



Sen. Lamar Alexander Estimates K-12, Higher Ed. Need \$50 Billion to \$75 Billion to Reopen Safely

By [Andrew Ujifusa](#) on June 24, 2020 3:35 PM

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The top U.S. senator for education policy believes the federal government should be ready to step in with new education funding to help K-12 schools be safe in the fall. What precisely that means for a future coronavirus relief package remains to be seen.

The estimate from Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., based on outside studies, is that it would take \$50 billion to \$75 billion for K-12 schools, as well as colleges and universities, to reopen safely. This funding would be directed to things like barriers, hand sanitizers, and other health and hygiene resources to ensure schools are properly prepared for the coronavirus.

The Senate education committee chairman's goal is for the lack of federal funding not to be an impediment for schools to resume in-person classes in the fall. However, that estimate is separate from discussions about whether, and to what extent, the federal government should help provide emergency aid for schools to cover general staffing costs and other major, more traditional budget items.

During a Tuesday [appearance on CNBC](#), Alexander said—as he has previously—that he considers it crucial for both K-12 schools as well as colleges and universities "that they have the money that they need to open safely in the fall." After stressing how important reopening will be for the economy and for parents in general, Alexander added, "If we need more money for that, I'm for that," and shared his estimate for costs related to reopening safely.

Alexander's position will goose hopes that Congress will provide some sort of relief for K-12 education in any broad relief package for the coronavirus. But it might temper expectations about the total amount of COVID aid that Washington might provide to schools. And remember, Alexander's estimate of \$50 billion to \$75 billion covers higher education as well as K-12.

Estimates about the cost of safely reopening schools—and what factors are included in those estimates—can and have varied.

A recent report from AASA, the School Administrators Association, **put the cost of reopening schools** with proper safety protocols at nearly \$1.8 million per district on average, or roughly \$25 billion total. That estimate covers personal protective equipment (PPE), hiring staff to implement new safety protocols, health monitoring and cleaning, and providing transportation and child care. The American Federation of Teachers said that to reopen safely and "most effectively" **would cost at least \$116 billion**; that figure includes not just personal protective equipment and cleaning materials, but everything from new transportation costs to providing more children with high-speed internet.

And on Wednesday, the Council of Chief State School Officers **released an estimate** that it would cost between \$158 billion and \$245 billion to reopen safely. That estimate is based on the costs of expanding broadband internet, academic supports for students who have fallen behind due to school closures, and other wide-ranging needs caused or exacerbated by the pandemic.

For an EdWeek special report on how America will go back to school in the fall, click here.

More generally, education lobbying groups and some Democratic lawmakers think that schools need a great deal of money to make up for the collapse in state and local revenue due to the pandemic. Again, Alexander's estimate doesn't cover those broader concerns about school budgets. He has previously **stressed that coronavirus testing will be crucial for schools** in the fall.

A COVID relief package passed by the House last month called the HEROES Act would provide \$58 billion in general fiscal relief for K-12 school districts, which could use the money for a wide array of programs and services. However, outside organizations have pushed for Congress to provide **at least \$250 billion in funding** for both K-12 and higher education. And a group of House Democrats **has pushed for \$305 billion** for K-12 school districts in the next coronavirus relief package to use on everything from teacher salaries to distance learning; that group publicized its demand after the House passed the HEROES Act.

The last relief package signed by President Donald Trump, the CARES Act, provided roughly \$13 billion for public school districts.

Alexander's word will carry some weight in upcoming congressional negotiations, but it remains to be seen how Capitol Hill leadership will thrash out different amounts of COVID relief for different priorities, both within education and in general.

Alexander is retiring and is not seeking reelection this year.