

Recommendations for Stakeholders: Offering Advice on the Use of IDEA ARP Funds *May 2021*

DEC offers this resource to those who are planning for or view themselves as stakeholders to decisions on spending the early childhood IDEA funds included in the American Rescue Plan Act (ARP). This document was developed by the DEC Policy Advocacy Committee. DEC will provide additional updates on ARP as more information becomes available.

The ARP was signed into law on March 11, 2021, offering the first COVID-19 related targeted IDEA resources to address the challenges faced in ensuring services for children with disabilities and their families. While there are additional general education and IDEA Part B section 611 special education funds allocated under the ARP, this document specifically addresses the two early childhood programs under IDEA. Some of the ideas are also relevant to the early elementary years.

Clarifications on the use of the funds, the application process, reporting requirements as well as how long the funds will remain available is expected shortly from the federal Office of Special Education Program (OSEP). Additional implementation information will be posted at an OSEP IDEA ARP webpage at: <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/leg/arp/index.html>

How much money is available and how will decisions be made?

ARP includes an extra \$250 million for **Part C Early Intervention** for FFY 2021. It is expected these additional funds will be allocated to the state lead agency July 1, 2021 by census, according to the current statutory formula. This award will be in addition to the FFY 2021 Part C allocation of \$481.9 million, a \$4.9 million increase from last year. Decisions related to the use of these additional funds will be made at the state level.

ARP includes an extra \$200 million for **Preschool Special Education Grants** under Part B 619 for FFY 2021. This is in addition to the FFY 2021 Section 619 allocation of \$398 million, a \$3.5 million increase from the previous year. Based on the statute, most of these additional funds will be allocated to local school districts July 1, 2021. It is important to note that states are permitted to, and some states do, withhold some 619 funds for state uses according to the statute. Therefore, most decisions about the use of these additional funds will be made at the local school district level and in some instances at the state level.

On what can these additional funds be used?

OSEP has advised states that funds are subject to the same IDEA and Uniform Guidance requirements that apply to all IDEA funds. Therefore, it probably can be assumed that anything that is currently an allowable expense for Part C or Preschool Special Education funds will be allowable for the ARP funds.

What considerations does DEC recommend in making these decisions?

DEC recommends that state and local agencies with responsibility to expend these funds seek broad stakeholder input when making these decisions. It is also recommended that an equity lens be used in discussions and considerations to ensure funds are prioritized to respond to children and families who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and/or are members of chronically under-resourced communities or groups.

It is important to use data to inform these decisions and consider short-term as well as more long-term investments. Both administrative and instructional activities should be considered. Finally, remember these are one-time only funds and it is important to be sure the investments lead to sustainable benefits and outcomes.

What are some examples of uses of the ARP funds across all the systems where children are served?

The following list represents areas DEC suggests be considered by state and local policy makers. These are categorized in several topics and include investments that are both short and long term.

Child Find and Evaluation:

- Use public awareness efforts directed to families and referral sources to assist in returning to pre-pandemic levels of referral and identification.
- Scale up developmental screening processes in early childhood settings to identify children with risk factors or developmental needs.
- Gather evidence of effective evaluation processes delivered virtually, in-person, or through hybrid models.
 - Provide professional development for staff to scale up evidence-based practices for identifying and evaluating children with disabilities.
 - Upgrade informational resources for parents who decline services despite the child's eligibility to include information related to service strategies and safety during emergencies such as COVID-19.
 - Develop and increase the availability of culturally diverse and linguistically appropriate child find and evaluation resources.

Services to Children with Identified Disabilities:

- Plan summer enhancement activities both in-person and virtually to address current learning needs and mitigate future learning loss.
- Gather evidence of effective instructional processes delivered virtually, in-person, or through hybrid models.
- Increase access to evidence-based platforms and digital tools while providing professional development to support use of technology in multiple settings.

- Provide personal protective equipment and sanitation supplies to settings where children and their families are offered services in-person.
- Make technology devices and internet access available to providers and families to support evidence-based practices for improved outcomes.
- Offer funding (through Federal, community, or grant dollars) to ensure programs remain prepared to serve children with disabilities and their families as enrollment numbers fluctuate.
- Monitor and shift caseloads to support high quality services during transitions to and from in-person services as needed.

Family Engagement:

- Plan and implement collaborative efforts to identify and address family needs with inclusion of family members of children receiving services.
- Promote models of service delivery to meet the individual needs of each family.
- Utilize evidence-based coaching practices to support families of children with disabilities.
- Provide staff with professional development regarding family engagement, support, and service delivery in the diverse settings where infants, toddlers, and children with disabilities are served.

Mental Health:

- Focus evaluation and support efforts on the social emotional needs of children, families, and staff to identify and plan to address the wide range of needs.
- Provide professional development to staff to support trauma-informed approaches in all settings.
- Make mental health professionals available to collaborate with special education and ECE professionals in all settings. Support manageable caseloads for these partners.

Service Innovation and Evaluation:

- Enhance data systems to support planning for, delivering and evaluating delivery of high-quality services for children and families.
- Enhance data collection and analysis to document child and family needs, services, and outcomes during COVID-related activities.
- Pilot demonstration projects based on data analysis to address specific needs of children with disabilities and their families.

Personnel Preparation:

- Support preparation of and pathways for college students to enter ECE/EI/ECESped.
- Provide staff with long-term, job embedded professional learning regarding family engagement, support, and service delivery in the diverse settings where infants, toddlers, and children with disabilities are served.