Using ESSER Funds for Building Strong Relationships and Social-Emotional Supports
Our Shared Challenge

Students — especially students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, English language learners, and students with disabilities — have had months of disrupted learning and disconnection from the relationships and social-emotional supports they experience in school.

The unprecedented infusion of federal stimulus funds (ESSER) provides an important opportunity for districts to equitably meet students’ needs and lay the foundation for meaningful, long-term change. With careful planning and investments, leaders can ensure changes are sustainable beyond the three-year ESSER funding period.

It’s time to redefine what ‘going back to normal’ means and use learnings from the pandemic to innovate and rethink the student learning experience.

-Elementary school dean of students in Minnesota

Source: Educators for Excellence, Voices from the Classroom, 2021
“Do Now, Build Toward”

District and school leaders can best navigate ESSER investment decisions by taking a “Do Now, Build Toward” approach — choosing doable starting points for the 2021-22 school year, while designing changes with a long-terms sustainable vision in mind.

This overview lays out a long-term, “Build Toward” vision for key strategies district and school leaders are prioritizing in elementary schools this fall.

These guides offer a blueprint for organizing resources this school year and beyond.

See the full “Do Now, Build Toward” toolkit
The **Schools Start Here** Series

**IN THIS SERIES:**
How can district and school leaders use stimulus funding to make “Do Now” investments that respond to urgent student needs, center equity, accelerate student learning, and also sustainably “Build Toward” long-term improvement?

**IN THIS GUIDE:**
What could it look like for my district or school to organize resources to provide effective social-emotional development and support for all elementary students?
What does the research say?
Students will enter the 2021-22 school year with unprecedented social and emotional needs from the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Researchers say isolation — such as that caused by school closures and quarantining — is leading to a “mental health tsunami.”

- Many students will return to school with additional trauma due to job loss, housing instability, or the loss of a loved one, particularly among Black and Latinx communities that have seen higher death rates and job loss.

- Additionally, for Black students in particular, ongoing “race-based adversity, discrimination, and stress, referred to as racial trauma, is harmful to children’s development and well-being.”

Stimulus funds give districts and schools the opportunity to respond to these intensified needs by strengthening structures for social-emotional development and support.

Sources: 1The74, 2Center for American Progress, 2020, 3ChildTrends
Research on social-emotional development and support has converged on **several key findings.**

- **Focusing on social, emotional, and cognitive development is a core function of schools** and is especially important for children and youth who have experienced trauma or adversity.

- **Dedicated, explicit social-emotional learning (SEL) opportunities and instruction** have a demonstrated positive impact on students, including academically.
  - A meta-analysis found “significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance that reflected an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement.”

- To be most effective, social-emotional learning should be **integrated across the school day**, including during academic instruction.


Continued…
Research on social-emotional development and support has converged on several key findings.

- **Positive, safe, relationships-based environments** promote social, emotional, and academic development.¹
  - “The elements of positive school climate that contribute the most to increased academic achievement were teacher–student relationships, including warmth, acceptance, and teacher support.”²

- Access to **mental health services** is key for students’ well-being and development, but is often insufficient.³
  - Staffing of counselors and social workers is associated with better mental health outcomes, lower discipline rates, and other benefits.⁴

- **Family engagement** supports a safe school environment, among other benefits.
  - When there are strong relationships between school staff and families, students feel more supported⁵, and there is a safer school climate.⁶

Social-emotional development and support can be provided in a tiered structure, and investment in Tier 1 structures builds an essential foundation.

**Tier 1 universal structures** include SEL instruction and practice, regular family engagement, and relationship-building structures.

**Tier 2 supplemental services** include family outreach, behavioral supports, and counseling support groups.

**Tier 3 intensive interventions** include sustained 1:1 counseling services, provided by on-staff counselors or community partners.

While school systems may increase Tier 2 and 3 supports to meet intensified needs, investing ESSER funds in building stronger, universal Tier 1 structures for social-emotional development and support could help create lasting change.

Sources: 1LPI and Turnaround for Children
Research and emerging practices indicate several key areas of investment for strong relationships and social-emotional development and supports.

- **Dedicated & Embedded SEL Instruction** (*Tier 1*)
  Invest in high quality materials for explicit SEL instruction and adjust core curriculum to embed SEL practice.

- **Safe, Positive Environment** (*Mainly Tier 1*)
  Develop a school environment that is physically and emotionally safe, and foster strong relationships among children and adults.

- **Family Engagement** (*Mainly Tiers 1 & 2*)
  Strengthen school-to-home connections.

- **Counseling Supports** (*Mainly Tiers 2 & 3*)
  Connect students to necessary supports, either with staff or by leveraging community resources.
How can districts and schools target ESSER dollars now?
Investments in all components of social-emotional development and support are **strategic and allowable uses for ESSER dollars**.

**Dedicated & Embedded SEL Instruction**

**Safe, Positive Environment**

**Family Engagement**

**Counseling Supports**

---

The CARES Act (ESSER I) includes allowable uses of funds related to preventing, preparing for, and responding to COVID-19.

Note that the ‘additional’ LEA allowable uses of funds under the CRRSA Act (ESSER II), such as addressing learning loss, preparing schools for reopening, and testing, repairing, and upgrading projects to improve air quality in school buildings, already are permitted under the CARES Act.

- US Department of Education
Effective **SEL instruction** involves quality materials, dedicated time, staff development, and, ideally, supports for integration into academics.

**Dedicated & Embedded SEL Instruction**

- **Dedicated, Regular Time for Explicit SEL Instruction**
  In many cases, elementary schools repurpose time from morning routines (see Scheduling & Staffing section). It is unlikely for there to be additional expenses related to this time.

- **SEL Curriculum**
  Acquire, adapt, or develop SEL curriculum — considerations and options are summarized here by the Wallace Foundation.

- **Core Curricula That Embeds SEL**
  Adopt curricula that embeds SEL. Alternatively, invest in significant time for qualified school- or district-level staff to integrate SEL into current curriculum (CASEL).

- **Collaboration and Professional Development Time**
  Dedicate time for staff to internalize, adapt, and discuss dedicated SEL instruction and how it is embedded into the curriculum (see Scheduling & Staffing section for options).

- **Program Management & Coordination**
  Allocate school- or district-level staff to coordinate curriculum, training, and support of SEL instruction.
Building a safe, **relationships-based environment** starts with investments in developing adult practices.

- **Collaboration & Professional Learning Around Culture-Building Programs**
  Focus on practices that promote positive classroom culture, including drawing on culture systems like [Responsive Classroom](#), restorative practices, or trauma-informed practices.

- **Out-of-School Time for Enrichment Opportunities**
  Provide stipends to staff and/or partner with community organizations to provide out-of-school time for programming that is designed with explicit goals related to building relationships and students’ sense of belonging.

- **During-School Partnerships That Support Culture-Building**
  For example, [Playworks](#), program that improves climate through play during the school day, has shown strong evidence of impact on several SEL-related outcomes.

- **Dedicated, Regular Time for Building Classroom & School Culture**
  Adopt welcoming activities and optimistic closures. In most cases, this time is repurposed and does not involve additional investments (see [Scheduling & Staffing](#) section), but requires the training and support described above for staff.
Home visits and emerging digital tools have shown promise for increasing family engagement.

- **Home Visits**
  Emerging research on family-teacher home visits indicates that at least one model is associated with improved attendance and family perception of school. Common models involve paying stipends for staff to conduct visits before the school year or during non-school hours in the fall. Training should be provided to ensure that visits are effective and demonstrate cultural competences.

- **Communication/Translation Services**
  A number of new digital communication tools can increase engagement by adding channels that are more convenient and often more comfortable for families, with some tools embedding translation services to reach more families.

- **Dedicated Family Engagement Staff**
  Some districts/schools invest in dedicated family engagement/involvement facilitators, often part-time or shared across schools. The impact of such positions on engagement has not been studied in depth.

- **Community Partnerships**
  Partnering with community organizations (for example, The Oakland REACH can strengthen family voice and agency.)

Sources: ¹Johns Hopkins, ²Parent Teacher Home Visits, ³Columbia University, Stanford University
Leveraging community resources for additional counseling supports can be a sustainable investment.

- **Liaison(s) to Community Mental Health Services**
  Build connections to community mental health providers and manage processes for referrals and support (like in Florence, AL). Depending on state context, Medicaid reimbursements may support expansion in services.¹

- **On-Staff Counseling and Social Work Providers**
  Many districts are addressing chronically low counseling resources by adding counseling staff.² Use of ESSER funds for this expansion means districts will need to consider offsetting reductions if they plan to sustain staff after stimulus ends.

- **Shared-Student Collaboration Time**
  Counselors should be included in regular grade-level or shared-student collaboration time to participate in sharing information, identifying needs, and planning and monitoring supports.

Sources: ¹FutureEd, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, National Academy for State Health Policy, ²Rand
How can districts and schools invest sustainably?
Federal stimulus funds provide an opportunity to **address students’ current needs and build toward lasting improvement.**

To plan ESSER investments with **long-term sustainability** in mind...

- **Size the full cost of implementing strategies over time.**
  Consider *all* the cost components associated with implementing the strategy well, including those that address intensified needs and those that build long-term capacity. Understand which costs will need to be sustained over time.

- **Plan out how spending and organization will shift to sustain critical investments over time.**
  To avoid fiscal cliffs, have an exit strategy where possible. Carefully monitor and plan for what needs to be sustained.

- **Invest in building bridges to new ways of organizing.**
  Pilot and evaluate new approaches that lower future costs or redirect resources to sustain this strategy.

- **Define success, measure, and adjust.**
  Investing in a continuous improvement system is critical for ensuring that strategies evolve and improve over time. For more on this, see *Uncharted Waters.*
Investments in social-emotional development and support will vary across districts and schools based on student and staff needs and context.

For more support in estimating the true cost of implementing strategies in your specific context, see our ESSER Strategy Planner & Funding Calculator.

- This interactive tool allows you to see a breakdown of potential ESSER spending (SY 2021-22 – SY 2023-24) and the implied spending commitments post-ESSER (from SY 2024-25 and onward).

- For counseling staff, select the tab at the bottom labeled “#4 Relationships” and scroll left or right within the sheet to view the different strategies.

- For family engagement staff, select the tab at the bottom labeled “#5 Family Partnerships” and scroll left or right within the sheet to view the different strategies.
ESSER investments should balance investing in immediate student needs with building lasting capacity. Many of the investments described here can do both.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Address intensified needs</th>
<th>Build system capacity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedicated &amp; Embedded SEL Instruction</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe, Positive Environment</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Engagement</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling Supports</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Investing in Tier 1 structures for social-emotional support will address some of the increased needs that many students and families will bring back to school, while also putting into place practices for universal supports that can last beyond stimulus funding.

Additional counseling supports, even if short term, could build long-term capacity if leveraged for:
- Providing training and support to teachers around Tier 1 trauma-sensitive and responsive practices.
- Building lasting connections to community services.
While some investments will decrease, other investments will need to be sustained in order to continue strong social-emotional supports after ESSER.

**Dedicated & Embedded SEL Instruction**

Illustrative investment needed

- Pre-ESSER
- ESSER
- Post-ESSER

Investments in curricula and training for SEL instruction and practices for a safe, positive environment can likely be reduced when ESSER ends.

If district-level staffing is increased for program coordination, adjustments may be needed.

Also, if stipended time or additional substitutes are used for shared-student collaboration and professional learning, it will need to be moved into the school day to return to baseline spending.

**Safe, Positive Environment**

If investing in stipends for home visits, family engagement staff, or additional counselors, districts will need to consider how to sustain or adjust these investments.

**Family Engagement**

**Counseling Supports**

Key Question: How can districts and schools sustain increased family engagement, counseling supports, and shared student collaboration time — without increasing long-term costs?
Districts and schools can pilot ways to sustain more social-emotional support than was provided pre-COVID.

For now, schools might...

- Provide stipends to staff to meet after school and during additional professional learning days.
- Hire additional counselors.
- Hire additional family engagement staff.
- Pay stipends to staff for home visits and associated training.

...while piloting and evaluating ways to provide more social-emotional support, even without stimulus dollars.

- Pilot ways to embed more staff collaboration time during the school day.
- Build partnerships with community organizations who can provide counseling.
- Depending on local context, invest in improved systems for Medicaid reimbursements that can subsidize some services.
- Set up volunteer family councils at school sites who can serve as liaisons and organize family engagement activities.
- Explore shifts to staffing formulas to free up funds for needed positions — for example, consider shifts away from administrative and reactive disciplinary positions.
- Explore shifts to funding systems that will increase staffing at higher-need schools. For example, allocate counselors and family engagement staff based on metrics of student and family need, not flatly per-pupil.
What does strategic scheduling and staffing look like?
These four main investment areas have two scheduling implications.

**Scheduling Implication #1**
Find dedicated class time for explicit SEL instruction and culture-building activities, such as warm welcomes and optimistic closures.

- Dedicated & Embedded SEL Instruction
- Safe, Positive Environment
- Family Engagement
- Counseling Supports

**Scheduling Implication #2**
Find dedicated staff time for professional learning and collaboration.

- Dedicated & Embedded SEL Instruction
  Staff need time to plan explicit SEL instruction and integrate practices into their academic instruction.
- Safe, Positive Environment
  Staff need time to learn new practices that contribute to stronger school culture.
- Family Engagement
  Staff need time to coordinate family engagement.
- Counseling Supports
  Staff need time to collaborate with mental health staff members around student supports.
Scheduling Implication #1: Part 1

Typically, time for elementary classrooms to engage in explicit SEL instruction and culture-building routines is repurposed from *existing opening and closing time*.

**WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE**

- Daily 20-minute community circle, with explicit SEL instruction included in this time.
- Daily closing routines for reflection and reinforcing positive culture.

**TRADEOFFS**

- Daily investments of time in SEL instruction and culture development may be difficult in contexts with shorter school days.

---

**Example 2nd Grade Daily Schedule**

- Community Circle
- ELA
- Small Group Instruction
- Math
- Lunch & Recess
- Enrichment
- Science / Social Studies
- Closing & Dismissal
Scheduling Implication #1: Part 2

Some SEL programs may call for periodic longer blocks; tradeoffs can be made to maintain desired weekly minutes in each content area.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

- RULER, a widely used SEL program, includes four 45-minute lessons every two weeks in its elementary curriculum.
- In this example, RULER lessons are on Tuesday and Thursday mornings for 45 minutes. Small group instruction is shorter on those days. The other days of the week start with a short (~15-minute) community circle in order to leave more time for small group instruction on those days.

TRADEOFFS

- Shortened small group instruction sessions two days a week.
- With explicit SEL instruction on two days, it is important to reinforce SEL content at other times in the week, ideally by embedding into academic instruction.

Sources: 1RULER
# Scheduling Implication #2

Find dedicated time for staff to learn new practices and collaborate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To find planning time...</th>
<th>Key Considerations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Early release or community partner enrichment | • One day per week, adopt a **half-day calendar** so that teachers have extended time for expert support and collaboration after students go home.  
• Collaborate with **external partners** to provide student programming during early release or during the school day so that teachers are free to meet for expert support and collaboration. |
| Stack planning time with other non-instructional blocks; cover regularly | • Schedule **daily planning time next to non-instructional blocks** that can be covered by support staff once per week, such as lunch/recess, community circle, and/or arrival/dismissal — this will help make time for an extended block once per week.  
• Leverage **temporary or part-time** staff. |
| Extend enrichment time on one day | • Increase **enrichment time** for coverage or redistribute existing individual planning time to create an extended block once per week. |
| Hire a floating teacher | • Hire a **multi-grade floating science or social studies teacher** who provides coverage; stack with enrichment block to create an extended-release block for teachers. |

For more information and support, see the *Professional Learning & Collaboration for Teachers* guide.
Example #1

Early release or community partner enrichment.

**WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE**
- Create one early release day per week so that teachers have time after students go home.
- Core instructional time is maintained and individual planning time for teachers is increased.
- Allows for flexible teaming structures since all staff are available at the same time.

**KEYS TO SUCCESS**
- Maintaining core instructional time across the week and school year.
- Deliberate planning about how to use the collaboration time effectively.
- Sufficient expert support since meetings will be at the same time (for example, one coach cannot support all grades at once).

**TRADEOFFS**
- The school day might need to be extended on other days, which is expensive and requires buy-in.
- Transportation might need to be adjusted and families might have to organize childcare.

**ALSO CONSIDER**
- Collaborating with external partners to provide meaningful enrichment opportunities during this time.
- Leveraging technology to create release time for teachers by having support staff supervise students.
- Combining this move on a quarterly basis with another option for additional time.
Example #2

Stack planning time next to small group instruction.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE
• Stack planning time next to small group instruction and have support staff provide coverage.
• Core instructional time for students and individual planning time for teachers is maintained.

KEYS TO SUCCESS
• Support staff are available and have strong classroom management skills.
• Access to technology-based intervention for the one day per week with support staff.

TRADEOFFS
• Requires enough support staff time to cover each homeroom.
• If small group instruction is covered, time for classroom teachers to lead small group or individual instruction is reduced and requires whole-class management by support staff.

ALSO CONSIDER
• Stacking the planning time next to non-instructional blocks (for example, enrichment, lunch/recess, community circle, arrival, or dismissal).
  • If enrichment is stacked with lunch/recess, teachers still need duty-free lunch.
  • If enrichment is stacked with community circle or closing/dismissal, planning is required to ensure procedures are followed safely and calmly.
Example #3
Extend enrichment time on one day.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

• Extend enrichment time once per week (while keeping enrichment the same length on other days) to protect daily individual planning time for teachers.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

• Maintaining sufficient core instructional time with an extended enrichment block.
• Enrichment teachers have capacity to teach additional enrichment blocks.
• Enrichment classes can be pooled to get coverage if needed.

TRADEOFFS

• May reduce core instructional time (Note: Due to impact on core instructional time, districts and schools need to be deliberate and thoughtful about how to do this well and reduce time in areas that are not core instruction, such as enrichment on other days).
• May require support staff to enable sufficient coverage for the increased amount of enrichment.

ALSO CONSIDER

• Shortening enrichment on the other days to maintain instructional time and eliminate the need for additional enrichment coverage. Would require teacher buy-in, as this would reduce teachers’ daily individual planning time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2nd-Grade Student 1 day per week</th>
<th>2nd-Grade Student 4 days per week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Circle</td>
<td>Community Circle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>ELA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Group Instruction</td>
<td>Small Group Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrichment</td>
<td>Science / Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrichment</td>
<td>Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch &amp; Recess</td>
<td>Lunch &amp; Recess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing &amp; Dismissal</td>
<td>Closing &amp; Dismissal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hire a floating science or social studies teacher.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE
- Hiring a multi-grade science or social studies teacher who provides coverage to multiple grades to enable extended blocks, achieved by stacking science or social studies with enrichment.
- Core instructional time is maintained and individual planning time for teachers is increased.
- Reduces one content area for homeroom teachers to plan.

KEYS TO SUCCESS
- Floating teacher has strong content knowledge across grades.
- Floating teacher has support from administrator and/or instructional coach.
- Floating teacher has strong classroom management and relationship-building skills.

TRADEOFFS
- An additional classroom teacher is expensive, and depending on school size, more than one teacher may be needed to provide coverage for all grades.
- Multi-grade teacher has high student load and limited in-school collaborators.
- Rotating student and teacher schedule can be initially confusing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2nd-Grade Student 2 days per week</th>
<th>2nd-Grade Student 3 days per week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Circle</td>
<td>Community Circle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>ELA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Group Instruction</td>
<td>Small Group Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science (floating teacher)</td>
<td>Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrichment</td>
<td>Enrichment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch &amp; Recess</td>
<td>Lunch &amp; Recess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing/Dismissal</td>
<td>Closing/Dismissal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This guide was authored by Gloria Samen (Associate), Eddie Branchaud (Manager), and Kristen Ferris (Partner). It is the result of collaborative efforts among numerous people, both within and outside of ERS. We would like to acknowledge the following ERS team members who contributed to this work: Crystal Chu, Mark Heath, Gayatri Mehra, Torrie Mekos, Daven McQueen, and Karen Hawley Miles.

We owe our deep thanks to our partners at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York for supporting the creation of this set of guidebooks.

We are grateful to all those listed above who inspired, informed, contributed, and reviewed this work.
For more tools and information...

See the full “Do Now, Build Toward” toolkit

VISIT
www.erstrategies.org

SUBSCRIBE
www.erstrategies.org/signup

LIKE + FOLLOW
@ERStrategies
As your team weighs the possible tradeoffs associated with different approaches, makes decisions about how to organize resources, and plans for how to evolve and scale your approaches over time, we encourage you to adapt these guides to meet your unique needs and context.

To share your work or get help navigating your “Do Now, Build Toward” approach, contact us.