profound impact on school districts and education service agencies both in terms of increased administrative burdens and new opportunities for partnerships with school districts.

While it might be easy to compartmentalize the efforts under ARRA to just relating to the stimulus funding, the reality is that the Obama administration is laying the groundwork for their efforts in education over the next four to eight years. If education service agencies want to have an impact on these policies, it is best to address them now rather than when they appear in future policy debates.

Talking points:

1. US DOE must make it clear to governors that the ARRA state fiscal stabilization funds are meant to permit school districts and colleges to save and create jobs so dollars meant for schools must flow to local schools.
2. Urge your members of Congress to continue the historic investments in Title I and IDEA in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. All the research on institutional change shows that implementing nationwide massive change in public schools takes much longer than two years. Maintaining the investment will permit the new P-16 data systems, teacher effectiveness plans, and interventions in the lowest achieving schools to take root and grow. Further ending a huge increase in funding causes a great deal of dislocation and added costs associated with terminating teachers, administrators and support staff.
3. US Department of Education and SEAs must interpret IDEA provisions permitting local districts to reduce their effort in special education by an amount equal to 50 percent of their federal increase in a way that makes the option available to the most school districts.