



August 2021

Taking a “Do Now, Build Toward” Approach to  
ESSER Investment

# Design for Equity

Three actions school district leaders must take to center equity in their plans  
for COVID recovery and redesign

For more than 15 years, we have partnered with districts and schools across the nation to help them align resources in ways to drive lasting improvement for all the students and families they serve. Informed by that body of work, we recently published [seven principles](#) for investing federal ESSER funds with a “Do Now, Build Toward” approach — addressing critical student needs now *and* laying a sustainable foundation for lasting improvement — to COVID recovery and redesign.

Principle #4, “Design for equity,” requires districts to focus support on the students and schools facing the greatest challenges. However, trying to distribute resources equitably within the confines of inequitable structures, systems, and practices ultimately limits the impact of these efforts and hinders long-term improvement.

Building an ESSER investment strategy to accelerate equity will be crucial to addressing urgent gaps in students’ academic and social-emotional recovery needs *and* designing better long-term approaches to teaching and learning. To successfully center equity in their ESSER strategies and implementation, district leaders must focus on **three intentional sets of actions**.

## Action #1

### Disrupt longstanding patterns of inequity within the system.

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ESSER funding provides an opportunity for systems to dismantle the longstanding resource inequities that existed long before COVID and that threaten to persist long after ESSER funding runs out. The education field learned from painful experience with 2009’s American Recovery & Reinvestment Act funds for School Improvement Grants that adding dollars and programs — no matter how equitably they’re allocated — on top of inequitable systems and structures won’t work. Therefore, districts should use ESSER funds not only to address disrupted learning and supports, but also to redesign inequitable policies, practices, and processes that govern how funds are used and resources are organized. Districts will need to do this work in financially sustainable ways to ensure that they are able to maintain these important shifts, even after ESSER funds expire.



Consideration #2

## Target resources based on differing needs and contexts.

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Once efforts to disrupt longstanding inequities are underway, school districts need to invest their ESSER funds in ways that support students who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, including students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and English learners, as well as students experiencing foster care, homelessness, or the juvenile justice system. For these young people, COVID compounded many of the educational inequities they already experienced. When district leaders distribute ESSER funds toward recovery efforts, it will be important to target and differentiate resources based on an informed understanding of students' individual needs and schools' various contexts. Otherwise, districts risk providing some schools, communities, and students with less of what matters most to support recovery and stronger, more equitable outcomes.

Consideration #3

## Engage educators, students, and families in decision-making.

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All efforts to disrupt longstanding inequities and target resources based on need must also recognize that the depth, breadth, and inequity of student need is different and greater than before. Therefore, proposed solutions must be developed based on information, preferences, and perspectives of the people who know these needs best — including families, teachers, and students themselves. Especially at a time without comprehensive state assessment and benchmark data, their insights will prove to be especially valuable for adding the nuance and contextual information that is necessary for effective decision-making.

Engaging educators, students, and families in decision-making processes requires continuous reflection about who is missing from or underrepresented in these conversations. Barriers to connecting and engaging with them need to be identified and removed — for example, by building time into teachers' regular work days to provide input or communicating with families in their home languages. Elevating the experiences, insights, and ideas of those with the deepest familiarity with students' individual needs will help districts use ESSER funds in ways that work effectively to meet them.

To examine several approaches to driving equity from schools and districts nationwide, see "Disrupting Patterns of Inequity."