



Cities Connecting Children to Nature

NLC NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES
CITIES STRONG TOGETHER

Children & Nature Network

Initial Guidance on Using American Rescue Plan Act Funds to Bring Nature's Benefits to Children

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), which includes \$65 billion in direct aid to cities, towns, and villages via a State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund, offers an unprecedented funding opportunity to increase children's regular connections to nature and promote healthy child development. [Guidance from the U.S. Treasury](#) places emphasis on "serving the hardest-hit communities and families," including to "address educational disparities" and "promote healthy childhood environments." It also notes "investments in parks, public plazas, and other public outdoor recreation spaces may be responsive to the needs of disproportionately impacted communities by promoting healthier living environments and outdoor recreation and socialization to mitigate the spread of COVID-19."

In line with this guidance, the [Cities Connecting Children to Nature](#) (CCCN) partnership of the [National League of Cities](#) and Children & Nature Network recommends local leaders consider the below uses of ARPA funds that can bring nature's benefits to children in their local neighborhoods where they live, study, and play.

Getting More Young Children Outdoors, More Often

ARPA makes funds available to connect young children to nature, directly through Head Start and also via child care block grants. Cities that administer, or have partners hosting, Head Start programs can use Head Start funds (\$1 billion) to support [early childhood outdoor learning and nature play](#). The [ARPA guidance](#) from the Office of Head Start describes uses of funds as follows: "Purchasing or enhancing outdoor learning spaces, including nature-based learning and outdoor classrooms. Creating play areas and landscape features that promote exploration and discovery in a natural environment, such as plantings, gardens, and 'loose parts' (i.e., materials for construction and pretend play), rather than traditional play structures or playgrounds."

Another approach involves showing how outdoor learning environments and nature-based programming will contribute to the [\\$24 billion ARPA-funded effort to stabilize the child care industry](#). City leaders can connect with [state Child Care and Development Fund administrators](#) to suggest prioritizing outdoor learning, highlighting the research on how nature-based approaches fulfill two key ARPA goals: providing safe and [healthy learning environments](#), and [mental health support for children](#) and educators. In addition, focusing on the [maternal and child health benefits](#) of time in nature may help make the necessary connections to join projects under the \$150 million ARPA-funded expansion of the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program.

Stormwater Management and Climate Resilience via Schoolyard Greening

Cities may use ARPA State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund dollars for creation of [green infrastructure or managing and treating stormwater](#). CCCN recommends that city leaders and their partners pursue opportunities to expand the [benefits of green schoolyards](#) further by implementing them as a form of [green infrastructure and stormwater management](#). CCCN also recommends emphasizing the [climate resilience benefits](#) of green schoolyard projects such as rain gardens that expand natural infrastructure.

Outdoor Learning and Play During and Beyond the School Day

State education agencies and school districts received a combined \$122 billion allocation in ARPA via the [Elementary and Secondary School Relief](#) (ESSER) Fund to address the needs of reopening and sustaining operations in schools, as well as addressing the pandemic's impact on students. Whereas states submitted [plans for these funds](#) in early June, CCCN recommends that city leaders and their partners review submitted plans to check for chances to pursue common interests in healthy childhood development and academic and social-emotional learning via outdoor learning and nature-based out-of-school time (including summer) enrichment activities. [a](#)

Libraries As Jumping-Off Points for Learning About and Exploring Nature

ARPA allocates \$200M in funding to libraries in a grant program managed by the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), most frequently passed through state library agencies. These grants support museum and library services addressing community needs created or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and assisting with recovery. [Guidance](#) provided by IMLS states that eligible projects may continue, enhance, or expand existing programs and services, or to launch new ones to address new needs. CCCN recommends advancing proposals to create more [nature-smart library programming](#), which employs libraries as neighborhood nodes to send children outside for learning and exploration.

The [recent guidelines](#) on the [allowable uses of the Coronavirus Local Fiscal Recovery Fund](#) in ARPA reflect NLC's advocacy on behalf of municipalities across the country.

Additional Resources:

- [Local Recovery: Five Principles for ARP Implementation](#) (NLC)
- [Leveraging ARPA Funds for Mental Health & Wellbeing](#) (NLC)
- [What Small Cities Need to Know to Access ARPA Funds](#) (NLC)
- [An Unparalleled Investment in U.S. Public Education: Analysis of ARPA 2021](#) (Learning Policy Institute)
- [Supporting Early Childhood with ARPA](#) (NLC)
- [Supporting Education Success through ARPA](#) (NLC)
- [Research Digest: Nature and Mental Health and Well-being](#) (C&NN)

DISCLAIMER: The information contained here is not legal advice. It will be subject to change based on updates from the U.S. Department of the Treasury, and any recipients should confirm applicability to their specific situation.

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