

# How to Maximize COVID-relief Funding for English Learners

BLOG POST



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By now there is mounting evidence showing that English learners (ELs) have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and distance learning. ELs have been **less likely** to log-in to class than other students, and given this decrease in attendance, it is no surprise that there has been a sharp increase in **failing grades** assigned to these students as well. Additionally, a recent U.S. Department of Education **survey** found that ELs were **less likely** to be receiving in-person instruction, despite widespread **recognition** that they should be **prioritized** when school buildings re-open.

The federal government has approved \$190 billion in **relief funding** for the K-12 education system. However, as our team recently **wrote**, we have yet to see how these funds will be put to use to help ELs get back on track. Here are key pitfalls to avoid and recommendations schools and districts should consider to ensure they are **maximizing their ability** to boost ELs' learning:

1. **Don't** assume all families and students are adequately connected to technological infrastructure needed to participate in online education simply because we are a year into remote learning.

→**Do** fund programs and initiatives that are working to ensure ELs can actually access online education services. In February 2021, for example, the Equity in Education Coalition in Washington launched its TechConnect Washington Community Helpdesk, a **multilingual and multicultural helpdesk** that received 600 to 700 calls within six weeks from parents asking about how to access online learning platforms. Many ELs and their families are **reluctant** to return to school out of fear of infection—a fear that is more than justified considering the **devastating impact** COVID-19 has had on immigrant families, many of whom speak a language other than English at home. Remote learning may very well have a **permanent place** in our education system, which makes addressing the **digital divide** that has been exacerbated by COVID-19 all the more critical. ELs may continue to encounter issues accessing education services in the short-term and local education leaders must continue to check-in with these students to make sure they do not fall through the cracks.

2. **Don't** assume that all teachers have the specialized skills and competencies needed to support and monitor ELs' linguistic and academic growth.

→**Do** invest in professional development and training focused on bolstering all teachers' competence and confidence, not just EL specialists, to assess where ELs stand academically and linguistically and develop a plan to move them forward to the next level. Remote learning has not been conducive to creating the best conditions for academic growth and retention, and given that ELs were not afforded the same opportunity to learn even before COVID, teachers will need to quickly grasp where these students stand academically and linguistically in order to devise a plan for their recovery.

**Formative practices** including **pre-assessments**, **self-assessments**, **peer feedback**, and **feedback breaks** can help teachers and students understand where learning needs are in current time and allow for instruction adjustments. While formative assessments are commonly used in instruction, the available tools don't necessarily account for the needs of linguistically diverse students. In response to COVID-19, the ExCEL Leadership Academy developed a new formative assessment **tool** specifically to allow teachers to monitor and

support ELs remotely. The self-assessment tool was created to assess progress toward learning goals and its developers **hope** tools like this can continue to play an important role in ELs' education even after the pandemic.

→**Do** invest in professional development for general education teachers focused on strategies for supporting ELs' home languages, English language development, and academic growth. Common models of professional development such as **Project GLAD®** and **Structured Immersion Observation Protocol** (SIOP) provide teachers with practices geared towards integrating language and content instruction. These approaches can help ensure that ELs are receiving instruction that attends to their myriad learning needs and that language instruction is embedded in their regular classroom time. Additionally, over 30 school districts in California are **partnering with Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) to provide teachers with professional learning opportunities** focused on implementing research based strategies that promote ELs' academic success.

3. **Don't** expect that one-size-fits-all extended learning opportunities will provide English learners with meaningful opportunities to engage without providing targeted and intentional differentiated supports.

→**Do** fund extended learning opportunities, such as **after school** and **summer school** programs that include English language development components. Learning a new language is just as much about **social interaction** as it is an academic pursuit. This means that as schools and districts focus on increasing the number of hours students are exposed to in-person learning contexts, they should also work to ensure these programs are facilitating meaningful opportunities for engagement and growth. Previous research has found that successful afterschool and summer school programs generally **include** targeted homework support focusing on specific study skills and motivational strategies that can complement the curriculum, staff members who share the same linguistic and cultural backgrounds as the students, and lastly, constructive ways to include parents and other family members in the program.

For example, Philadelphia Public Schools is **launching** a summer school program for preK-12 students and has made a concerted effort to provide ELs, specifically newcomers

and students with limited or interrupted formal education (**SLIFE**), with English language development programs. Lastly, special attention should be given to dual language learners' **transition** into the K-12 system, considering that preK and kindergarten have experienced the **sharpest declines** in enrollment during the pandemic.

4. **Don't** respond to short-term budgetary constraints by cutting back on specialists and paraeducators best-equipped to support English learners.

→**Do** boost school staffing to help support ELs and their families during the next two years. Newly **proposed interim final requirements** specify that funds can be used to hire school counselors, psychologists, and nurses. Schools that serve high proportions of ELs should consider hiring bilingual individuals to fill those roles in order to ensure EL accessibility to those services. In addition, COVID-relief funds can be used to create stability in the school workforce and avoid staff layoffs. Many school districts **eliminated paraeducator positions** as a result of the shift to remote learning and these essential educators should be brought back. Paraeducators often provide small group instruction to ELs and help with translation and communication with families. To extend more support to families, schools should also consider hiring **bilingual liaisons** to facilitate outreach, help connect families with essential services, and share information on school enrollment, COVID safety protocols and more.

5. **Don't** purchase new digital tools, interventions, and curricula without considering how they can meet the needs of ELs.

→**Do** ensure additional supports provided to ELs, including digital tools and curriculum, are rooted in evidence and that teachers are adequately prepared to use these tools. Local education agencies (LEAs) are required to implement “evidence based” interventions and activities to help address the disruptions in students’ learning. Yet, a recent survey found that 61 percent of teachers surveyed were **not trained** on how to provide accessible remote instructional opportunities to all students, regardless of resources at home, and it is unclear how LEAs will determine what qualifies as “evidence-based” given the wide range of programs available.

The landscape of **educational technology** for ELs is wide including **free tools**, **open educational resources**, and licensed products designed to boost ELs' language and literacy development. When choosing a product, school district leaders should connect with other districts, including administrators and teachers, using the materials to learn more about how they work in the classroom and with students and families. Educational technology review resources such as **LearnPlatform**, **ISTE Edtech Advisor** and **Common Sense Education** can also be used to learn more about different digital tools.

While curriculum is not explicitly named within the funding guidelines, LEAs should also consider how to **boost instructional materials** to better meet the needs of ELs. This type of investment could include engaging (and paying) teachers in the development district-wide curriculum that includes attention to English learners, or adapting existing curriculum using **evidence-based** practices. Some commercially available intervention materials may lack inclusion and representation—an issue that school districts should be aware of when selecting the materials that will be used for ELs and other historically under-served populations.

→**Do** invest in asset-based instructional approaches, including dual language education, that support ELs' language development in both English and a partner language and foster strong academic outcomes. Research is clear that dual language programs provide ELs with **academic benefits** and **higher rates of reclassification** over the long term. School districts across the country have implemented dual language programs and have continued to do so **even during the pandemic**.

COVID-relief funding alone will not fix the educational disruption English learners have experienced during the last year. However, if we apply this unprecedented influx of funding to support services and programs that we know can benefit ELs' academic, linguistic, and socioemotional needs, we have a chance to dramatically improve their schooling opportunities.