

IT INFRASTRUCTURE

Ed. Dept. Outlines How Schools Can Use Federal Funds to Sustain Tech Programs



By [Alyson Klein](#) — January 25, 2023 ⌚ 3 min read



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School districts have a host of options for using federal funds to support digital learning programs started during the pandemic, a top U.S. Department of Education official told school district and state education leaders.

In a [Jan. 25 letter](#) to K-12 leaders, Roberto Rodriguez, the assistant secretary for planning, evaluation, and policy development at the department, emphasized that any tech investments made with federal dollars need to be part of a broad strategy to bolster teaching and learning.

“Technology itself is not a panacea,” he wrote. “Technology can help improve learning and educational outcomes for students only when teachers are well supported with appropriate resources and have an opportunity to integrate technology with high-quality instruction.”

The letter—which aims to offer advice and clarify existing laws and regulations for K-12 leaders, not direct spending decisions or make policy changes—comes as recent ed-tech investments approach a critical juncture. Within the next several years, many digital tools purchased with billions of dollars in one-time COVID relief funding will need to be replaced, almost certainly without another federal windfall to cover the cost.

At the same time, many schools—particularly those that serve high numbers of children living in poverty, students in special education, and English learners—still don’t have the technological infrastructure they need to close achievement gaps and help kids recover academically from the pandemic, the letter noted.

Schools generally have until the fall of 2024 to use the last of their federal COVID relief dollars. Though early spending was sluggish, most districts are on pace to meet that deadline, [according to a tracker created by the Edunomics Lab at Georgetown University’s McCourt School of Public Policy.](#)

The department’s recommendations can help districts still pondering how to use the remainder of their relief funds, Kristina Ishmael, the deputy director for the Office of Education Technology at the education department, said in an interview. But they can also be of assistance to districts that want to sustain their ed-tech investments going forward.

“While we know that a lot of schools and states have rallied and put relief dollars towards device access and connectivity to ensure continuity of learning, we also know that those relief dollars will run out,” Ishmael said. “We want to make sure folks can see the different opportunities to build up [educator tech] expertise [and] integrate technology in sustainable ways.”

The spending ideas outlined in the department’s letter include:

- Teacher training funds to hire coaches who can help teachers make the best use of digital tools, and teach students about safe online behavior;
- Money aimed at English Learners to purchase software that can serve those students;
- A flexible fund to pay for student supports and academic enrichment to help educators use and share digital tools, including open educational resources;

- And, specific special education funds to improve communication with parents.

Some of the programs mentioned in the letter recently received spending hikes. Federal spending on special education, through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, rose from \$13 billion to \$15.5 billion. And federal funds to support English Learners grew from \$802 million to \$890 million.

The guidance will help district and state leaders better understand how to get the most out of federal funding as they seek to make technology a more central part of teaching and learning, said Julia Fallon, the executive director of the State Educational Technology Directors Association.

“We really don’t want to waste the opportunity that the pandemic gave us to actually modernize our school system,” she said.

The Education Department isn’t the only organization concerned with maintaining technology gains made during the pandemic. Digital Promise, a nonprofit that works to improve learning through more-effective use of technology, has been advising K-12 leaders on how to craft a sustainability plan.



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