



Comments of

**The New York Association of School
Psychologists**

on the

**Implementation of the American Rescue Plan Funding to
Address Students' Social and Emotional Needs**

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INTRODUCTION

The New York Association of School Psychologists (NYASP) is a statewide organization representing school psychologists across the state and the millions of school-aged children and families with whom they work on a daily basis. School psychologists are trained and educated in the psychology of learning, motivation, and human development in order to address the many factors influencing the performance of students. These qualified mental health professionals conduct screening and evaluations to identify cognitive strengths and needs to ensure academic success, and, in some instances, to determine eligibility for special education services. These professionals provide direct psychological services within educational settings, community settings, and state and local agencies, as well as promote access to mental health services within the educational system through information platforms. They are valued partners with state agencies such as the Office of Mental Health and NYSED in the development of psychological interventions related to children and youth and the provision of instructional presentations on relevant issues such as trauma, suicide, and depression, and otherwise lend counseling and support to students and their families.

Our members have participated in countless work groups and task forces on a range of pressing issues resulting in invaluable publications and guidance documents around frameworks for safe and successful schools, the SAFE Act, bullying and discrimination in schools, mental health education literacy in schools (linking to a continuum of well-being), suicide prevention, and behavioral health.

It is against this backdrop of experience and expertise that we provide these comments on the implementation of the American Rescue Plan Funding to address students' social and emotional needs.

As millions of children across the state reenter our schools this Fall, many will face challenges due to ongoing health, economic, and social consequences of the pandemic. Children have been uniquely impacted by the pandemic, having experienced this crisis during important periods of physical, social, and emotional development. Some are experiencing the loss of loved ones and many households with children have been particularly hard hit by loss of income, food and housing insecurity, and are experiencing disruptions in health care coverage, all of which affect health and well-being. Public health measures to reduce the spread of the disease also led to disruptions or changes in children's social interactions, school experiences, and increased mental health challenges. Young children are still not eligible for vaccination, and although children are likely to be asymptomatic or to experience only mild symptoms, they can contract COVID-19.

Children may face new risks due to the rapid spread of the Delta variant, and some children who contract COVID-19 experience long-term effects from the disease. Many of these effects have disproportionately affected low-income children and children of color, who faced health and economic challenges even prior to the pandemic, as compared to peers. School psychologists are uniquely positioned to help school districts engage in needs assessments to identify challenges to their school community, collaborate with administrators, teachers, and other mental health professionals to plan effective, evidenced based supports, and to provide direct mental health services to children, adolescents, and families.

NYASP recently surveyed school psychologists across the State to assess the implementation and use of funding through the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA) and the American Rescue Plan (ARP). While we recognize the broad application of this funding to support schools and students, our remarks will focus on the use of this funding to address the mental health impact of the pandemic on students.

Community Engagement in Planning for Use of Funds

Feedback provided from our recent survey indicated that many school districts engaged in extensive outreach to the community to identify the impact of the pandemic and potential ideas for the use of “COVID Relief” funds. Respondents indicated that districts engaged in surveying the community, hosting virtual and live “Town Hall” meetings, or meeting in smaller groups with various stakeholders. It is apparent that some districts meaningfully engaged a diverse and representative set of the applicable stakeholders in developing a plan to use these funds and in implementing support services.

However, it is important to note that some respondents indicated little or no knowledge regarding their district’s engagement of the community to assess their needs or develop a plan for use of the funding. While it is difficult to generalize their experiences, many of these respondents reported that their districts have historically lacked community engagement or stakeholder feedback in decision-making.

Current Application of ARP Funds and New or Enhanced Programs to Address Student Mental Health

NYASP was encouraged to receive feedback that some districts were using ARP funds to expand and enhance their mental health supports through additional staffing, expanded services, and purchasing of mental health resources (e.g., evidenced-based mental health curriculum). A sampling of comments included:

- Appointed a Social Worker to provide mental health services and supports, including through the implementation of evidence-based community schools
- Hired additional mental health staff, offered services before and after school, and purchased curriculum for group interventions
- Expanded services using a multi-tiered systems of support framework to provide support for all students

- Hired two psychologists and one social worker.
- Sent two psychologists to be trained in neuropsychological assessments.
- Consulted with a BCBA all year long to teach and "supervise" us to improve our FBA skills.
- Provided counseling for any student who needed it during the summer and will be providing counseling before and after school.
- All teachers are being trained on identifying mental health needs.

Enhanced programs included:

- Implementation of SEL lessons in the classroom
- Restorative Justice practices
- Consultation with outside agencies to address substance abuse
- Purchased several evidence-based programs to use with kids (e.g., Second Step, Unstuck and On Target, Zones of Regulation, Camp Cope a Lot, etc.).
- Offering parenting groups
- Implementing RULER program (RULER is a systemic approach to SEL developed at the Center for Emotional Intelligence)
- Dialectic Behavioral Therapy (DBT) in the schools

While this feedback is encouraging, other respondents provided comments such as:

- There does not seem to be extra funding applied for new or enhanced programs
- While additional mental health staff were hired, there is no clinical supervision or effective guidance on using these professionals
- The district recruited staff and administration to take part in the district's "Academic Innovation Task Force" in spring 2020 to discuss options regarding the use of the federal CARES Act money. However, the final plan has never been shared and no programs or supports appear to have been added/implemented.

Therefore, it would appear that there is inconsistent application and use of the federal funding by districts across New York State.

Measuring Impact and Accountability Measures

NYASP is concerned about the trend of inconsistent use of federal COVID funds to address the social and emotional needs of students. Accountability on the part of schools around the use of these funds and the impact of programs on students' social and emotional adjustment are vital components of any grant program. While some respondents reported that their district had established accountability measures, the vast majority indicated that they were unaware of any new or specific monitoring programs. Respondents indicated that the "usual indicators" of grades, attendance, discipline, and academic skills development would continue to be reported. However, there did not appear to be any formal outcome protocols in place. Of those that did indicate new or specific monitoring tools, programs such as Branching Minds or hiring of "data coordinators" to engage feedback from the community were identified.

A final note regarding accountability and impact relates to sustainability of any new or enhanced supports and programs. While there is recognition that the COVID relief funds are time limited, the issues that they are designed to address are likely to be present for many years to follow. It is vital for the state to recognize that these critical resources represent an investment in our children. Planning for future funding to school districts to sustain and expand mental health supports in schools is critical.

Summary

NYASP is encouraged by the general trend on how school districts are using ARP funds. However, without specific accountability measures and progress monitoring tools, significant concern exists regarding the inconsistent application of funds to support student's social and emotional needs. We are concerned that this funding stream will replicate similar programs in the past, where well-resourced school districts will be able to expand and enhance mental health supports, low resource districts will continue to struggle to meet basic social and emotional programming. We believe that school psychologists are an invaluable resource who have the potential to make significant contributions in the advancement of the stated intention and purpose of the ARP funding.

We urge the Legislature to specifically identify school psychologists in all contexts as relates to the planning and implementation of ARP funds and the provision of mental health services to children.

In furtherance of NYASP's stated mission of commitment to enhancing access to vital mental health services, we ask that the Legislature give thoughtful consideration to related legislature proposals, including:

- **A.545A** (Rosenthal)/ **S. 4347A** (Brouk) – providing for licensure of school psychologists; and
- **A. 5019** (Gonzales-Rojas)/ **S.1969** (Jackson) – requiring school mental health services in all districts.

We believe these proposals will enhance the availability and accessibility of mental health services to children and adolescents both in schools and the community, while identifying additional funding streams for districts.

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We appreciate the opportunity to provide these comments.