



Core Feature 8: Funding

Few issues generate more uniform interest and attention than funding. In 2021, this is especially important as the Recovery Act will provide extraordinary dollars to schools and agencies to address mental health during the pandemic recovery. This is complicated by the short timeline for developing state and local plans for the use of funds provided and relatively short timeline for expending the funds

These constraints bring the relationships among stakeholders into sharp focus. These individuals and groups have unique perspectives on the needs to be addressed through current and new funding. Among the most important of these stakeholders are students and families, the intended beneficiaries of new funding. The situation raises the question, *“Can we overcome our system challenges to reimagine the system we need now?”*

In co-creating this Dialogue Guide on funding, we first looked at the cross-sector agreements among national experts. Then, we explored those issues with decision-makers, practitioners and families at the state, local and organizational levels.

Across both groups, the focus on using current funding, especially foundational funding, in a more informed and connected way is a priority issue. While there is broad agreement with the Core Features, in co-creating this Dialogue Guide the array of stakeholders identified issues of common concerns. Consider how you may use these Dialogue Starters in your setting or in your organization. Collectively, we have a role in bringing attention to the need for comprehensive systems of school mental health.

The source document, [*Advancing Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems: Guidance from the Field*](#), summarizes the expert panel conversations

on funding by coming to the following critical agreements:

- Building and sustaining comprehensive school mental health systems require innovative strategies to leverage and apply various financial and nonfinancial resources in a school or district.
- Best-practice considerations include using diverse sources, combining categorical and block grant funds from across multiple agencies to achieve shared outcomes, leveraging funding and Medicaid reimbursement by developing relationships with other agencies, matching funding to service delivery across multiple tiers, and monitoring policy and new funding opportunities (e.g., education, behavioral health, health, climate/safety, juvenile justice) at the local, state and national/federal levels.

The conversation among stakeholders offered a future-focused view from the practice level and posed three themes as inquiries:

- 90% of new education funding under the Recovery Act will pass through to the local level. Who will have a role in decision-making?
- Beyond new funding, how can we use current funding in new and better ways?
- Will we resist the temptation to add before recognizing what is working and what is not?

This Dialogue Guide incorporates both sources. The guide offers *Reaction Questions* and *Application Questions* from which you can choose Dialogue Starters that will allow you to take these conversations into your work.

Resources

Resources to inform this content are available at:

- [American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief State Plans](#)
- [School Mental Health Quality Guide: Funding and Sustainability](#)
- [Collective Impact](#)
- [Restart and Recovery: Leveraging Federal COVID Relief Funding & Medicaid to Support Student & Staff Wellbeing and Connection: Opportunities for State Education Agencies](#)
- [Dialogue Guide Response Strategies](#)

Practice Issue 1

90% of new education funding under the Recovery Act will pass through to the local level. Who will have a role in decision-making?

Reaction Questions:

1. States have submitted plans for priorities and for distributing the dollars. Will state priorities translate to local spending?
 - What “big picture” challenges might the state see that are not apparent to local audiences?
 - How might these understandings impact priorities for local districts?
 - How will you find out?
2. Local districts often make decisions with their executive team (Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Principals, etc.). Why is it important that districts engage more broadly in making decisions about the Recovery Act funding?

Application Questions:

1. In your view, do local districts have working relationships with stakeholder groups that have important ideas about current and new challenges? If not, how can they begin to develop these connections?
2. Given the short timelines in planning for the use of funding, what should districts be doing now?
 - What should stakeholders be doing now?
3. Given the role that families were asked to play during the pandemic, how might they be expected to be included in planning?
4. Planning will necessarily include efforts to address the needs of currently undeserved and marginalized groups whose needs became evident during the pandemic.
 - Who are these groups, and what needs to be done to engage them meaningfully?
5. Given the national emphasis on mental health during the pandemic, both schools and agencies will receive funding to address school-age issues. We might expect schools, agencies and community providers to become allies. Consider the iceberg visual in the response strategy *What Lies Beneath*.
 - If the funding guidelines are “on the surface” of this collaboration, what is above the surface in working across schools, agencies and community providers?
 - What lies below the surface?

Practice Issue 2

Beyond new funding, how can we use current funding in new and better ways?

Reaction Questions:

1. New funding is not the only way to improve practices across schools and mental health providers. In fact, a focus on our foundational funding is an important long-term strategy: What is our obligation to rethink the use of foundational funding as part of a total plan to “build back better”?
2. Nonprofit funding has played an important role in bringing attention to specific issues and engaging specific groups. In a comprehensive plan to address school mental health, what is a role for time-limited nonprofit funding?
3. A recurring comment in conversations with practitioners is the many disconnected efforts in schools and agencies to serve families and students. Will these programs play a meaningful role or a confounding role in developing new strategies? Explain your perspective.

Application Questions:

1. Many believe that the way forward will require de-implementation of practices that don't have impact. How can we examine ways our current approaches actually create more harm (e.g., exclusionary discipline, punitive attendance policy)?
2. Some groups rarely get invited to planning tables, yet they represent parties with specific needs. How can we ensure that planning under the Recovery Act prioritizes equity?
 - What will we need to do to establish meaningful connections with underrepresented groups?
 - How will we maintain these relationships beyond the planning table?
 - What role can these new potential partners play in addressing challenges that the current system has been unable to address?
3. In our current system, stakeholder networks with deep connections to practitioners come together to advance their issues. These groups can play an important role in “building back better.” Offer some ideas on how stakeholder networks can help. Who can do it and what can they do to:
 - Help communicate issues broadly?
 - Rally support for approaches?
 - Explain funding?
 - Discover shared interests?
 - Build deeper connections across groups and systems?

Practice Issue 3

Will we resist the temptation to add before recognizing what is working and what is not?

Reaction Questions:

1. The Recovery Act funding represents a significant new investment that will not likely be coming again for years. Given your experience with systems (education and/or mental health):
 - Which practices will inhibit effective collaboration?
 - Which habits will advance collaboration?
2. Several stakeholders shared this insight: "We cannot buy our way out of this. We cannot hire our way out of this." In your view, what do they mean?
3. Using a *1-10 Scale* (10 high), rate the extent to which multiple discrete programs target the same or related goals. Why do we continue to create separate programs?

Application Questions:

1. Stakeholders report a tendency to answer challenges with time-limited funding applied to the issue. They also report that efforts often fade and disappear with the funding. Given the importance of the Recovery Act in addressing wide-ranging issues, what do we need to:
 - Start doing?
 - Stop doing?
 - Continue doing?
2. In your view:
 - How does discrete funding contribute to siloed efforts?
 - How can discrete funding contribute to a shared solution?
 - What is the "sweet spot" for using discrete funding initiatives?
3. Some stakeholders say that spending one-time Recovery Act funding without aligning current practices and funding sources is like "building a house on shifting sand."
 - What does this comparison suggest about the need to examine our approaches to persistent challenges?
 - What does it suggest about the need for better connections across agencies in addressing academic preparation and well-being?

4. At a minimum, what must we expect systems to do in ending practices that do harm?
 - What are some of these practices?
 - Why have we tolerated these practices for so long?
 - What will it take to end them?
5. What would meaningful participation in the Recovery Act by each of the following parties look like?
 - Relevant agencies and investments
 - Interested stakeholders
 - Families and students