Arkansas – Governor’s Emergency Education Relief (GEER) Funds

Initial 45-Day Report

As a very rural state, Arkansas faces many challenges to deliver educational services to students in a digital format. Many areas of the state have little to no internet connectivity. The Governor intends to use the GEER funds awarded to Arkansas to address these challenges for Arkansas students in several ways. Additionally, a small portion of the funds will be dedicated to addressing the specialized needs of three state-sponsored residential schools to ensure student and staff health and safety related to the coronavirus pandemic.

Arkansas has designated its state department of education to be the fiscal agent for its GEER Funds. Additionally, the SEA will also serve as an education-related entity to expend some of the GEER funds to provide statewide support for school districts, charter schools, private schools, educational cooperatives, and institutions of higher education.

The first stage of implementation involves conducting a statewide data study to determine serviceability and a fabric analysis of needed broadband coverage for all areas of the state. This study will be conducted in coordination with the state’s departments of commerce and geographical information service (GIS). The results of this study will be the basis for then determining the areas with the most significant needs for improved broadband access, which consequently demonstrates the educational impact of the coronavirus as it relates to remote learning.

The next stage will use data gathered from the fabric analysis to determine which areas of the state have the greatest need for expanded broadband access. In these areas, the state will increase the number of access points by at least 20,000 through a combination of personal devices and fixed locations. The state has worked with three cellular vendors to negotiate pricing details. The packages will include unlimited, high speed data for approximately two years on each device.

Additionally, Arkansas has developed a statewide plan for education services to address specific needs faced by the coronavirus pandemic, including blending learning options. This initiative, called Arkansas Ready for Learning, provides support, guidance, and resources to all schools in the state to enable them to serve all students’ educational needs. This program incorporates assistance from the Arkansas Department of Health to provide an all-inclusive support system for all school districts, charter schools, private schools, preschools, educational cooperatives, and institutions of higher education. The state intends to dedicate a portion of its GEER funding for further expansion of this valuable resource as preparations for the school year begin as well as throughout the academic year, as needs change with the state’s health data.

Arkansas also recognizes similar needs exist in less traditional education settings. The state plans to use GEER funds to support work force training initiatives provided by the state’s adult education units, institutions of higher education, and career centers. Funds will be used to issue subgrants for new programs of study/training or innovative approaches for meeting both employer and worker needs. Funds will also be used to develop a digital platform that would allow analysis of education and workforce data. This platform would integrate records into an online public portal for users to access education and workforce records and explore available personal growth opportunities through education and technical skill enhancements.

Finally, the state intends to use the remaining GEER funds to address needs at three state-sponsored residential schools: Arkansas School for the Blind, Arkansas School for the Deaf, and the Arkansas School for Mathematics, Sciences, and the Arts. All three schools will have additional health and safety concerns beyond those of traditional education entities because students reside on campus. Additional funding will be granted to each facility to provide training for staff, personal protective equipment for students and staff, and additional sanitation supplies or services.

Arkansas is dedicated to providing a world class education to all students across the state. In the time of this health pandemic, our rural state faces many challenges to this goal, especially related to technology and digital access. The Governor, along with the Arkansas Department of Education, has developed this plan to use GEER funds to address as many of these challenges as possible. We believe student access to education, even remotely, should be consistent and equitable. Our goal is to ensure every students’ educational needs are met.

General Budget Outline for Arkansas GEER Funds

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| Item | Amount |
| Hotspots | **$10,000,000**  |
| Broadband Mapping | **$447,000** |
| Ready for Learning  | **$4,800,000** |
| Workforce Training Initiatives | **$14,816,725**  |
| Arkansas School for the Deaf and School for the Blind and Visually Impaired | **$500,000** |
| Arkansas School for Math, Science, and the Arts | **$100,000** |
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| Available GEER funds  | **$30,663,725** |