



Recommendations to Support High School Transformation

This is the moment for all of us—policymakers, students, educators, families, and communities—to join together to create a vision and a plan for high school transformation. Better education results in better opportunities for students. It results in better citizens. It results in happier, healthier lives for generations.

Every dollar matters, and it's not enough to spend more. We must spend smarter—more imaginatively, efficiently, and effectively. These once-in-a-lifetime funds can build a legacy of impactful change that transforms our education system permanently. It is essential that we all get this right. No excuses, no exceptions.

First and foremost, when allocating funding, consider the students in your state. Nationwide, approximately 30 percent of K-12 students are currently in high

school, so make sure to dedicate at least a proportionate amount—approximately 30 percent of federal COVID relief dollars, depending on your state—to long-term high school transformation that directly impacts high school students and the schools in which they learn.

But a proportionate high school allocation is just the beginning. As states develop and activate their priorities, we recommend focusing on:

- Improving critical high school infrastructure
- Engaging in community-led design of high schools
- Redesigning the daily learning experience for students
- Ensuring all students are prepared for college, career, and life after graduation

**Want to learn more about your own state's ARP funding?
[Click Here to Find Your State!](#)**

INVEST IN INFRASTRUCTURE.

This is an opportunity to build the educational spaces and resources that we have always envisioned for young people. Visionary infrastructure spending includes building technology, curriculum, and facilities that are constantly improving and are hyper-resilient toward the challenges and changes specifically facing your community in the future.

States should:

- Invest in high-quality, modern facilities while making health and safety upgrades, such as science labs, greenhouses, libraries, and other 21st-century learning spaces where students are engaged as active collaborators in their own learning environment;
- Guarantee and deliver universal access to technology—not just devices and internet access, but the learning management systems, professional development supports, and tools that support 21st century teaching and learning;
- Ensure fair education funding, so that every student from every community has a chance at success; and
- Diversify the teaching corps, so that our students have the opportunity to learn from the very best, from every background.

EMPOWER COMMUNITIES TO REIMAGINE HIGH SCHOOL.

The Department of Education requires states to seek community input from stakeholders such as families, educators, and students on how to spend COVID relief funds. But merely seeking community feedback is not enough. States should be deliberate about setting a vision for high school design and redesign, and challenge—and empower—local communities to take the lead in reimagining their high schools. That means focusing on the individual needs of their students, their local and regional economies, and their shared vision for the future.

States should:

- Create processes and structures that empower genuine co-creation, co-design, and collaboration with educational stakeholders, including students, educators, and families;

- Create and provide serious incentives—financial and otherwise—for districts to pursue community-led redesign efforts; and
- Bring communities together in a rigorous exploration and design process that results in north star models that show what is achievable.
 - This can be done by using the state set-aside portion of ESSER funds to match funds that districts invest in community-led design initiatives, bringing people together to share fact-based best practices, creating robust technical assistance for participating districts, and otherwise providing affirmative support to districts on family and community engagement.

REDESIGN THE DAILY LEARNING EXPERIENCE.

These funds are a once-in-a-generation opportunity to remake the high school experience into one that is rigorous, equitable, and that gives students ownership of their own learning. This includes investments in competency-based education, where students progress and earn credits by demonstrating genuine comprehension rather than by fulfilling time and minimum classwork requirements.

States should:

- Redefine “courses” to break free from “seat time” and, instead, invest in competency-based education, where students are rewarded for demonstrating true mastery;
- Develop the tools and learning infrastructure necessary to support mastery-based teaching and learning, including new approaches to assessment, transcript format and content, and accountability;
- Reimagine engaged course design, making learning a holistic endeavor including academic and social-emotional learning; and
- Change the credit structure that drives graduation requirements.

PREPARE STUDENTS FOR LIFE AFTER GRADUATION.

Finally, we have to do everything we can to make high school diplomas more meaningful. The route to earning a diploma is too often unengaging, uninspiring, and unchallenging. Too often, it's about getting it done, when it should be about getting it right. [And, once obtained, a diploma doesn't guarantee that the graduate has mastered essential knowledge, skills, and competencies and has a viable pathway to a successful career in the 21st century workforce.](#) State leaders can and must change that outcome. High schools need to become engines of continuous improvement that meet the demands of their students, so that students graduate with true preparation for real life.

States should:

- Develop a profile of a graduate that defines the broad and interconnected set of skills and competencies that students will need for success after—not just during—their time in high school;
- Reimagine and deliver a results-driven approach to student performance and course design;
- Align course requirements with college admissions so that learning today prepares students for opportunities tomorrow;
- Make rigorous courses widely accessible, including both college and career pathways; and
- Modernize career preparation so that it works in the real world, which is rapidly changing.



WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Let's make sure these historic investments yield real results for all of our high school students. This starts with the commitment to spend at least proportionately on high schools and high school students. But it doesn't end there. As we come together as a nation in post-pandemic recovery—and as state and district leaders think through spending on infrastructure, empowering communities, reimagining high school learning experiences, and truly preparing students for professional and civic life—let's be sure we are asking these fundamental questions:

- *How can we enable all students—especially those who faced the greatest challenges before COVID and the most disruptions during the pandemic—to reengage and reinvigorate their learning?*
- *How can we build on what we've learned over the past year about learning, resiliency, and ingenuity?*
- *How can we use these historic investments of federal resources wisely to catalyze rigorous, engaging, equitable, and dynamic teaching and learning that is sustained over time?*

Over the coming months, XQ will go deeper into policies that can inspire transformational and meaningful change. We'll identify the best approaches, based on each state's data landscape, to create the change we know is necessary, possible, and achievable for every state's high school students. We'll share examples of innovation taking place nationwide, along with profiles, stories, and powerful perspectives from policymakers, educators, students, and families to inspire and inform decision makers.

As you start to make your transformational funding plans, come back here and tell us what you are doing so that we can amplify your work.

- Do you have resources, events, or ideas to share about federal COVID relief funding and the opportunity for transformation? Share them with us. Join the conversation on our social channels using [#RethinkHighSchool](#).
- [Join Rethink Together](#) to stay up to date on the latest developments around high school transformation.



ABOUT XQ

XQ Institute is the nation's leading organization dedicated to rethinking the high school experience so that every student graduates ready to succeed in life.

We work in communities throughout the country, with individual schools and entire school systems, to help them dream big about what high school could be, turn their innovative ideas into action, and create more rigorous and equitable schools. We share what's

working with other schools and districts, so they can tailor new models to the needs of their own students and communities. We know that seeing is believing, so we meet people where they are to share the importance and possibility of change through listening, learning, and storytelling. And our open-source tools, based on research and design thinking, empower people to take up the challenge of transforming their high schools with a unifying goal: unlocking the American promise of a high-quality education for everyone.

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