



# Introduction

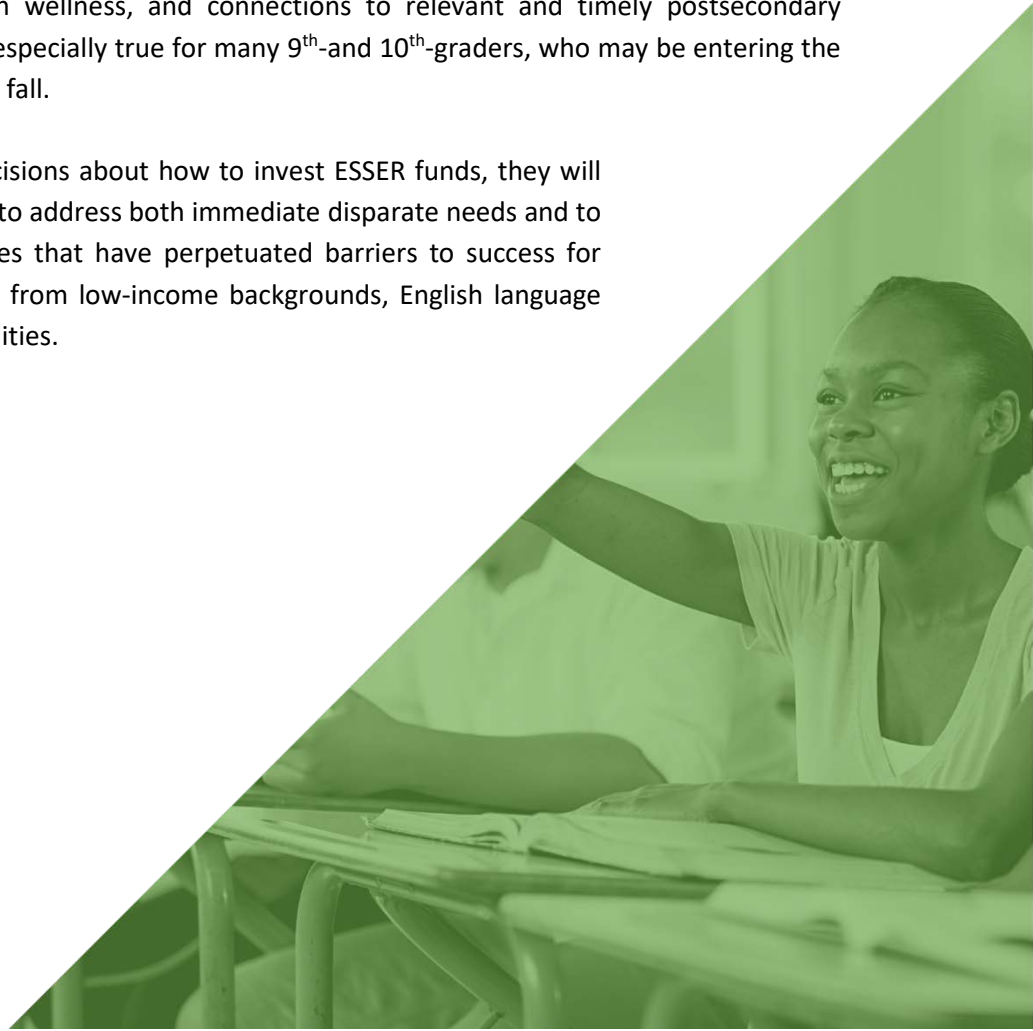
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High school is pivotal — it can be a foundation for students to grow and thrive, in school and in life. And insights gained from focusing on students' experiences in high school can help system leaders backwards plan to design better, more equitable experiences for students in middle school. But, as students, families, educators, and district leaders look ahead to the 2021-22 school year, it's clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified both students' needs and existing inequities.

A crucial part of addressing these challenges will be leveraging ESSER funds to deepen investments in improving important aspects of students' high school experiences. District and school leaders can do this work best by taking a **“Do Now, Build Toward” approach** — choosing doable starting points for the 2021-22 school year, while designing changes with a long-term, sustainable vision in mind. This means navigating how to effectively implement and scale strategies that are research-backed and aligned with students' differing needs, both this school year and beyond.

As part of this “Do Now, Build Toward” approach, high schools will need to engage students in standards-aligned work that is connected to what they care about and what's next for them, at times that work for them, and with teachers who have the energy and support they need to build strong relationships, respond to students' needs, and affirm students' interests and identities along the way. Students will need varied opportunities to earn credits, targeted structures to meet their distinct learning needs, deeper support for navigating their own wellness, and connections to relevant and timely postsecondary opportunities — and all of this is especially true for many 9<sup>th</sup>- and 10<sup>th</sup>-graders, who may be entering the building for the very first time this fall.

As districts and schools make decisions about how to invest ESSER funds, they will need to approach equity head on to address both immediate disparate needs and to disrupt the longstanding inequities that have perpetuated barriers to success for many students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, English language learners, and students with disabilities.





# The *Schools Start Here* Series

To help with these challenges and opportunities, our *Schools Start Here* series offers a blueprint for how to organize resources as part of a “Do Now, Build Toward” ESSER investment strategy. To create this set of guides, we drew on decades of research, leveraged takeaways from our work in districts, and gathered insights from experts and partner organizations in the field. Throughout the process, we kept three main criteria in mind:

- Building from research on strong district and school practices.
- Advancing equity by understanding and addressing students’ most pressing needs.
- Planning implementation through both near-term next steps and a longer-term vision.

## Each guide in the series:

- ✓ Details relevant research.
- ✓ Identifies system-level enabling conditions, policies, and practices that can help make this work successful.
- ✓ Highlights opportunities for sustainable investments.
- ✓ Makes recommendations for “Do Now” priorities.
- ✓ Provides concrete examples of scheduling and staffing models.

Based on feedback from district leaders across the country, we focused on six initial topics for high schools:

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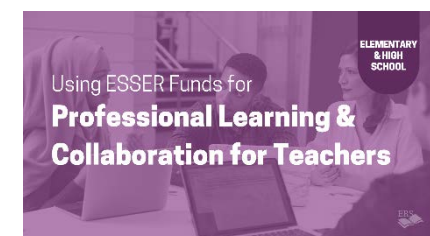
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## 1 CREDIT RECOVERY

### WHY

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased course failure rates in many schools<sup>1</sup>, and many high school students have grappled with other obligations during school hours, such as working or caring for younger siblings.<sup>2</sup> Credit recovery programs are often used as an intervention, but historically have not demonstrated strong outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

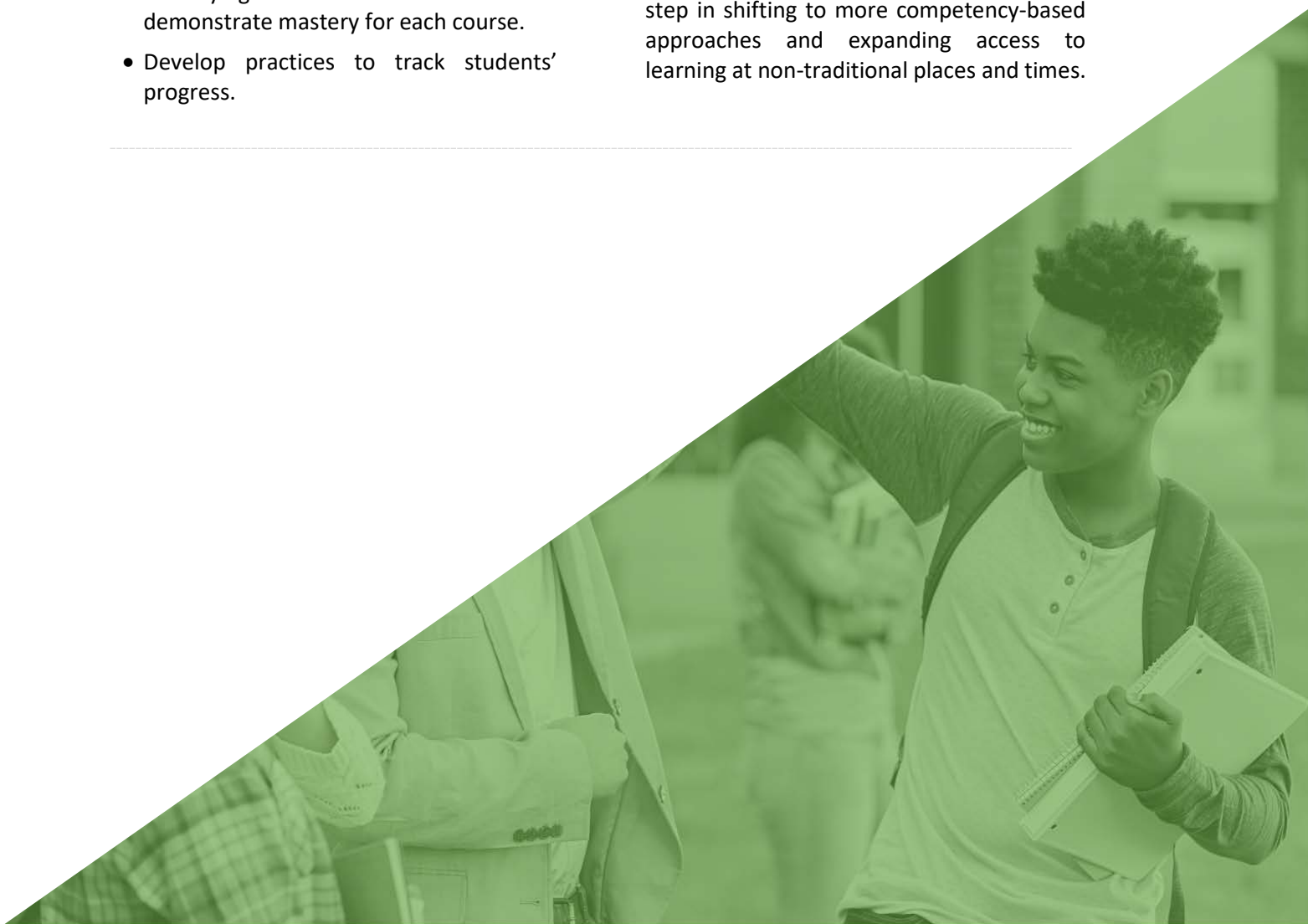
### DO NOW

- Improve the instructional materials used as the basis for credit recovery.
- Hire additional staff to expand face-to-face support.
- Expand students' options to include a mix of during the school day, after school, weekends, or summer.
- Begin to shift credit recovery to target needed competencies, including first identifying evidence needed to demonstrate mastery for each course.
- Develop practices to track students' progress.

### BUILD TOWARD

*Credit recovery programs provide personalized support, target needed competencies, and are offered flexibly to improve students' access.*

- Credit recovery programs are part of a holistic, integrated system that begins from engaging, empowering, and culturally relevant instruction — and includes ongoing academic and wellness support.
- Some school systems are treating efforts to improve credit recovery as an important first step in shifting to more competency-based approaches and expanding access to learning at non-traditional places and times.





## 2 RELATIONSHIPS & SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SUPPORTS

### WHY

Teenagers' social, emotional, and mental health needs have increased throughout the pandemic<sup>4</sup>, and teens are reporting intensified loneliness.<sup>5</sup>

### DO NOW

- Invest in a coherent set of strategies that encourage strong relationships and connect students to support systems, such as advisory and counseling.
- Lower student and course loads for teachers in priority subjects and grade levels.

### BUILD TOWARD

*Every student has the network of strong relationships, the mindsets and skills, and the wellness supports they need to learn and to thrive.*

- Wellness supports and structures that help students develop strong relationships and social-emotional skills are seen as critical aspects of organizing resources for learning. In addition, the supports and structures in place...
  - Respond to and affirm students' identities.
  - Are cohesive with each other and with students' day-to-day learning, and cross typical inside- vs. outside-of-school boundaries.

## 3 TARGETED ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

### WHY

High schoolers need differentiated supports to fully engage in meaningful and relevant content. The pandemic has not only underscored the need for moving away from "one-size-fits-all" practices, it has widened the spectrum of academic needs and worsened existing inequities.

### DO NOW

- Add dedicated time to daily schedules that can be used flexibly for small group intervention or tutoring.
- Add support courses in ELA and/or math for incoming students with disrupted

### BUILD TOWARD

*More equitable and effective academic supports are engaging and target time and attention in ways that meet students' distinct needs.*



learning that can be taken alongside standard courses (“double-dosing”).

- Student data is used to inform flexible supports that evolve to meet students’ changing needs.
- Academic support opportunities are engaging for students and avoid the types of boring, repetitive work that can often be part of “remediation” programs.

## 4 EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS

### WHY

Targeting the right academic and wellness supports at the right time to meet each students’ distinct needs is key for districts and schools that are trying to use their often limited resources with the most impact.

### DO NOW

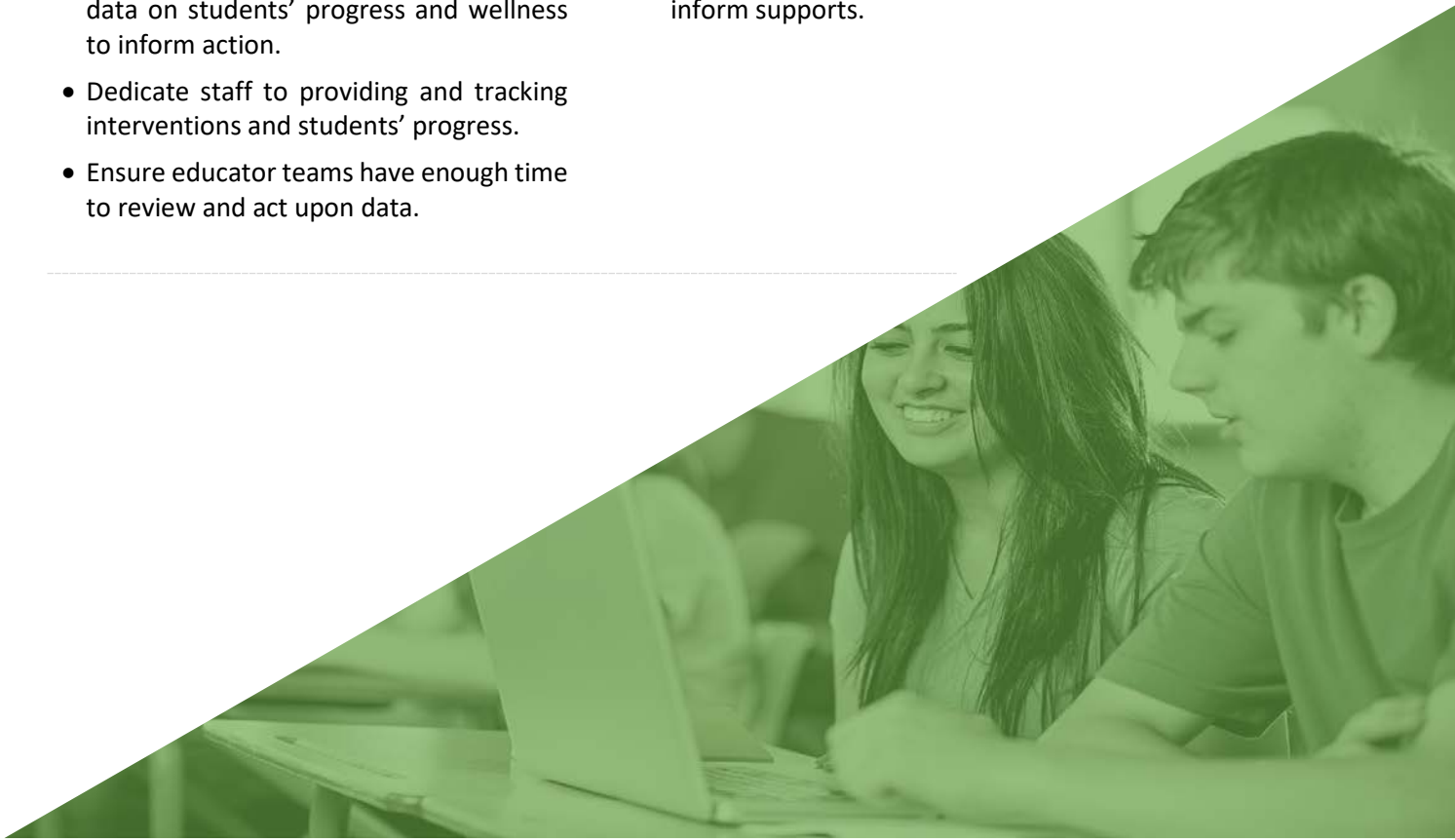
Due to the pandemic, typical systems that target supports to a small number of students will likely need to expand to reach more students. Therefore, “Do Now” investments will need to address both the quality and scale of these systems.

- Create or expand systematic collection of data on students’ progress and wellness to inform action.
- Dedicate staff to providing and tracking interventions and students’ progress.
- Ensure educator teams have enough time to review and act upon data.

### BUILD TOWARD

*Early warning systems leverage data to continuously develop, target, monitor, and adjust the supports students receive.*

- The system is organized so that individualized conversations about each student’s needs, interests, and motivations take place — and these conversations inform supports.





## 5 TUTORING

### WHY

Tutoring can lead to academic gains and provide deeper opportunities for teaching and learning to be engaging, empowering, and culturally relevant.

### DO NOW

- Invest in tutoring partnerships.
- Add time to the student day, week, and/or year to make room for tutoring without removing enrichment.
- Focus on program management, staffing and scheduling designs, and continuous improvement processes that will enable long-term sustainability.

### BUILD TOWARD

*Tutoring programs are part of a bigger-picture student support strategy and career pathway for educators.*

- Decisions about who receives tutoring, in which subjects, and focused on which skills are equitable, and made by a team of skilled educators using quantitative and qualitative student data.

## 6 PROFESSIONAL LEARNING & COLLABORATION

### WHY

The opportunities that secondary students have to engage in learning that meets their distinct needs and connects to what they care about and what is next for them will be deeply shaped by educators' capacity, skills, support, and materials.

### DO NOW

- Invest in high-quality, culturally relevant instructional materials and assessments — or evolve existing materials to embed a deeper focus on social-emotional skill development and connections to students' identities and experiences.
- Increase time for teachers to plan, collaborate, and participate in professional learning opportunities.
- Increase job-embedded support from experts, such as teacher-leaders who receive additional compensation.

### BUILD TOWARD

*Every student has engaging, high-quality, culturally relevant learning opportunities because every teacher is empowered through regular, job-embedded support.*

- Curriculum-connected professional learning — which includes high-quality instructional materials, expert support and collaboration time for teachers, and cycles of observation and feedback to support ongoing reflection and growth — sets the foundation for students to experience excellent instruction in high school.<sup>6,7</sup>



# Changes in 2021–22 and Beyond

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## Key Shifts for 2021–22

District and school leaders will need to figure out a *combined* set of actions for addressing areas of student need and inequity — and the specific changes in scheduling and staffing needed to enable and sustain improvement. This means that going into the 2021–22 school year, secondary school leaders will need support from their districts, their communities, and from policymakers to enact **six big-picture shifts in what school could look like this fall:**

1. Staffing models and student schedules that enable small group instruction, individual support, and relationship-building, including:
  - ✓ Expanding time for targeted small group and individual support, and advisory structures that help students access their desired pathways for learning.
  - ✓ Ensuring students have equitable access to strong teaching and teachers.
  - ✓ Reducing group sizes and teacher loads in ELA and math
2. More **time for teachers to collaborate** in teams — while receiving expert support from school leaders, coaches, or teacher-leaders, and with high-quality **curriculum and instructional materials** that focus on understanding students’ needs, identities, and interests, and that help teachers plan engaging instruction and differentiated supports.
3. Individual **student schedules and opportunities to earn credit** that are more flexible and student-driven, and include options for learning online, after hours, and outside of their school. This includes work-based opportunities, dual enrollment, and credit recovery options.
4. A broader set of **complimentary teaching and leadership roles** to ensure that all teams have access to job-embedded expertise and support — including additional compensation for those who take on responsibilities that require additional skills and expertise, and lighter loads and/or mentorship and coaching for those who are early in their career or who need more support.
5. **External providers and technology** should be leveraged to support learning and wellness among teachers and students, inside and outside of the traditional school day and year.
6. **Structures for student wellness**, including expanding and systematizing social, mental, and physical health services.

Secondary school leaders can begin by leveraging ESSER dollars to make these shifts this school year, while also “Building Toward” long-term sustainability and bigger-picture change.

## Enabling Meaningful Change *Beyond 2021–22*

**Achieving a “Build Toward” vision will require shifting the underlying structures that drive the ways resources are used.** Districts and schools will need to begin planning for this over the next 12–18 months.



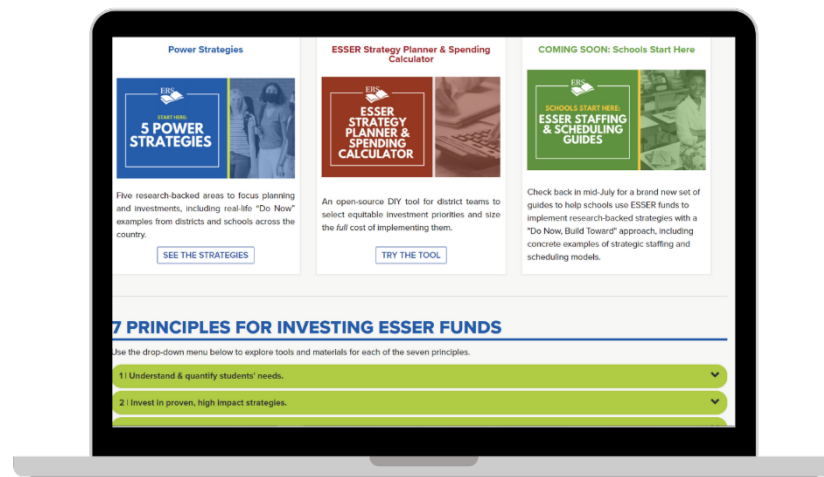
For example, in the short-term, this might look like adding more collaboration and reflection time to teachers' schedules or using ESSER funds for additional staff to allow for more 1-1 student support. But keeping these changes sustainable after the ESSER funding window expires will require more innovative solutions, especially in areas such as scheduling, teacher roles and teams, technology, and external community partnerships. District leaders can and should invest ESSER funds now to collaborate with school leaders, educators, families, students, and their broader community around the strategic planning and financial modeling that will enable these longer-term solutions to work. Focusing on several key underlying structures will help:

- Ensure **equitable funding across schools**. For example, ESSER funds were distributed across districts to ensure that those with higher rates of poverty received more resources. States and districts will need to plan ways to sustain equitable funding after the ESSER window.
- Revamp **career paths and compensation** for teachers and school leaders to better support differentiated roles and responsibilities, including raising compensation earlier and more significantly for those who contribute most. ESSER creates an opportunity to pay teachers and leaders more for taking on roles that require more expertise, responsibility, or time. However, *sustaining* increased compensation will require addressing underlying career path and compensation systems.
- Move away from “one-size-fits-all” time blocks and class sizes to strategically vary **class and group sizes and learning time**, depending on subject, grade level, lesson content or students' needs. Targeting attention in these ways can require moving away from more traditional ways of allocating staff to schools or changing clauses in state regulations and employee contracts. It also calls for deeper collaboration between districts' talent offices and financial offices in order to plan the level and type of staffing needed in response to new school-level models.
- Maximize the ways in which **inclusion strategies** are used to support students with disabilities in general education settings. ESSER funds provide an opportunity to grow capacity, knowledge, and skills among both special education teachers and general education teachers in areas where they may have gaps, such as subject-specific content knowledge or differentiation strategies — and to find ways of bringing educators with expertise in serving students with disabilities into team planning and general education settings. These short-term added costs could bring down long-term costs.
- Reduce the amount of time teachers are directly facilitating to free up **time for teachers** to collaborate and plan, and to connect with individual students and families. Although widespread virtual schooling hasn't been ideal in many ways, it has demonstrated that for certain lesson types, students can be engaged in learning without being directly facilitated by their core teachers. Although secondary teachers have implemented versions of “flipped” classrooms and blended learning before to better leverage their time directly supporting students, there is an opportunity now to reflect these approaches in new schedules for teachers and students. Doing so can help ensure that the work teachers do to plan and individualize lessons and connect with students can happen *inside* the teacher work day, instead of after hours.





- Leverage **technology and partnerships with outside providers** to help facilitate instruction across schools, during the school day and after hours. Organizing schedules and staffing models for a balance of direct in-person, blended, and virtual models in ways that optimize for both students' learning and district/school cost will take ongoing planning and evaluation.
- Revisit **instructional models and staffing configurations at small high schools**. Many high schools that are intentionally designed to be small (like hundreds in New York City Public Schools) are demonstrating the power of creating smaller learning communities specifically to meet the learning and development needs of high school students. But oftentimes in districts with high concentrations of student need, high schools end up being small by default, not because they have been intentionally designed that way. And these schools often continue to operate as though they were larger schools, resulting in significantly higher costs per student and a narrowed array of course offerings because it is difficult for them to offer a robust range of courses and services.<sup>8</sup> These circumstances can also make it harder for students to access and leverage teachers' expertise. For example, it can be difficult for schools to staff physics teachers in general, and when only one advanced physics course is needed at a school, the science teacher at that school may or may not have the needed content knowledge or capacity for leading the advanced physics course. By leveraging ESSER funds to expand course offerings, while restructuring schedules and staffing models with longer-term sustainability in mind, district and school leaders can open up new possibilities for small schools.



See the full “Do Now, Build Toward” toolkit



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