



JUNE 2021

7 Principles for Investing ESSER Funds:

Overview: Plan Spending for Long-Term Sustainability

Four ways district leaders can sustain their new ESSER investments over time

Districts across the country are planning how to invest huge influxes of one-time ESSER funds — targeting funds toward meeting urgent academic and social-emotional recovery needs, as well as redesigning better, more equitable approaches to teaching and learning.

But short-term investments are often not enough to generate meaningful long-term change, and many districts will want to sustain the changes they are funding with ESSER dollars beyond the three-year period. Therefore, district leaders will need to begin planning *and investing* for sustainability. In this brief, we outline **four considerations to help district teams plan their ESSER spending with long-term sustainability in mind.**

1. Size the full cost of implementing strategies over time.

First, district leaders will need to distinguish between short-term and long-term needs. This will help teams identify which new investments address temporary challenges that are expected to be fully recovered within the grant period, and which new investments may need to continue in perpetuity. For example, short-term investments in technology infrastructure may shrink to only maintenance costs, while short-term investments in teacher stipends for additional tutoring may evolve into broader plans to restructure [teacher compensation and roles](#).

Second, the actual cost of implementing strategies often differs from what it can appear like at face value — so to make ESSER investments sustainable, district leaders will need to scope out the full breadth of costs associated with implementing a strategy well. For example, many district leaders are applying ESSER funds to introduce new curricula — but the cost of implementing this strategy extends beyond what the district pays to the curriculum provider. Teachers will need time and support to learn the new curricula, adapt lesson and unit plans, review student work, and implement aligned assessments — all of which can come with additional costs. Further, we know that teacher expertise isn't properly developed over a



couple of days during the summer; it requires job-embedded collaboration and support, which can cost [two to five times](#) as much as simply buying the new curricula.

Third, it will be important to use informed assumptions to estimate how costs might change over time. While it can be difficult to assess *all* the cost components of a strategy in advance — especially given uncertainty around the extent that students' needs have changed and how long it will take to address them — it will be important to monitor and adjust investments going forward. This means recognizing that many investments will need to happen over a timespan greater than the ESSER window, and shifting resources or raising new resources to implement strategies longer-term.

Finally, it will be essential to [center equity](#) as district leaders cost out different strategies, taking into consideration not only everything the strategy involves but how it will target students and schools based on their varying needs. For example, a tutoring strategy organized to reach the maximum number of students could be structured with a 4:1 student-to-tutor ratio for 45 minutes weekly. For a similar cost, the district could implement a more targeted and intensive tutoring strategy for the 25 percent of students with the most significant learning needs, using a 2:1 ratio for 90 minutes weekly. The type, depth, and variation of student needs should ultimately dictate a district's investment. Additionally, investment levels are likely to vary by grade level and concentration of student need. For example, early evidence suggests that academic recovery needs may be highest in the early elementary grades for students who are English language learners, as they may have faced additional barriers to engaging in virtual learning.

To learn more about sizing the full cost of strategies, explore our [ESSER Strategy Planning & Spending Calculator](#).

2. Integrate all funding sources and stretch the window for investment.

ESSER dollars aren't just for new initiatives that help recover unfinished learning. Districts will need to leverage the full range of resources they have available in the next five years by integrating ESSER funds with all of their other revenue streams. This has two important benefits.

First, it creates coherence between new and existing investments. This may include accelerating spending in areas that were previously identified as priorities and remain aligned with current needs. For example, if the pandemic has inspired districts to add new [professional learning structures](#), leaders should consider how new spending can be amplified by existing investments in school-based collaboration time and support. It may also include investing in successful initiatives that are already underway — either to expand them to more schools or to deepen their impact. At the same time, the needs created by the pandemic may supersede other planned investments and suggest a repurposing of existing funds in order to ensure a coordinated effort to finance needed new strategies. In this way, preventing siloed spending now will enable a smoother transition when the stimulus money goes away later.

Second, it will enable districts to stretch the window for new investment. Thinking holistically across funding sources and years will enable district to mix and match revenue to incremental spending on strategies that extend beyond the period of ESSER funding availability.



3. Invest in building bridges to new ways of organizing.

ESSER's additional revenue and three-year window are unique and enable districts to take a "[Do Now, Build Toward](#)" approach. Usually, districts end up needing to make immediate shifts from one strategy to another because there is no room in the budget to accommodate both at the same time — but ESSER provides the opportunity to begin establishing new ways of working without eliminating existing ways.

To invest ESSER funds sustainably, district leaders must choose investments that can achieve the district's objectives and ultimately reduce, replace, or reallocate costs strategically over time. That way, when the ESSER funds run out, districts will still be able to sustain these new ways of organizing. For example, these "power strategies" address critical student needs now *and* lay a sustainable foundation for lasting improvement:

- **Time & Attention:** vary class sizes and embed small group instruction by adjusting schedules and instructional roles, and/or extend learning time using [school day redesign or intersession calendars](#) (see the Lander Elementary case study in our [Start Here](#) series)
- **The Teaching Job:** create more collaborative planning time and reduce teacher loads by leveraging technology, staffing models, and innovative schedules (see the Brookside Elementary case study in our [Start Here](#) series)
- **Relationships & Social-Emotional Supports:** sustain direct outreach and connection to services for each family and student, using a caseload model piloted during the pandemic (see the Metro Nashville Public School case study in our [Start Here](#) series)

4. Plan out how spending and organization will shift to sustain critical investments over time.

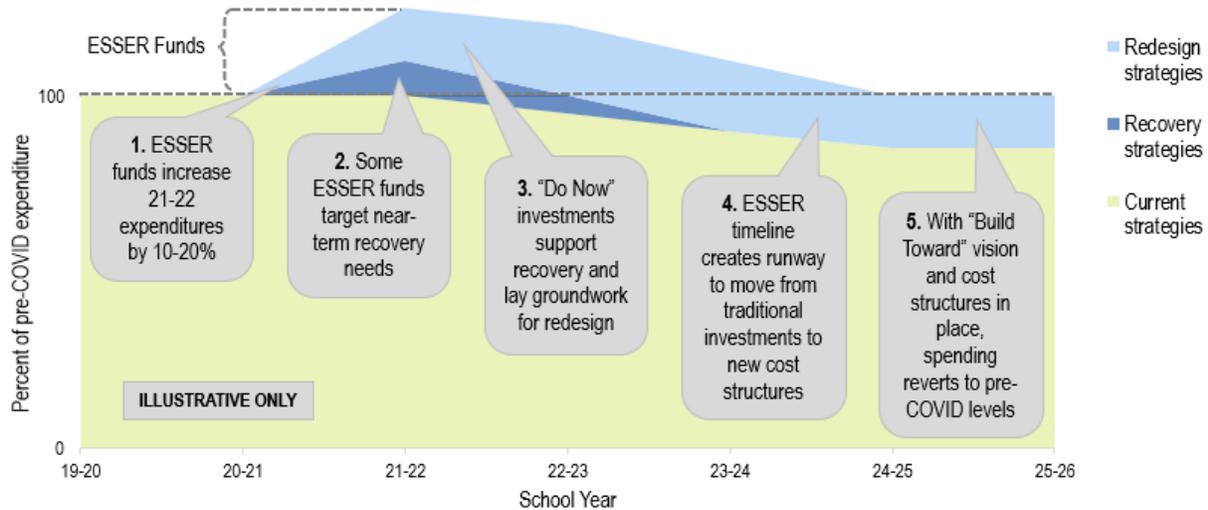
As district leaders invest ESSER funds in a combination of recovery and redesign strategies, they face crucial decisions around how to plan now for a post-ESSER funding environment. Put simply, leaders have three main options for when the ESSER funds expire:

1. **Roll back new investments** and essentially revert district structures and practices to a pre-COVID state.
2. **Roll the dice** on being able to generate new revenue to offset ongoing investment obligations, while building the case for the needed investment.
3. **Roll innovation into future practice** by planning now to balance new investments with shifts to underlying cost structures. This option enables leaders to roll innovation into future practice by taking advantage of the ESSER funding window to initiate lasting change.

While ESSER funds buy us time for change, the urgency to figure out what that change looks like is still there. The illustrative chart below walks through five phases of sustainable ESSER spending using a "Do Now, Build Toward" approach.



Planning spending for long-term sustainability with a “Do Now, Build Toward” approach



Note: Recovery strategies create an initial spike in spending and then phase out before the ESSER funds do. Redesign strategies constitute the majority of the ESSER spending and continue beyond the grant period, when spending will likely revert to pre-COVID levels. By the 2024-2025 school year, district budgets will be able to accommodate new ways of working as a result of careful planning around how to sustainably change cost structures and preserve critical investments long-term. This means that the strategies districts choose to invest in now can and should contribute to what schools look like beyond 2024-2025. However, it is worth noting that for some districts, the cost of realizing their vision will exceed the savings they can make in the next three years, and therefore it may be necessary to use a combination of rolling back investments, rolling the dice on new revenue, and rolling innovation forward. This alone is not a cause for despair. It just reinforces the importance of organizing resources strategically to maximize impact and to build a case that will encourage political leaders to invest in additional funding for our school systems in the future.

In conclusion, immediate recovery needs caused by the pandemic create pressures to spend ESSER funds quickly, but it is crucial to resist using stimulus funds simply to pad budget shortfalls or add temporary approaches that will disappear when the money runs out. Instead, district teams will need to plan for long-term sustainability in their investments — and these next six months leading up to the 2022-23 budget planning cycle will be crucial to starting on the right path toward meaningful and sustainable change.