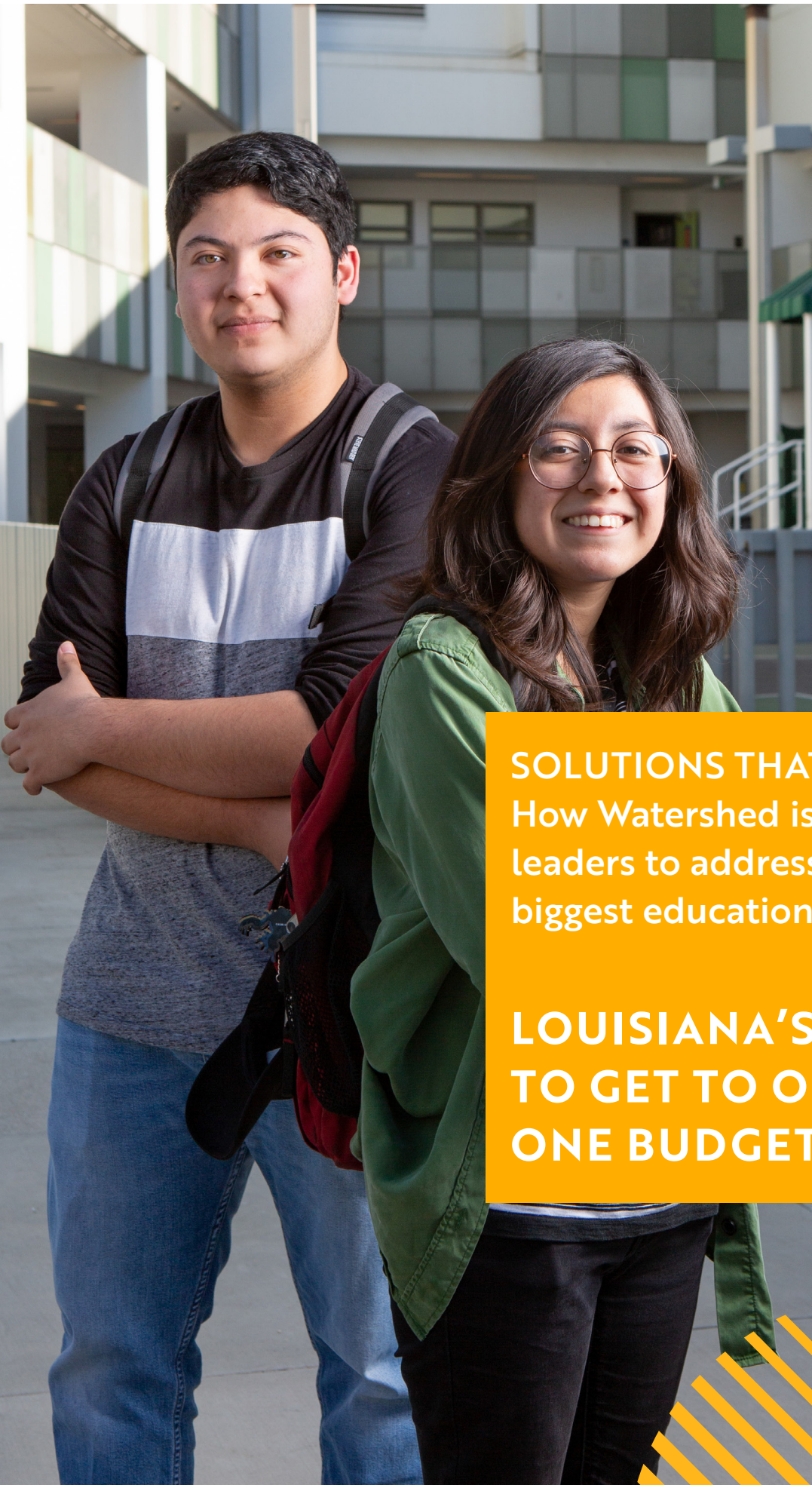




**WATERSHED**  
ADVISORS

**SOLUTIONS THAT SCALE:**  
How Watershed is supporting  
leaders to address America's  
biggest education challenges

**LOUISIANA'S PLAYBOOK  
TO GET TO ONE PLAN,  
ONE BUDGET FOR KIDS**



# THE CHALLENGE

High-functioning, effective organizations are clear about their goals and line up their resources accordingly. In 2016, Louisiana school districts weren't doing that. The Bayou State didn't make it easy for districts to have a unified plan and aligned budget. As a result, educators were spending too much time, money, and energy managing funding — rather than teaching kids.

**At the time, districts were being asked to provide nearly 30 plans and 30 budgets to the state department of education.** Different, siloed district offices oversaw these plans and budgets and set their own priorities for each grant. They then purchased different products and services or funded school-based positions without regard for how other grant funds across the district were being spent. Meanwhile, those closest to children — teachers and principals — were left trying to make sense of how all the varied products and services coming from different district offices could come together.

**This convoluted and inefficient way of operating wasn't random — and it wasn't unique**

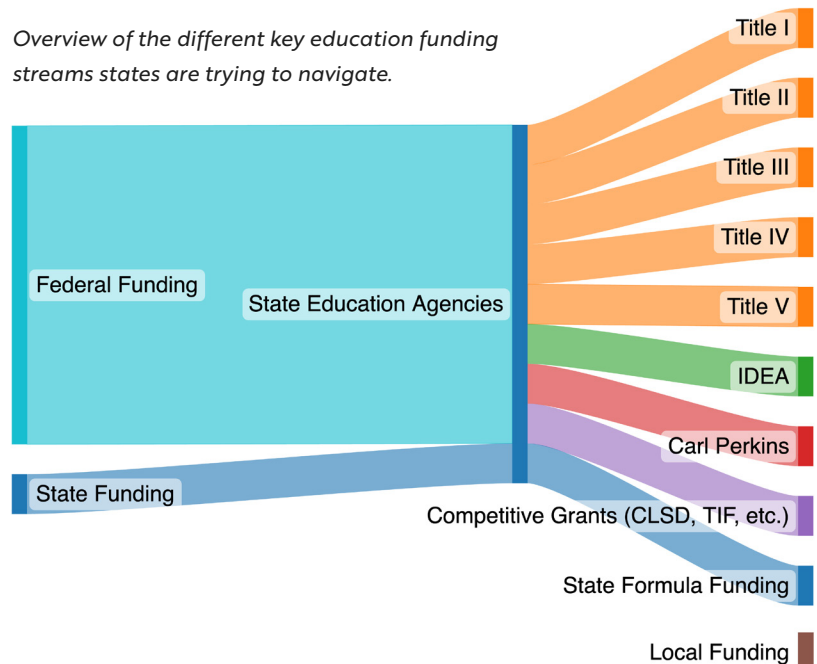
**to Louisiana.** It was happening because federal and state dollars come with strings attached — that is, they're tied to individual programs with specific aims. For example, Title I of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) designates funding for low-income students, Title III of ESSA designates funding for English learners, and so on across a litany of other federal grants. To access these dollars, districts typically are required to submit budgets to the siloed offices within the state department of education responsible for approving each of these plans, monitoring implementation, and reporting to the federal government.

On top of federal money, states may also issue other legislatively-funded priorities or competitive grants to districts, adding to the list of grants and budgets districts are being asked to manage. As a result, district leaders must often submit multiple budgets and plans to multiple different offices within a state department of education on multiple different timelines in order to acquire public funding for virtually any aspect of running a school.

This remains common practice in the majority of the almost 14,000 school districts across the United States and poses many challenges at the state, district, and school level, leaving educators with:

- **Siloed decision making.** Because of the separate planning and budgeting processes for each federal grant, districts make decisions about how to spend each grant individually. Planning therefore centers on each *grant* (e.g., how to spend Title I dollars), rather than on each *priority* for students (e.g., how to provide high-quality curricula in every classroom by braiding a variety of funding sources).

Overview of the different key education funding streams states are trying to navigate.



- **Multiple timelines and processes.** Because grant cycles are on different timelines, at any given time, districts may be working on the application for one grant, budget review for another, and audits for yet another. This fragmentation makes it challenging for states and districts to track overall spending of dollars toward strategic priorities.
- **Inefficient use of funds.** Siloed decision making on misaligned timelines makes it hard for district leaders to do their job. Under the current structure, not only do superintendents often start the school year with incomplete information about their districts' financials, but there is also no point during a school year in which they have a complete accounting of the funds available for the current or coming year. As a result, districts tend to underestimate and under-budget federal funds, leading to a large amount of rollover year to year with significant funds remaining unspent or spent without an intentional focus on impact. Without a clear financial picture, superintendents are not set up to establish and drive forward clear priorities for students.

**It's no surprise then that the United States of America spends 34% more per pupil** than other similar countries and **yet American students often perform no better** than their peers internationally. In the wake of pandemic learning loss, it's more important than ever to address this problem, or states will be left cutting critical interventions at the time when students need them most.



### How this plays out: Chromebooks

Devon is the district's Title I officer, and Jessie is the district's IDEA officer. They rarely interact outside of monthly meetings. Devon thinks students in Title I schools need Chromebooks. Jessie thinks students with learning differences need Chromebooks. Each leader applies for state grants — Devon through Title I and Jessie through IDEA — and both applications are approved. Because Devon and Jessie didn't coordinate as they were building their plans, and because state department of education offices didn't coordinate as they reviewed district plans, the district ended up with too many Chromebooks. This could have been prevented if offices at both the district and state level were coordinated.

## THE SOLUTION

**States are uniquely positioned to build coherence within the school funding system** because they are responsible for distributing and monitoring federal funding to districts. Although they cannot change the legal requirements tied to federal funding, states do have the opportunity to shape strategic priorities and spending behaviors at the district level through how those dollars are administered. That's the approach Louisiana took in 2017.

**Members of the Watershed Advisors team, then working at the state department of education, turned 30 plans and 30 budgets into one streamlined, strategic plan with one budget aligned to the state's top three education priorities.**

The team did this by developing the **Super App**, a single platform that put policy priorities, planning, and budgeting all in one place.

### The Super App allowed district leaders to:

- ☑ **Establish one plan across all funding sources**
- ☑ **Focus these plans on the state's top education priorities**
- ☑ **Consider all potential sources of money simultaneously to fund their priorities**
- ☑ **Streamline their planning**
- ☑ **Eliminate redundancies**

**Most importantly, the Super App empowered districts to create one plan and one budget centered on the needs of students.** As a result, they could:

- **Focus on what works for kids.** Louisiana used the Super App to turn state-level priorities, such as improving reading instruction, into action by focusing districts' spending (e.g., purchasing materials, providing teachers with training on how to use them in the classroom). The Super App also made it easier for districts to see what resources were available across funding sources (e.g., Title I, Title II, IDEA) and the extent to which they could be strategically braided to support these priorities.
- **Improve district-wide coordination.** The Super App required coordination across all district offices that had historically planned for distinct grant programs in silos. Through its unified format, this tool provided a structure for district leaders (e.g., principal managers, curriculum experts, special education leaders, etc.) to coordinate planning around student needs.

- **Increase efficiency.** With the Super App, districts engaged in just one cycle of planning, budgeting, and application approval. The Super App replaced all lengthy grant application questions with simple short-answer or drop-down questions focused on how the district would spend funds in alignment with the state's and its own priorities.
- **Ensure federal compliance.** The Super App helped districts keep the big picture and support key priorities, while also ensuring they were meeting individual program requirements. The Super App's digital platform also allowed for automated reviews that reduced the time and energy spent ensuring compliance.

## THE IMPACT

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During the Watershed team's time in Louisiana's state department of education, we prioritized ensuring every teacher had access to the best curricula and training to help them use these materials effectively in service of their students. To support districts in making these curricular and training shifts, the state department of education partnered with teachers to develop a list of top-tier curricula and a list of high-quality teacher training partners.

We designed Super App to encourage districts to allocate money toward these shifts in curricula and teacher training ahead of other priorities. Districts were able to maximize the amount of money dedicated to these spending priorities by looking across all eligible funding sources all at once. Using the Super App, districts were able to indicate the financial gap between how much money they were able to allocate and the true cost of the curricula and training.

With this information, the state department of education could then direct its own discretionary funds to support districts in bridging these gaps. Every school identified for ESSA school improvement was offered about \$40,000 in additional funds to motivate them to switch to high-quality curricula and training. These funds came from a number of different discretionary sources of money, including the Title I school improvement set-aside, the federal Comprehensive Literacy State Development, and state discretionary IDEA funds.

**The impact was immediate:** Every one of the 500 schools identified for ESSA school improvement made the switch to high-quality curricula and training in year one. And, as an added benefit, schools knew in April how much money they would have for the entirety of the upcoming year, which enabled them to focus on planning and implementing the shift with fidelity.

**The Super App quickly demonstrated how coordinated, strategic planning and spending pays off for kids: According to our internal analysis, students in the schools identified for school improvement that made the switch grew to a greater extent than those in historically higher-performing schools in the state.**

## OUR ROLE

Since leaving Louisiana's state department of education, the Watershed team has worked with leaders across the country to scale solutions that match the scale of the challenges facing public education — including collaborating with leaders in other states to build their own versions of a unified app, inspired by Louisiana's success.

Watershed is experienced in galvanizing education leaders across program implementation, grants management, and technology teams to:

- **Set priorities for funding** that focus on achieving key improvements for students,
- **Align grants** to support each spending priority and maximize the dollars leveraged for student outcomes,
- **Design an application** process that meets compliance requirements and ensures spending is aligned to priorities,
- **Support districts to build a strong plan** for student learning and federal grant spending,
- **Review applications** against set criteria for plan approval and discretionary awards, and ultimately,
- **Approve and allocate funding** that supports a clear set of plans to support student achievement.

While finding ways to do more with less has always bedeviled decision makers, few challenges have been as great as preparing for the funding cliff that school systems are facing as federal COVID-19 relief funding ends. **If states want to avoid cutting critical interventions long before students' learning recovery is complete, they will need to help districts abandon the status quo and quickly transition to more strategic, streamlined, and effective planning and budgeting.**

Watershed can help make this possible.



**Super App provided school systems with the framework that aligned with state priorities and ensured that all previously siloed funding streams were prioritized to address our greatest needs. This work matters for kids: Better coordinated planning allows us to center what works for students and boost academic outcomes."**

*– Shavonne Garner-Price, Executive Director of Teaching and Learning, Jefferson Parish*

# OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH AND SCALE

**Now is the perfect time for state education agencies to take inspiration from Louisiana’s success and develop a unified app for one plan and one budget.**

Why? Because states still have ESSER money to deploy and can use this money to purposefully establish a set of priorities, including:

- Stronger early literacy instruction
- Better instructional materials and training for teachers
- Support to build stronger career pathways for students

With those priorities in place, states can create a comprehensive structure to distribute money throughout districts in service of those priorities. The [latest NAEP](#) scores show that the pandemic wiped out two decades of student gains in reading and math. If we want a shot at changing students’ trajectory despite our limited means, this is how to ensure it happens — making it easier for districts to invest their dollars in what will make the biggest impact for kids.

Watershed Advisors stands ready to help states make this critical shift.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). Education Expenditures by Country. Condition of Education. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved March 15, 20203 from: <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cmd/education-expenditures-by-country> ; and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). (2019). Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results from PISA 2018. Country Note: United States. Accessed 15 March 2023 from: [https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/PISA2018\\_CN\\_USA.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/PISA2018_CN_USA.pdf)

*All Photos by Allison Shelley for [EDUimages](#)*

