



FALL 2021

Moving from Plan to Action:

AN ANALYSIS OF DISTRICTS' ESSER PLANS





Education leaders are working feverishly to allocate and spend federal ESSER funds to address pressing [student needs](#) in the wake of COVID-19. Now, families, advocates, political leaders, and others are asking: **How will these plans translate into action that improves students' experiences and outcomes?**

Based on our work with leaders from dozens of school districts across the country, ERS unpacked current ESSER spending plans from 24 predominantly low-income urban and rural systems. These plans — and the real-life implications that district leaders are working through — provide crucial insights on how leaders can best design, implement and sustain long-term change that benefits all students, particularly those with the most significant needs.

24 Districts

Collectively educating **1.3 million students**

- **Median size:** 21,000 students
- **Median \$ per-pupil:** \$12,700
- **Median ESSER \$ per-pupil:** 26% of annual budget

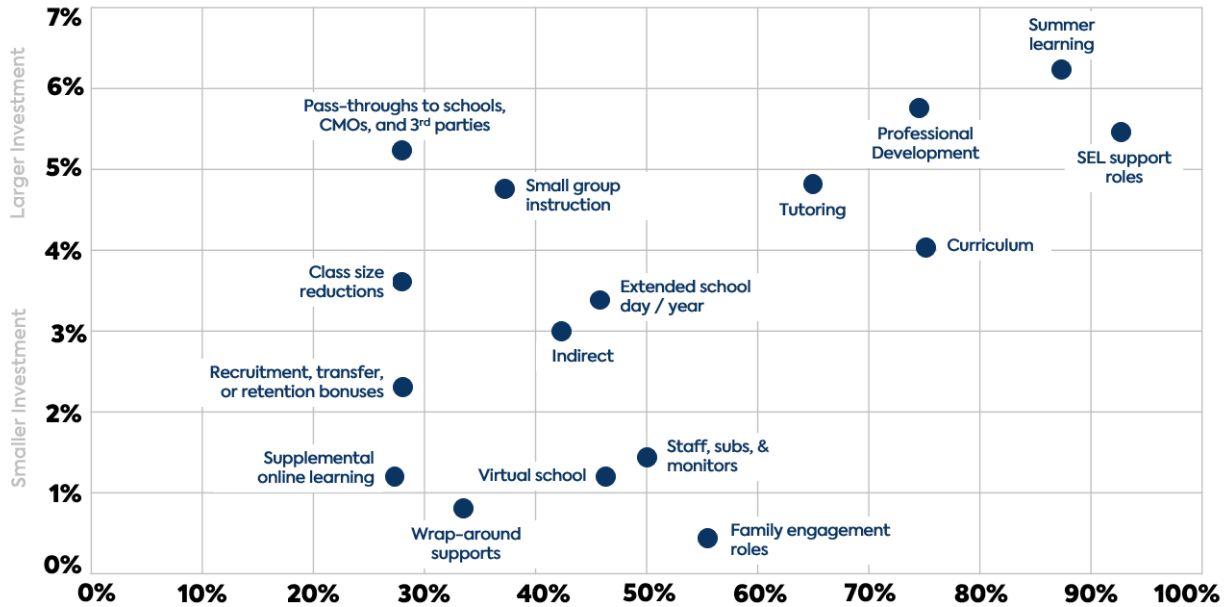
Here's what we're seeing and here's what it means for education system leaders:

#1 | Half of ESSER funds are allocated toward research-backed strategies with the potential to address students' needs now and lay the groundwork for lasting improvement. (At ERS, we call these [Power Strategies](#).)

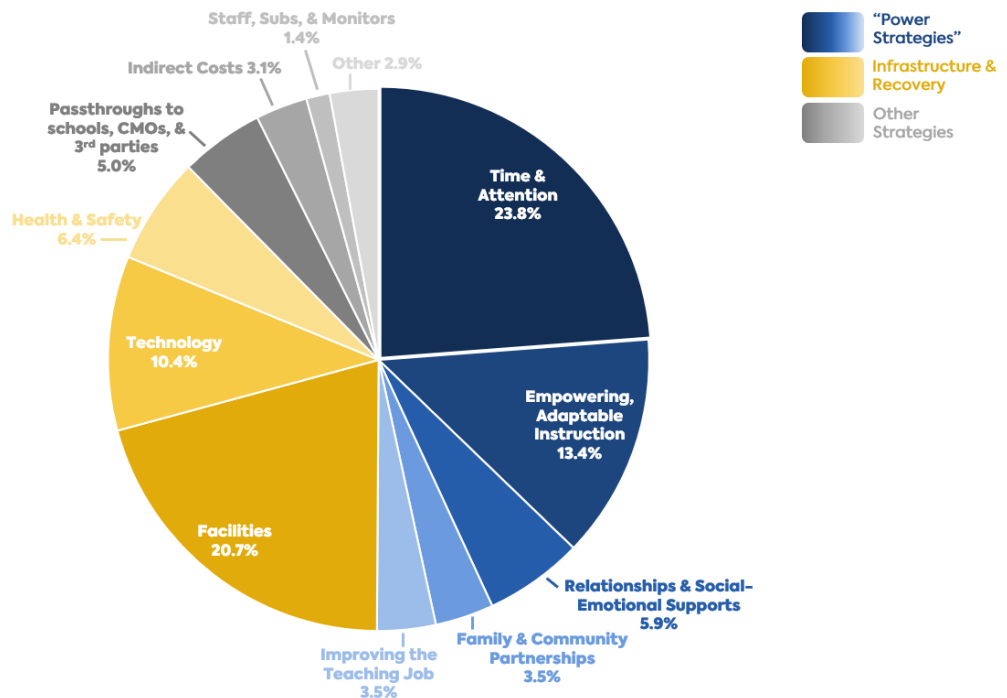
Nearly 40 percent of funds are being targeted toward facilities upgrades or investments related to technology, health, and safety. In many communities, these include crucial investments in infrastructure and COVID-recovery. But these investments ultimately don't change cost structures or core practices related to teaching and learning.



Most Common and Largest Investment ESSER Types Reflected in District Plans



Percent of Allocated ESSER II/III Funds

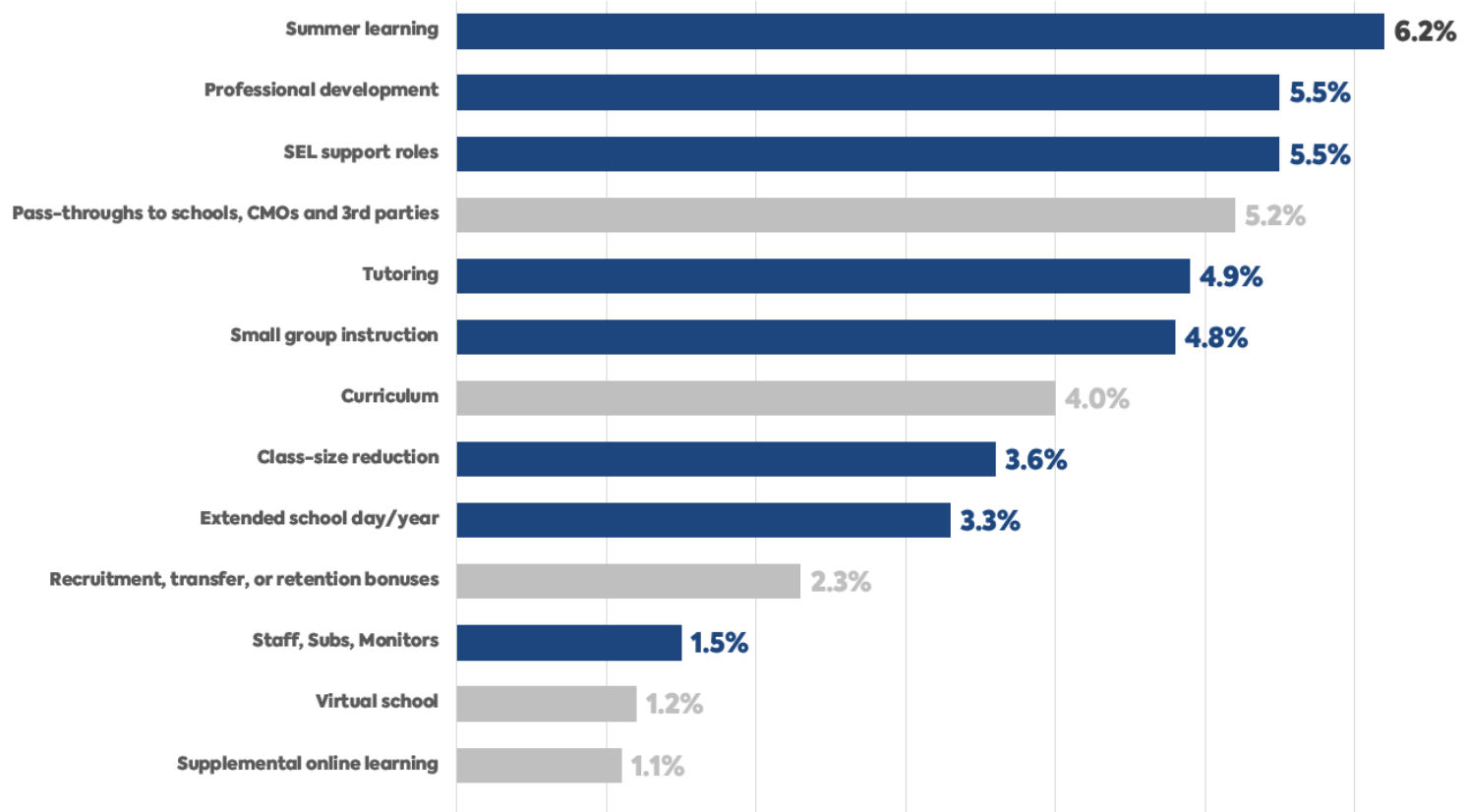




#2 | Nearly 20 percent of planned ESSER investments involve increasing hiring — an exceedingly difficult task in a tight labor market.

These include investments in social-emotional support staff, summer learning, lower class and group sizes, and increasing learning time through extended day and school year strategies. However, old or rigid job definitions may constrain some districts’ ability to attract and retain talent when and where they need it most.

Largest “Power Strategy” Investments in District ESSER Plans
(Average Percent of ESSER \$)



Blue bars represent investment areas that typically imply hiring more people and/or extending time for existing people.



#3 | Most districts are not yet allocating resources around the explicit goal of fundamentally improving the teaching job.

Even before the pandemic, teaching was more difficult and less sustainable than ever for too many educators. Amid rising concerns about [teacher burnout](#) and challenges filling new and existing [vacancies](#), leaders have an opportunity to use ESSER resources to “Build Toward” a teaching job that is intentionally structured to be more rewarding, collaborative and sustainable.

Fortunately, strategies that make it easier to provide more time and attention for students can also become a foundation for significantly improving the teaching job. For example:

- **Subtracting or reassigning low-impact tasks.**

Getting “back to normal” doesn’t have to mean restarting *everything* schools did before COVID. Strategic school leaders are protecting time for teaching, collaborative planning, coaching and feedback — while reassigning or eliminating administrative meetings and non-instructional responsibilities, such as monitoring arrival, dismissal, and lunch.

- **Expanding the definition of who can do the work.**

Sometimes rigid assumptions about who can do what jobs constrain districts’ ability to address students’ needs. During the pandemic, [Massachusetts](#) expanded the labor pool by adjusting limits on the roles of student teachers and retired teachers. In [Guilford County](#), North Carolina, qualified high school students are being recruited as part of the district’s high-dosage tutoring strategy. And some charter schools have changed educator [job descriptions](#) to build more flexibility into roles to attract candidates who may have not otherwise applied.

- **Designing new learning models that tap into non-traditional sources for instruction.**

For example, by offering advanced and low-enrollment high school courses via virtual platforms or through partnerships with local colleges, districts can create rich new learning opportunities, while freeing up staff to provide more support in ninth grade. Educators in [Aldine, Texas](#), are engaging elementary school students in service learning projects led by high school students, while at the same time creating more time for teacher collaboration.

- **Providing meaningful, curriculum-connected professional support.**

More than two-thirds of the district plans we studied include plans for new curricula and professional development. With a [Connected Professional Learning](#) approach that is tailored to teachers’ [varied needs](#), school and district leaders can make the teaching job more



collaborative and sustainable, while shifting away from professional development models that are neither popular nor consistently effective.

- **Using every available tool to strategically restructure existing time.**

It can be challenging for even the most sophisticated schedulers to find more [time for teaching, learning and planning](#). This year, by thinking creatively about use of time and staff assignments, leaders in Madera, California were able to double teacher collaboration time without adding additional resources.

Even the best-laid plans can change — and with the uncertainties of the [current moment](#), it's likely that many plans *will* change in response to new data, experiences, evolving contexts. So district leaders should keep [continuous improvement](#) in mind — tracking how dollars are being spent on the ground and how that compares to the plan, and making adjustments that further their pursuit of [“Do Now, Build Toward”](#) approaches that address students' need now *and* lay the foundation for lasting improvement.

