

Capturing Student Perspectives on ARPA Funds

Intro

Who are we and why are we talking about the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)?

The Kentucky Student Voice Team (KSVT) comprises young people who are research, policy, and advocacy partners working to create more just, democratic Kentucky schools and communities. At any time, the Kentucky Student Voice Team is made up of roughly 100 self-selected students from across the state. The team is founded on principles of intergenerational partnership in which young people and adult allies collaborate to deliver information to an audience on a grassroots level (school and district) and grassroots level (policy and legislation makers).

KSVT runs a podcast and blog; designs and delivers professional development for students, educators, and policy influencers; mobilizes coalitions around issues and legislative initiatives; shapes narratives through policy reports, social media, public testimony, and op-ed writing; facilitates dialogue between young people and education advocates and influencers; and conducts roundtables, interviews, and quantitative research that harnesses, amplifies, and elevates the voices and experiences of young people who represent the full diversity of the state.

The Kentucky Student Voice Team launched multiple initiatives over the summer of 2021 as part of a Seek Common Ground project accelerator with the intent of amplifying student voices within the context of new funding measures put in place by ARPA. Seek Common Ground (SCG) serves state- and community-facing education advocacy efforts to promote coalition building that honors the power of local, authentic agenda setting to drive sustainable educational excellence and equity. Through focusing on specific issues via Action Accelerators, Learning Community networking, and consultation and connection, they empower community-centered organizations to fulfill their agendas and meet the needs of their communities.

What is the American Rescue Plan, anyway?

On March 11th, 2021, the federal government passed the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), which includes over \$120 billion directly set out for education initiatives. The money will be dispersed between states, districts, and individual schools, and is designed to counteract the effects of the pandemic. This includes addressing inequalities in schools, purchasing cleaning and safety equipment, addressing learning loss, the creation of extracurricular programs, increasing transportation, and purchasing technology, among many other things. In fact, much of the funds can be used for nearly any goal (with the exception of new construction). Many states are poised to experience dramatic change in their education systems due to this infusion of funds, with a typical state like Kentucky receiving more than \$2 billion overall. In no uncertain terms, the money provided by ARPA represents a once-in-a-lifetime reinvestment in education throughout the United States.

Seriously, why should students care about ARPA?

Given the sheer flexibility in how ARPA funds could be used, appropriately prioritizing funding targets in a way that works to solve long-standing and COVID-induced problems in schools is critical. As such, districts, states, and the federal government have turned towards the communities they serve to help provide knowledge, lived experience, and expertise to better inform the most effective uses of ARPA funds and challenge the typical assumptions of school decision-makers. ARPA regulation, in fact, requires that recipients provide a plan of how they plan to engage the community in providing input on how to use the funds before any money is dispersed. Community members, particularly those from less privileged backgrounds, provide a specific, essential perspective on education that can be incredibly transformational when paired with available funding. Included within this group of community members, of course, are students.

It is difficult to understate the role that students can play in providing input on ARPA funds. Beyond just being community members, students provide a level of lived experience and knowledge on their own education that is unparalleled in school decision-making spaces. Students fundamentally understand the issues that they are facing for eight or more hours a day in the classroom, with almost all of them having some thoughts on how these issues might be able to be addressed. If nothing else, students represent an incredible well of data and stories and can help articulate what the issues are in schools today, much of which can't be captured by a simple 10 minute survey or standardized test. Additionally, current students, being the consumers of education and the ones most likely to be affected

by ARPA funds, are the primary stakeholders in conversations surrounding ARPA education funding.

These new funds could easily have lifelong ramifications for students nationwide, making it essential that young people are included in the conversation and that their needs are being directly addressed. The legislation surrounding ARPA acknowledges this fact, as ARPA recipients must also specifically describe how they plan to engage student perspectives before any payments are made. It is not enough, legally and morally, to only include already interested parents, community members, and teachers in conversations about ARPA. Instead, it is mandatory that students and all types of other community members, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, are actively sought out for input on how to best use ARPA monies.

This toolkit describes how to best engage students on ARPA from the position of an adult, mainly one in a decision-making position. The second part of this toolkit describes how interested students can connect with other students and reach out to school decision-makers. Both parts seek to answer common questions that adults and students may face when working on this issue.

Preface

To begin, we want to speak directly to you, the adult reader, to make sure you understand the context around working with youth. As an adult in this space, your perspective on education may or may not align with today's students and the modern reality of education. At the same time, it's also important to remember that many students have never really been asked to give serious, meaningful input on an issue of this caliber. Even so, most students are ready and willing to share their experiences, stories, and opinions, provided they know they're being taken seriously. Please take students for the whole people that they are and focus on empathizing with them, rather than attempting to ascribe what you may find to all students' thoughts and feelings. The goal is not merely to educate students but to learn from them!

I. How do you connect with students?

There's often a preconception in education spaces that students are actively disengaged from "serious" school decision-making, both on small and large scales. That is to say, many adults are tempted to believe that students are disaffected on education issues and often

cannot comprehend how educational systems, funding allocation, and professional development operates. However, what we have found in our work as the Kentucky Student Voice Team is the opposite narrative.

We and so many of our peers deeply care about the issues surrounding education and can thoroughly understand how schools and districts operate, but many of us end up feeling excluded from traditional input avenues. These reasons can include implicit or explicit discouragement from decision-making arenas, a lack of ability to physically appear where decisions are being made, a lack of information or context on the issues being discussed, and even fears of retaliation from parents, teachers, and administrators.

Traditional modes of school decision-making and public input such as board meetings come up short in their capacity to engage most young people. Additionally, schools and districts may try to collect data from students through a survey, but these are often lacking in providing adequate information or enough depth to uncover the nuances of what is taking place in schools. Advertising a board meeting or having students take a short survey is not enough to provide a meaningful connection or useful understanding of a student's perspective. Instead, it's necessary to provide a separate, clearly defined, easily accessible, student-specific, ongoing communication channel.

A student-centered input channel could take many forms, and what may work best may take trial and error and should be tailored to the school or district. The simplest and one of the cheapest solutions is to provide an anonymous digital comment box that asks a few key open-ended questions of students (further discussed in part III) that adequately frames ARPA and links to clear resources to learn more (further discussed in part II). Simply giving students space to freely express their opinion on a broad scale can, when combined with adequate knowledge of that space, be a wealth of information from which to draw when determining funding priorities. However, this method is prone to self-selection biases and can struggle to get beyond the surface-level problems that, while important, don't add anything new to the conversation.

Targeted interviews and round tables are one way to solicit more diverse student stories and perspectives. These types of loosely-structured, more intimate conversations allow for immediate follow-up on students' ideas, allowing them to bring up some more significant and underlying issues that don't typically get mentioned in the education space. An interview or roundtable also carries the added benefit that students are more likely to take the opportunity seriously and feel like they're being heard, mostly because an interview

represents a significant investment of time in the student. Despite the increases in resources to conduct interviews and roundtables, the quality of responses is often exponentially greater than that of a survey alone.

On top of this, it's useful to make sure that students can, at any time, approach school-decision makers with thoughts or stories. While having a specialized, formal channel to collect student input can be important and useful, more informal methods of gathering student input have also proved to be quite helpful for both students and adults. By first initiating and inviting students to provide commentary and input on their schools and ARPA and then helping them to continue that conversation over time with other education officials, a large swath of student perspectives can be collected over time. This could be particularly useful when considering the efficacy of ARPA-funded solutions and how funding should be adjusted over the multi-year course of ARPA monies being distributed.

Above all else, it's important that in any work with students, the students themselves ultimately have agency over expressing candid ideas and concepts they hold about education. It's helpful for facilitators to follow-up, ask further questions, and demonstrate interest in students' ideas to gain a better understanding of what is being said, while being careful not to share their own biases and beliefs. This type of neutrality is not only key for students, but also for collecting input, feedback, and stories from any group. Be aware of what is already believed, and actively try to avoid confirming that in the work.

II. How should ARPA be framed?

As referenced in Part II, barring new construction, there are few restrictions on the usage of ARPA funds, other than the requirement that they must address impacts of the pandemic. Therefore, student-led discussion on ARPA should be conducted in broad and aspirational ways. To stimulate more, unfiltered discourse, students should be encouraged to think of possibilities as opposed to just the economic feasibility of specific proposals.

The first step in adequately framing ARPA is to simply provide students with the necessary background information to raise their comfort level in participating in the conversation. Many students (and adults!) will likely be unfamiliar with ARPA and its specificities. Thus, adults should spend sufficient time simply discussing the most basic components of ARPA and clearing up any confusion around the use, purpose, and functions of the funds.

Throughout this initial discussion, facilitators should solicit and value the lived experience of the student participants. Students should be encouraged to examine the state of their school as a whole, especially in the context of the pandemic and issues arising from it. Throughout the pandemic, the entire education system has had to adapt and shift into altered forms of learning and isolation at home to prevent the spread of COVID-19. There has been a lack of consistency that students are experiencing firsthand and that has led to varying needs for support, including technological needs, financial needs, mental health resources, and free and reduced lunch. It is essential that students and school leaders consider the necessity of adapting our education system to the ongoing struggles of the pandemic, and recognizing that the pandemic has created unique challenges that need to be addressed and not merely glazed over.

Taking this into consideration, it should be emphasized that ARPA funds can make significant changes to student experiences that have resulted from the pandemic and long-standing educational issues. This influx of funding could prompt unprecedented education innovation. The flexibility of these funds should be noted when discussing ARPA with students, and it should be acknowledged that students do not have to know the most granular specifics of the funding to contribute to the thinking around it. The goal of collecting student experiences is not to find exact solutions, but to set goals, priorities, and general ideas to address deep-rooted issues for a future that better serves students and communities.

III. What questions do students need to be asked?

When gathering data from students, open-ended questions such as, “What’s one thing you wish you could change about your school?” should be emphasized instead of direct questions, such as, “How should ARPA funds be distributed?” Students are seldom consulted on matters of funding and school policy in general, so framing questions around the experiences and problems encountered in school as opposed to questions that merely ask where they would like to allocate funding can help relieve the initial hesitancy students may have in discussing these matters. Student expertise should not be underestimated when dealing with funding discussions, and the more general framing allows students to draw on their daily experiences as students and participate meaningfully in the funding-related discussion.

Minimizing bias is also vital to crafting an effective question set that authentically captures the voices of students. By phrasing questions neutrally, students’ perspectives are not

influenced to lean towards a specific answer. For example, the question, “How does masking negatively impact your education?” has a negative connotation and implies that the student mainly has negative views regarding the subject. If this question is not asked alongside the question, “How does masking positively impact your education?” the student responses will discuss the negative aspects of masking, even if they do not encompass the true sentiments of that student. By asking less biased questions, such as, “How do you feel about masking?” we eliminate external influences and provide the opportunity for students to share their genuine opinions.

Additionally, the language in questions is vital to students’ understanding of what is being asked, so it is essential to use accessible language to remove the barriers preventing students from voicing their opinions can be minimized. In the context of funding, certain terminology and ideas can be hard for students to grasp off the bat, but this is not a valid justification for a lack of student opinion under this topic. By emphasizing clarity and the importance of explanation, students will be more equipped to respond to relevant matters such as funding.

These tips are important to consider when crafting questions, but it is natural to learn as we go through a process. Listen to students, pay attention to what is working and what isn’t, and use these observations to adapt the questions being asked. Being static when trying to listen to the voices of others will only hinder the possibilities of the questions and will narrow the diversity in experience that could be represented. Perfection is not necessarily the goal, and even though financial influence may place emphasis on such, it is more important to focus on ensuring honest, reflective responses instead of responses that would otherwise align with the standard of “perfection” that is typically set. It is more important to hear what students have to say in earnest than it is to develop a refined plan from the very beginning.

To effectively gather data to use when making decisions, it is imperative that objective verbiage and accessible language is consistently used to avoid creating confusion or bias. Focus on collecting comprehensive data and ensuring that students’ voices are heard. In the end, it is most important that the results are reflective of the student population so they can then be used in the decision-making process to fully benefit stakeholders.

IV. What should be done with the stories and data?

It is essential to recognize that the stories and statistics collected are from real people and experiences and are unique to the nuances of their lives. For that reason, the information gathered must be respected and held with dignity throughout the process of analysis with the understanding that there are people for whom the data is not just dry and scientific, but personal and very often profound. When analyzing the collected data, it is vital to keep an open mind about what others are saying and recognizing the bias that may occur in who is reading the anecdotes. There are differing experiences among every single person, and everyone must be respected and validated.

With this mindset, the anecdotal evidence gathered can then be used and interpreted to develop conclusions surrounding the needs of students in the school community. Interpreting the findings is an important step that requires attentiveness to the nuances of the data; finding parallels between responses is an excellent way to process data and extrapolate larger themes. It is also important to rely on the responses themselves, not previous perceptions or contexts, when analyzing the data. Putting together the pieces of the data and situating it within the larger framework of the topic of discussion is imperative when interpreting data as well; education and other social and economic issues are interconnected, so it is important to acknowledge this in any conclusions reached. When analyzing data, having a collaboration between multiple people often helps to create a more holistic picture of the data because it allows people to discuss and consider a multitude of ideas and better dive into the subtext.

V. Sharing Back With Students and the Community

It is important that we acknowledge that simply asking the right questions is not enough. Expecting students to share intimate details about their experiences, personal situation, and personality is not a one-way street. Instead, clearly communicate how their voices are integrated into school environments. This gap of collecting individualistic information with the ultimate goal of bettering our schools yet not sharing with students how impactful they have is a recurring issue. In the context of standardized testing, a frequent student complaint we heard was the lack of feedback received after completing mandated tests. Hours spent diligently answering questions seem like a waste of effort with nothing but a number in return. This same principle is applicable to any communication between students and adults. It cannot be emphasized enough that the key to communication with students is transparency.

Transparency ensures that students are aware of the ongoing conversation, one that so deeply pertains to them. Take, for example, the emerging discussion of mental health in schools. Schools have hired mental health counselors - a step in the right direction. At first glance, what seems like substantial progress is in fact meaningless to many. Our interviews give testament to the fact that many students feel just as isolated as before. A rural Kentucky student expressed their frustration around their recently hired mental health counselor, citing stigma as a primary reason. The ideals of a small town and the stigma around their school should have been the primary focus of adults. The takeaway is not to simply implement a new policy and consider it a job well done. Take the time to acknowledge how these latest measures are truly affecting students and be clear about the role that everyone plays in ever-important issues.

There is no doubt that taking student voice as an input is crucial, but a major step that is often overlooked is relaying the results back to young people. Conducting interviews, participating in round tables, or acts as simple as asking for a student's opinion can all be the root of two-way communication. Treating these students as partners instills a sense of community and is a meaningful way to foster a more collaborative and mutually-beneficial environment. If you're in the process of conducting research, be proactive in updating your community of your progress, keeping in mind that the process of doing so is an essential part of the product and goal of ensuring healthier schools and communities.

Appendix A: Sample Student Questions

- How would you describe yourself as a student?
- How would you describe yourself as a person versus as a student?
- In what ways, if any, do you think any aspects of who you are as a student or as a person may have affected your school experience this past year?
- What have you learned about school this past year that you think school leaders should take into account to ensure the best possible learning experience for next year?
- What do you wish your teachers and administrators knew about your experiences and responsibilities right now? (These can be academic, social, personal, or both.)
- Do you think that your teachers are able to be responsive to everyone in your class? Do you know why that might be?
- What, if anything at all, have you heard about the American Rescue Plan?
- If you had an additional \$10,000 to spend to improve the education experience for the most students in some way at your school, what would you do with it? What if you had an additional \$100,000? And what about \$1 million?