



INSTITUTE FOR REFORMING GOVERNMENT

Help the Missing Students:

Wisconsin should explore how to use \$1.5 billion in federal K-12 dollars from the American Rescue Plan to ensure struggling students have access to courses.

IRG Policy Solution: As Wisconsin school districts closed their buildings in the past year – lagging far behind other states that placed a greater emphasis on staying open – failure rates have skyrocketed and tens of thousands of students simply did not show up for “virtual instruction.” To deal with this crisis, Wisconsin’s state policymakers should use federal funds from the American Rescue Plan Act to give these “missing students” the ability to take courses that will catch them up and prepare them for what’s next. Doing so will enable Wisconsin’s education system to end up stronger, more resilient, and more student-focused than before COVID-19.

3 Things to Know:

1. Being out of school for over a year is threatening students' futures, particularly those who already faced hurdles in their homes, schools, and neighborhoods. More are failing and many are simply missing.
2. Through the recently enacted American Rescue Plan Act, Wisconsin will receive over \$1.5 billion for K-12 on top of the hundreds of millions provided in previous stimulus packages.
3. To recover the learning loss experienced by students in the last 12 months, IRG – along with partner organizations like School Choice Wisconsin and Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty – urges Wisconsin policymakers to require as much of this funding as possible to be allocated to course offerings that support summer school, after-school, and learning-loss recovery through the part-time open enrollment system for school year 2021-2022.

Background: Across Wisconsin, hundreds of thousands of students have had their education disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. While many Wisconsin districts have made a significant effort to reopen fully or through a hybrid model, many of the state’s largest districts have not reopened full-time for five days week and may not open entirely until Fall 2021. According to the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), as of last February, only 21% of school districts in Wisconsin were open to all grades five days a week, which placed the state at 33rd in the nation for being in-person and far behind Florida that boasted 98% of school districts open.¹

Consequently, in Wisconsin, many of the most disadvantaged students have simply disappeared. They are not showing up to Zoom calls, they are not turning in assignments, they are not learning, period.² Wisconsin has seen public school enrollment drop by more than 25,000 in just one year.³ It’s possible this number is much higher because of how DPI allows students to be counted.⁴

Even many students who have participated in school remotely have fallen behind. A Milwaukee Journal Sentinel survey of 60 school districts in Wisconsin concluded that 90% of the districts had higher failure

¹ https://www.thecentersquare.com/wisconsin/21-6-of-wisconsin-school-districts-provide-full-in-person-learning/article_21e54b04-8145-11eb-8c1e-9b7296527a9b.html

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/pandemic-schools-students-missing/2021/02/25/f0b27262-5ce8-11eb-a976-bad6431e03e2_story.html

³ <https://wisedash.dpi.wi.gov/Dashboard/dashboard/20060?filtersetid=aaecbfa7-8c08-4872-bcf9-7f6b641afd90>

⁴ <https://dpi.wi.gov/sfs/third-friday-count-reminders>

rates than the previous year.⁵ Around one out of every three students at Milwaukee Public Schools, according to MPS, failed the fall semester.⁶ At Wausau Public Schools, around one out of every four middle school and high school students failed a course (a quadruple increase from the prior year).⁷

Explore Using ARP Federal Funds to Support Educational Recovery: The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 allocates \$1,540,784,854 for K-12 to Wisconsin.⁸ 90% of funds go to school districts and 10% to the state. School districts must use 20% of the funding they receive to address learning loss. The state’s 10% is allocated as follows: 5% to address learning loss, 2.5% is discretionary, 1% for summer enrichment, 1% for comprehensive after-school programs, and up to 0.5% for state administration.

Total	\$	1,540,784,854
SEA Total	\$	154,078,485
SEA Learning Loss (5%)	\$	77,039,243
SEA Discretionary (2.5%)	\$	38,519,621
SEA Summer School (1%)	\$	15,407,849
SEA After School (1%)	\$	15,407,849
SEA Admin (0.5%)	\$	7,703,924
LEA Total	\$	1,386,706,369
LEA 20% for learning loss	\$	277,341,274

The Wisconsin State Legislature should explore ways to use this funding to allow those students left behind from COVID and virtual learning to take missed courses or courses that they failed.

Here is how it could be done:

1. Funds would be directed to schools based on 2020-21 enrollment numbers to be used for any supplementary education services chosen by parents. Funds would be “performance-based,” meaning the provider of each course does not receive full payment until the student successfully completes the course.

⁵ <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2021/03/16/wisconsin-high-schools-report-high-failure-rates-during-first-semester/4512131001/>

⁶ https://www.thecentersquare.com/wisconsin/report-30-of-milwaukee-public-high-schoolers-failed-last-fall/article_d85a37f6-8d7e-11eb-8644-974fb33d4ada.html#tncms-source=infinity-scroll-summary-sticky-siderail-latest

⁷ <https://www.wausaudailyherald.com/story/news/education/2021/03/24/wausau-students-struggle-failing-grades-mental-health-issues-could-take-years-to-address/4802130001/>

⁸ https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/03/FINAL_ARP-ESSER-Methodology-and-Table.pdf

2. School districts will match 50 cents on each state dollar. They may use funding streams they choose, as allowed by federal law. They may set appropriate limits on how much funding each student may receive; however, they may provide more and give priority to “missing students” who return to school.
3. Any existing school (public, choice, or charter) or college and university in the state may provide Education Recovery services to other schools as long as they are offering in-person instruction to their own students. DPI will maintain a list on its website of these and additional course offerings. Third-party providers may apply as well and will receive approval by DPI within 30 days to ensure students are served quickly. All providers must demonstrate that they meet federal requirements for “evidence-based” practices.
4. Schools will be responsible for ensuring funds are allocated to summer, after-school, and other programs in accordance with federal requirements and will receive the majority of state administration funds for this purpose. A small amount will remain with DPI or an entity they designate so they may review and approve course providers.

The Bottom Line: The crisis of Wisconsin’s current K-12 education system demands that policymakers allocate the \$1.5 billion with a “Marshall Plan” mindset to ensure all students who have been left behind have access to the courses they need to lift them out of the struggles of the past year and put them back on the path toward success.