

STATE CARES FUNDS SUPPORTING ONLINE LEARNING: An Explainer

Overview

What did the Legislature do to support K-12 online learning?

The Legislature funded two bills to support K-12 online learning:

- the [Equity in Distance Learning Act](#) (SB 3044), which received \$150M, and
- the [Mississippi Pandemic Response Broadband Availability Grant Program](#) (HB 1788), which received \$50M.

Equity in Distance Learning Act (SB 3044)

How much money is available through the Equity in Distance Learning Act?

The Legislature funded SB 3044 at a level of \$150M from CARES Act funds. They split this funding into 3 streams:

- Stream 1: \$300,000.00 goes to MDE to *improve MSIS* as it relates to digital learning/COVID.
- Stream 2: \$129,700,000.00 goes to *public* school districts (including charter schools and state special schools) based on *average daily membership/enrollment* as calculated in 2019-2020.
- Stream 3: \$20,000,000.00 goes to public school districts based on their *needs' assessment responses*.

MORE ABOUT STREAM 2 (\$129.7M)

How will MDE administer Stream 2?

Stream 2 funds are *reimbursement only* based on average daily membership in 2019-2020. There is nothing specific in the law about how MDE will handle charter schools with planned enrollment increases in 2020-2021. MDE will have to promulgate guidance on the reimbursement process, including whether purchases made earlier in the spring will count.

Are private or tribal schools eligible for these funds?

NO.

How much per child are public school districts/schools eligible for?

The law does not specify *how much per child* schools will receive at a minimum or maximum, so MDE will have to promulgate some guidance on this point. Since this is reimbursement-based, it stands to reason that 1) schools will only receive money if they spend money and 2) if not all schools apply for reimbursement, there will be more available.

Is there a match?

YES. The Legislature is requiring districts to *match at least 20% of their grant funds from Stream 2* with either ESSER funds or any other available funds, including private funds.

What can schools spend their portion of the \$129.7M on?

Schools are allowed to spend their funds on the following:

1. Laptop computers, tablets, assisted learning devices or other devices which can be used personally by a student or teacher in their home or in the classroom
2. Learning management systems, software and other online tools
3. Hardware (installation as well as equipment) to provide for or enhance the internet connectivity of a school's students, including the cost of establishing personal or centrally located hotspots
4. Enhancement of security related to devices or connectivity to comply with state and federal law, and to protect students, teachers, administrators and other staff working within the school
5. Professional development related to use of devices, connectivity and other relevant components of distance learning for teachers, students and the wider community, including parents or guardians of students enrolled in the school
6. Materials and equipment necessary to increase health and safety precautions in classrooms or other school facilities

Must schools spend money on certain expenses before others?

YES. Schools must first "equip every student with a grade-appropriate device" (#1 above) before they can spend on learning management systems (#2) or hardware (#3). All other eligible expenses only become eligible after schools have these initial resources.

How long do schools have to make the expenses?

Unlike ESSER funds, CARES Act funding must be spent by December 31, 2020. If the funds have not been obligated via MDE by November 1, 2020, MDE may disburse the funds to schools by application.

Are there any other requirements?

1. Schools can only purchase off the Express Product List unless they can prove the same or better item was cheaper through a different vendor.
2. Schools must submit original, itemized receipts for reimbursement.
3. Schools must secure and submit proof of insurance.
4. Schools must develop and submit a plan to MDE by September 1 that contains:
 - a. A distance learning plan
 - b. A technology sustainability plan
 - c. A responsible use policyMDE is required to promulgate guidance to schools/districts on how to do these things.
5. Schools must also maintain an inventory list of items purchased.

MORE ABOUT STREAM 3 (\$20M)

The law is extremely vague on what this means or how it will work. It simply says, “The [Mississippi Department of Education] shall allocate the funds under this subsection to the schools according to the schools’ needs assessment responses.” Only public school districts are eligible for Stream 3 funds.

The Mississippi Pandemic Response Broadband Availability Grant Program (HB 1788)

How much money is available through the Mississippi Pandemic Response Broadband Availability Grant Program?

The Legislature allocated **\$50M** for this program.

How will MDE administer this program?

MDE is tasked with identifying “unserved” areas using Federal Communications Commission broadband data and then determining how many children in these areas are served in public, private, and tribal schools. MDE will then “equitably and efficiently” distribute money from the pot. Schools will not have to make an application.

How much per child are districts/schools eligible for?

MDE will determine the cost per child based on how many students in public, private, and tribal schools reside in the unserved areas. It is not specified in the bill.

Is there a match?

NO.

What can schools spend their portion of the \$50M on?

Schools must use the money to “negotiate and contract” with broadband providers to “increase or gain broadband access for the unserved areas.” The bill is technology neutral, so fiber, cellular, cable, etc., are all options.

Are there connectivity grant funds for school districts not in unserved areas that may have students not connected to the internet?

NO. This grant program is not available for school districts or schools with unmet student connectivity needs in areas that are not unserved.

How long do schools have to make the expenses?

Unlike ESSER funds, CARES Act funding must be spent by December 31, 2020. Schools must spend the money by December 1, 2020.