Follow the School Dollar

A school can have money and still not be able to spend it on its people. Most of the budget is spoken for before the year starts, and every new dollar comes with rules about what it can buy, when, and with whose sign-off.

1. Where public school money comes from



Nationwide, 2021 to 2022: $909 billion in all. Local is mostly property tax. Federal includes Title I and special education, and was higher than usual that year because of pandemic relief.

2. Where it already goes



About three of every four dollars pay people, at rates usually set by contract. Nationwide, 2021 to 2022.

3. The money sits in separate buckets

General fund · staff, teaching, supplies	**Special revenue** · money tied to a purpose, like a federal program or grant	**Capital projects** · building, often with bonds
Debt service · paying back borrowing	**Enterprise** · fee-paid services, often meals	**Trust and agency** · money held for others

Money restricted to one purpose cannot simply pay for another. Bus money is not training money. Each state sets its own fund names and rules for moving money between them.

4. Why staff go without

Spoken for. Salaries and benefits come first.

Labeled. Funds, federal rules, and funder purposes decide what a dollar buys.

Badly timed. The budget is set before the year starts; help that arrives in January has no room.

Short on hours. Someone has to find, write, approve, and report on every grant.

5. The red tape, in plain words

The budget is set before the year starts
In most states the fiscal year runs July 1 to June 30. Money that shows up in January has to find room in a plan already made.

Contracts set pay
Where staff have a contract, it usually sets stipends and hourly rates for extra time. Extra pay runs through payroll and is taxed.

Federal money must add, not replace
Title I and other federal funds pay for something extra, never for what the district would buy anyway.

One-time money cannot safely pay for a person
A grant-funded job creates a cliff when the grant ends.

Big purchases go out to bid
Every state sets a dollar limit for formal bids, and federal money has its own purchasing rules.

Gifts and grants need a yes from the board
The money stays tied to the purpose the funder or donor named.

6. When money can actually move

Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Start	Start	Start	Set	Set	Set	Set	Set	Plan	Plan	Plan	Plan

A typical July to June year. Dark months: the year's plan is mostly locked. Spring is the time to bring something new for next year.

If you want to help: five questions to ask a principal

1. What would you give your staff if money were not the problem?
2. Which of those need flexible money, and which could a grant cover?
3. Who has to approve a gift or grant, and how long does that take?
4. Does a contract set a rate for extra time, like planning or training?
5. When is the best month to bring you something new for next year?

Legwork does the grant part for free. We find the funding, write it to fit these rules, and file it once the school approves. legworkgrants.org · hello@legworkgrants.org

A general guide, not legal or financial advice. Rules differ by state and district. Legwork Educator Support NFP. Nothing here is a guarantee of funding. Revenue shares are calculated from NCES dollar amounts.

Sources: ies.ed.gov (NCES, revenues and expenditures for public elementary and secondary education, fiscal year 2022) · nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/fin_acct (fund types) · nces.ed.gov/ccd/pubs/npefs03 (school fiscal years) · cde.ca.gov (supplement, not supplant under ESSA section 1118(b))