



JUNE 2021

Do Now, Build Toward: 7 Principles for Investing Federal ESSER Funds in Recovery & Redesign

As students and educators conclude a school year like no other, district leaders are looking ahead to 2021-2022. Planning has already been underway for months, and now, with an infusion of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding, district leaders are faced with key decisions about how to invest those funds strategically.

The work of adapting teaching and learning for the post-COVID era is best approached with a **“do now, build toward”** mindset. This means choosing some doable starting points for the fall, designed with a longer-term vision in mind. But with such tight timelines and continued pressure around figuring out how to reopen schools, some districts are jumping to costing out specific investments without first defining their vision of learning and recovery. A defined vision must flow through to clear strategies that are based on research and lessons learned from past experiences — and districts will need to go further still to outline what those strategies mean at the school level for staffing and for students’ and teachers’ schedules. Too often, districts stop at a high-level vision without specifying and supporting the significant changes that need to manifest in schools to make that vision a reality.

Below, we detail seven crucial principles for investing ESSER funds with a “do now, build toward” approach, highlight key considerations for each, and share resources to help your district realize its vision.

- ✓ Understand and quantify students’ needs.
 - ✓ Invest in proven, high-impact strategies.
 - ✓ Design new staffing and scheduling models.
 - ✓ Design for equity.
 - ✓ Plan spending for long-term sustainability.
 - ✓ Create system conditions.
 - ✓ Define success, measure, and adjust.
- } Define Vision & Strategy for Recovery & Redesign

To learn more about how one district has embodied these seven principles, review this ESSER plan from our partnership with [Hartford Public Schools](#).



Understand and quantify students' needs.

The pandemic has created challenges for every child and, at the same time, has exacerbated existing inequities. For example, [researchers estimate](#) that students may start the 2021-22 school year with up to seven to eight months of unfinished learning for white students, and up to 11-12 months for students of color. And the [National Association of School Psychologists](#) anticipates that the percentage of children exhibiting social-emotional or behavioral concerns could double or triple as a result of COVID-19.

Now more than ever, equity considerations should be at the forefront of a district's decision-making process. Without comprehensive state assessment and benchmark data, fully measuring the depth and breadth of student need is challenging. But, quantifying need across the district by student group, grade level, and school remains essential to build the case for urgent action and guide the allocation of resources.

To learn more about increased student need estimates and the overall financial impact of COVID, see our [Cost of COVID](#) paper.

Key Considerations:

- **Consider a broad set of need indicators.** Include data on attendance, engagement, learning, and well-being that may help inform your strategy and target resource allocations. Further, disaggregate data by student group, grade, and school.
- **Understand the root causes of greater student needs.** Directly engage educators, students, families, and community partners to better understand the root causes behind specific needs.
- **Plan for uncertainty.** In most places, the data we have now on student need is incomplete, so expect your knowledge to evolve over time. This may mean holding back some dollars for later adjustments if unforeseen needs arise.

Invest in proven, high-impact strategies.

Although this moment presents unique new challenges, it is also an opportunity to ensure that your investments are backed by research. We have identified five research-based “power strategies” for using resources that address critical student needs now, while also laying the foundation for continued systemic change.

To learn more about how to use these five research-backed strategies as part of a “do now, build toward” approach, see our [Start Here](#) series, featuring real-life examples.

The Five Power Strategies:

1. **Empowering, Adaptable Instruction:** Ensure teaching teams have high-quality curriculum and the time and support they need to provide differentiated, empowering instruction.
2. **Time & Attention:** Expand and target individual attention and learning time inside and outside of traditional school hours, especially for students with the greatest needs.
3. **The Teaching Job:** Restructure teaching jobs and roles to be more rewarding, collaborative, and sustainable.



4. **Relationships & Social-Emotional Support:** Organize school structures that cultivate positive student-adult relationships and streamline support for students' social-emotional needs.
5. **Family & Community Partnerships:** Engage families, community partners, and other out-of-school resources to increase academic, health, social, and emotional support for students.

Design new staffing and scheduling models.

To implement proven, high-impact strategies, school leaders will need to create staffing models and design schedules that enable them. This means school staffing models and schedules must look different in at least five ways this fall: (1) First, students will need more time and customized support to help them catch up on unfinished learning. (2) Second, teachers will need more time free from directly facilitating instruction to work independently and in teams on planning engaging content, assessing students' progress, and figuring out additional supports to accelerate learning. (3) Third, teachers will need dedicated time in their schedules and lower teaching loads in some subjects or grades to allow them to invest more time in building relationships with students and families. (4) Fourth, since students will have greater social-emotional needs this fall, districts and schools will need to create partnerships, teams, time, and staffing models that enable the ongoing identification of these needs to match students with appropriate supports. (5) Fifth, since teacher expertise will be at an all-time premium next school year, district and school leaders will need to find ways to expand the reach of the teachers most equipped to support students with the greatest needs and help other teachers figure out how to do so too.

Coming Soon: *To see examples of what scheduling and staffing could look like in schools this fall, see our [Schools Start Here models](#).*

Key Considerations:

- **Create an integrated and cohesive experience for students.** Recognize the full experience students have in school by developing staffing and scheduling models that cater to both their academic and social-emotional needs. This may include flexible small group interventions, engaging enrichment and well-being programs, and relationship-building opportunities with adults and peers.
- **Develop a rewarding and sustainable experience for staff.** Identify whether existing positions need to be adjusted, and whether new positions need to be created to achieve results. Then, make sure staff can play to their strengths, develop new skills through connected professional learning, and feel supported by their colleagues during dedicated collaborative time.
- **Spend time on what works.** Maximize hours in the school day by intentionally organizing staff and students to engage in the instruction and interventions that are most needed. In early elementary grades, this may include small group literacy instruction or tutoring. In high school, time may be dedicated to academic supports, credit recovery and accumulation, or advisory programs.



Design for equity.

COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted students from low-income backgrounds, Black and Latinx students, English language learners, and students with disabilities, and compounded many of the educational inequities they already experienced. In addition, early elementary and high school students have been particularly vulnerable to increased rates of chronic absenteeism and widespread disengagement at [crucial moments](#) in their K-12 education, leading to concerns about literacy rates and post-secondary success. Targeting resources to support the students facing the greatest challenges is essential, but distributing dollars equitably within an inequitable system will limit meaningful impact and hinder sustainable change. ESSER funds present an unprecedented opportunity to both address emerging needs by directing resources to the students who need them most *and* disrupt longstanding inequities that continue to create barriers to success for specific student groups.

To learn more about how to take an equity-centered approach to investing ESSER funds, review the real-life examples featured in our [blog](#), or to better understand the current state of education equity and excellence in your district's unique context, complete our [Resource Equity Diagnostic](#).

Key Considerations:

- **Disrupt patterns of inequity.** Assemble data and reflect on the systems, structures, and practices that contribute to inequitable experiences and outcomes for students — and identify ways your new investments can work to correct them. For example, if students with the greatest learning needs are also the least likely to have access to strong teaching, you might consider leveraging your ESSER investment to change teacher incentives for hard-to-staff schools and assignments.
- **Engage educators, students, and families.** As you develop plans to gather information, insights, perspectives, and preferences from people who best understand students' needs – including families, teachers, and students themselves – as part of your decision-making process, continually reflect on who is missing or underrepresented in these conversations and how to elevate their voices once they're included.
- **Target resources thoughtfully.** Carefully consider which investments should be applied across all students or schools in the same way, and which should be targeted or differentiated based on your analysis of how needs vary across student groups and schools. Remember that uniformly allocating dollars on a per pupil basis means that some schools will have much less to meet the more intensive needs of their students.

Plan spending for long-term sustainability.

The Great Recession in 2008 showed how important it is to avoid adding unsustainable costs when using one-time stimulus dollars. Districts will want to sustain many of the changes they're funding with ESSER dollars long-term because they enable strategies — such as “just-in-time” tutoring or increasing time for teacher teams — that were needed to accelerate learning and advance equitable outcomes even before the pandemic. Therefore, districts will need to use their temporary dollars to target both near-term COVID-recovery needs *and* lay the groundwork for long-term redesign. By focusing on both, district leaders will have already done the work of shifting resources and changing underlying cost structures to enable these new ways of working to continue when the money goes away.



Coming Soon: To learn more about how to use ESSER funds as a three-year runway for changing underlying cost structures in the long-term, read our [Sustainability Blog](#).

Key Considerations:

- **Size the full cost of implementing strategies over time.** Consider *all* the cost components of implementing a strategy well. Estimates should include amounts for each main component (for example, tutoring includes tutor pay, training, and instructional materials), as well as assumptions about the number of students the strategy will serve.
- **Integrate all funding sources.** Avoid siloed spending of ESSER funds in ways that are misaligned from the rest of your district’s budget, and resist using new funds to simply layer on new initiatives. Instead, build coherence between new investments and existing ones, including by accelerating or deepening existing investments that are most aligned with your district’s recovery needs.
- **Invest in building bridges to new ways of organizing.** For example: deepen investments in relationship-building and social-emotional learning by freeing up spending from punitive discipline; expand investments in high-quality virtual learning options in high school by freeing up spending from small, specialized upper-grades courses; or invest in targeted small group sizes by enabling slightly larger overall class sizes.
- **Plan out how spending and organization will shift to sustain critical investments over time.** Identify which expenditures will go away over time, and which will stay and shift over time. For example, short-term investments in technology may shrink to only maintenance costs, while short-term approaches to tutoring may evolve into a broader vision for differentiated teacher roles or community and school partnerships.

Create system conditions.

In many traditional districts, school leaders cannot implement and sustain the kinds of strategies envisioned here on their own. The timeframe is too short for leaders to start from scratch to implement new strategies and figure out the cost of designing new staffing and scheduling models. Further, state regulations and union contracts can sometimes create barriers to implementing recovery and redesign models. There are so many decisions that need to be made quickly — so it is important for district leaders to be very clear about timelines, decision authority, and the support they can provide. District leaders must also collaborate with state policymakers, teacher unions, school boards, and their local communities to explore contract provisions and flexibilities in ways that enable nimble moves to meet students’ needs.

To learn more about some of the enabling conditions that make strategic spending of ESSER funds possible, read our [States Start Here](#) paper.

Key Considerations:

- **Ensure district-level enabling conditions.** Examine whether district-imposed limitations on the strategic and equitable use of resources exist, and take steps to remove such barriers if they do. Often, this involves providing school leaders with additional flexibility and autonomy around how they organize and adjust their talent, time, technology, and money.



- **Clarify decision-making roles and flexibilities.** Be deliberate about specifying which decisions related to your investment strategy will be made by schools versus central office. For example, with respect to extending learning time, outline the different decision-makers for (a) who covers the time, (b) when it is scheduled, and (c) what it is used for. Consider factors like who has the information needed to make the best decisions and whether central decision-making might better capture economies of scale, leverage community resources, ensure equitable student experiences across schools, and pilot innovation.
- **Organize support for school leaders.** Once you know which decisions will be made at the school level, organize the information and support that school leaders and their teams need to make those decisions well. Consider providing data to inform decision-making, examples of scheduling and staffing models, and suggested metrics and routines to aid continuous improvement.

Define success, measure, and adjust.

Regardless of the strategies we invest in, a wealth of data suggests that we are unlikely to find any “golden-ticket” solutions that are guaranteed to work immediately and in standardized or scalable ways. Rather, strategies must be adjusted for specific local contexts and adapted over time, based on meaningful community input and reliable data on effectiveness. When using ESSER funds for recovery and redesign, districts and schools must engage in rapid cycles of inquiry to better understand the conditions and strategies that meet students’ needs and generate impact.

To learn more about how to plan a whole-system approach to continuous improvement, review our [Unchartered Waters](#) paper.

Key Considerations:

- **Define success.** Identify the metrics you will track over time to make sure the strategies you are investing in are playing out in ways that address targeted student needs and improve equity in your district.
- **Engage your community.** Solicit the perspectives, insights, and ideas from those closest to the impact of decisions — including principals, teachers, students, and families — to fully understand which needs must be addressed and proactively identify possible limitations or barriers to effectively implementing specific strategies. Establishing further partnership can provide an ongoing gauge of effectiveness and inform new directions and adjustments.
- **Organize to adapt and improve.** Coordinate collaboration across a range of functional teams, since implementing and improving a district’s strategy is likely to span multiple departments. Be prepared to engage in rapid cycles of inquiry, so that schools can quickly learn, adjust, and iterate on recovery and redesign models.