Flexing the Flexibility of ARP-HCY: 
#1: Removing Barriers with Store Cards and Pre-Paid Debit Cards

Children and youth experiencing homelessness often lack basic items needed to attend school and participate fully in school activities: clothing, shoes, food, laundry, hygiene supplies, and school supplies. Without these items, they miss school and can become disengaged from their education, contributing to chronic absence, poor academic performance, and higher dropout rates. In fact, the 2019-2020 national average graduation rate for homeless students was 68.2%, which is 13 percentage points below other low-income students (81.3%) and nearly 18 percentage points below all students (86.5%).

Store cards and pre-paid debit cards are an efficient and effective way to equip students for school and remove barriers to their enrollment, attendance, and success. They eliminate the need for liaisons to shop for specific sizes and needs or find a place to store supplies. In addition, store cards allow families and youth to select items that meet their unique needs and that they will use.

The U.S. Department of Education specifically names store cards and pre-paid debit cards to purchase materials necessary for students to participate in school activities as an allowable use of ARP-HCY funds, and does not prescribe any particular method of tracking these expenses. As with all ARP-HCY funds, it is recommended that the LEA first use community resources to meet these needs, if such resources are reasonably available.

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 Strategies

School districts have used the following strategies to ensure effective use of store cards to meet basic needs:

- Create online forms that are accessible on a phone or other device for parents or youth to affirm the use of the card
- Require submission of receipts to document purchases with store cards
- Purchase cards that cannot be used for alcohol and tobacco, such as charitable cards from major retailers (Walmart, etc.)
- Require parents or youth to sign for cards when received

 Sample Forms/Procedures

- California's Homeless Education Technical Assistance Center offers sample forms, letters, and procedures for making the most of store cards/pre-paid debit cards
Local Spotlights: Using ARP-HCY to Meet Basic Needs Through Store Cards

**Food and Winter Clothing: Middletown Public Schools, RI**

In Middletown, RI, decisions on the best use of ARP-HCY funds were guided by weekly communications and check-ins with families, during which time it became clear that families needed support with food and winter clothing. The Family Services Coordinator is using ARP-HCY funds to purchase supermarket and store gift cards so families are able to purchase these items. Gift cards are purchased in collaboration with the district business office, who submits purchase orders through existing store accounts.

**Hygiene Supplies, Food, Clothing: Clifton Public Schools, NJ**

Clifton Public Schools prioritized the immediate needs of students by purchasing store cards from local retailers such as Walgreens, Target, and Shoprite. The district obtained gift cards in quantities of $50 cards from Shoprite and $25 cards for gas cards, which were then distributed to families by the Supervisor of Counseling and Student Services. The supervisor conducted one-on-one meetings with families to assess their needs and to ask them to choose items that they need the most, such as food, hygiene supplies, and clothing. The store cards were then used to procure the chosen items, and delivery was arranged to the school or the family’s location. CPS staff ensured proper documentation of the type of gift cards provided, with both the school and family acknowledging receipt of the items. Gas cards were also distributed to students who were waiting for district transportation services to commence. The use of store cards has led to an increase in the identification of students experiencing homelessness, as families seek assistance with the cards and share their housing situation with CPS.

"It's important for business office staff to be open to new and creative ways of using funds to better serve our students. Purchasing store cards can be an effective way to provide support to individuals in need, especially during challenging times. As business office staff, we should always be looking for ways to make the most of our resources and help our students achieve their goals. We were fortunate to receive a generous amount of funding from the ARP grant that we know will positively impact our students educational experience and help level the playing field. Ms. Tremble did all the heavy lifting and spent countless hours on finding innovative ways to help our students. I hope I can help inspire other business office staff to explore more flexible uses of funds."

- Ahmed Shehata, Assistant Business Administrator, Clifton Public Schools, NJ

**Basic Needs: Fairfax County Public Schools: Fairfax, VA**

Fairfax County Public Schools partners with the school district’s education foundation to purchase store cards for basic needs in bulk. ARP-HCY funds are transferred into a special
account with the education foundation, who then purchases store cards and returns them to the liaison to distribute to students.

Additional Resources

- Allowable and Strategic uses of American Rescue Plan Homeless Children and Youth Funds (ARP-HCY)
- Progress and Promise: An Early Look at COVID Relief Funds for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness

REMINDER: ARP-HCY funds may be used for “any expenses necessary to facilitate the identification, enrollment, retention, or educational success of homeless children and youth in order to enable homeless children and youth to attend school and participate fully in school activities.” Broad categories included in ED guidance include:

- Providing wrap-around services (which could be provided in collaboration with and/or through contracts with community-based organizations, and could include academic supports, trauma-informed care, social-emotional support, and mental health services);
- Purchasing needed supplies (e.g., personal protective equipment, eyeglasses, school supplies, personal care items);
- Providing transportation to enable children and youth to attend school and participate fully in school activities;
- Purchasing cell phones or other technological devices for unaccompanied, homeless children and youth to enable such children and youth to attend school and fully participate in school activities;
- Providing access to reliable, high-speed internet for students through the purchase of internet-connected devices/equipment, mobile hotspots, wireless service plans, or installation of Community Wi-Fi Hotspots (e.g., at homeless shelters), especially in underserved communities;
- Paying for short-term, temporary housing (e.g., a few days in a motel) when such emergency housing is the only reasonable option for COVID-safe temporary housing and when necessary to enable the homeless children and youth to attend school and participate fully in school activities (including summer school); and
- Providing store cards/prepaid debit cards to purchase materials necessary for students to participate fully in school activities.”

In addition, LEAs may use funds for any of the sixteen uses permitted by the McKinney-Vento Act (42 U.S.C. 11433(d)).
Series: Flexing the Flexibility of ARP-HCY Funding

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