Communicating Your ESSER Plans:

5 Actions to Build Alignment Among District Leaders, School Boards, and Cabinets
The needs of all students have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the existing inequities that many students already experienced have become more visible and far worse. Now, as ARP/ESSER funds flow into school district coffers around the country, school boards, superintendents, and their cabinets are working to develop and implement plans for using this federal stimulus money in ways that thoughtfully address these growing needs and inequities. As part of these efforts, district leaders are engaging in the time-sensitive work of gathering stakeholder input, assessing the needs of students and school communities, and pressure-testing strategies for meeting those needs — all while continuing to navigate a public health crisis with ever-shifting local, state, and federal guidelines.

For districts, a key aspect of all of this work will be developing a strategy for effectively messaging their ESSER plans internally, to their local school board, their cabinet, and other district leaders throughout central office — as well as externally, to families, educators, and the general public. Having a strong message is not a substitute for using ESSER funds effectively. It won’t drive outcomes for students, but it can help to build understanding and support around how your district can use resources to best support students and schools. A strong internal messaging strategy can help proactively establish a common set of understandings among your school board, cabinet, and various central office teams about what your district is trying to accomplish and where they can plug in to support ongoing efforts to meet students’ needs.

Developing this messaging strategy can be challenging for a variety of reasons, including:

- District leaders feeling pressed for time.
- Districts needing to develop reactive messaging in response to internal and external questions.
- The vast scope of the work and sheer number of areas that ESSER planning touches on.
- Fragmented responsibility and authority over ESSER funds.
- Difficulties building a coherent narrative while still deciding what the full plan really is.
- Risks associated with engaging internal and external stakeholders at a time when implementation challenges — such as continued pandemic mitigation and acute labor shortages — that could prevent the plan from moving forward as intended.

ERS, with support from RALLY, an advocacy communications firm, convened leaders from roughly 10 large districts to talk about these messaging challenges and how they (as district leaders who are responsible for the effective use of ESSER funding) can help set the tone in their district. Here, we:

- Outline five key actions to help district leaders effectively message ESSER plans internally, to their school board, cabinet, and other leaders throughout central office. These five actions were developed based on the real-life perspectives and “use-cases” of district leaders, RALLY’s expertise in messaging related to education equity and funding, and ERS expertise on strategic resource-use.
- Share examples of what these actions can look like for effective ESSER messaging — including a PowerPoint template we created for districts to adapt for their own use, and sample slides from two districts (Indianapolis Public Schools and Hartford Public Schools) that have taken a proactive approach to communicating about their ESSER plans with their local school boards.

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One major challenge that district leadership teams face is the mismatch of expectations between ESSER spending and the **policy constraints** that exist around these funds — rarely do elected officials, school and district administrators, teachers, and board members have a clear understanding of the specific size, duration, and reimbursement requirements that CFOs and other ESSER chiefs must consider when creating spending plans.

**An effective ESSER spending narrative begins by building understanding about these constraints and the potential impact they can have on decision-making.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To effectively define ESSER...</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explain the source and purpose of ESSER funds.</td>
<td>Help set appropriate expectations for spending decisions, including recognizing the ongoing uncertainty and need for unforeseeable adjustments in the future.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Show ESSER dollar amounts within the context of overall budgets, broken down by local, state, and federal categories.</td>
<td>Set expectations and build understanding around the relative magnitude of investments — for example, “$100 million sounds like a lot, but relative to our ongoing spend, spread over three years, it’s really more like a doubling of Title I.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Show the timeline requirements for ESSER spending — highlight the temporary nature of the funds and preview the sustainability challenges.</td>
<td>Build understanding and support around the funding required to maintain new programs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explain the impact of state-level policy and leadership on local funding.</td>
<td>Help district stakeholders and the community effectively apply political pressure to hold state leaders accountable for funding decisions.</td>
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**Action #1:**

**Build Understanding of ESSER: Examples**

**Why do we have ESSER funds?**

- Federal Language: Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds are provided to State educational agencies and school districts to help support recovery and sustain the safe, healthy, and equitable operations of schools and address the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the nation’s students.

**IPS** priorities for using these funds are in alignment with federal guidance to:

1. Keep classrooms open and safe for students and teachers during this global pandemic (including critical technology investments).
2. Kickstart accelerated learning to recover and lay the groundwork for long-term redesign of underlying cost.

*The extent of our progress on priority #2 is dependent on the pandemic and the remaining costs incurred under priority #1.*

This slide grounds the work by explaining the source and purpose of ESSER funds.

**Of the $74M IPS has allocated, $52M has supported keeping schools open, safe, and stable.**

This slide shows the relative magnitude of investments.

**ESSER funding roughly doubles our federal funding, but works out to be a max of 8% of our total revenue year over year until the spending deadline.**

This slide shows the timeline requirements for ESSER spending — and highlights the temporary nature of the funds and preview the sustainability challenges.

**CSDE’s authorized uses of ARP ESSER funds.**

- **CSDE State-Level Priorities:**
  - Learning Acceleration, Academic Remediation, and Student Engagement
  - Family Community Connection
  - Social, Emotional, and Mental Health of Students and Staff
  - Strengthening of Technology, Staff Development, and the Digital Infrastructures
  - Building Safe and Healthy Schools

- **CSDE Category Parameters:**
  - Supports must be targeted and in response to learning loss assessments, prioritizing vulnerable populations.
  - In-depth to engage families and communities, including providing training with the skills to support student learning.
  - Behavioral and mental health services, PPE.
  - Access to technology and connectivity for students, families, staff.
  - Facility repairs/improvements to support physical health and safety.

HPS is eligible to apply for $88.5M in ARP ESSER funds. CSDE has 5 updated categories the funds may be spent on.

This slide makes the connection to state-level policies and priorities.

Visit [erstrategies.org](http://erstrategies.org) to get the PowerPoint template for these “ESSER Defined” slides and adapt them for your own context.
District leadership teams often invest large amounts of time gathering feedback from stakeholders — including school leaders, teachers, families, and students — to ensure that spending decisions address community needs. This is especially true of ESSER funds due to the unique challenges presented by the pandemic, as well as federal requirements to include stakeholder input.

**Effective ESSER narratives clearly show the community-district feedback loop in action** by:

- Demonstrating what the district did to ensure that under-represented groups were included.
- Openly sharing the perspectives and concerns that the district heard from school leaders, teachers, families, and students.
- Transparently outlining the ways in which the districts intends to address these perspectives and concerns (or not).

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<th>To effectively share stakeholder input...</th>
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<td>Use language that amplifies personal relevance.</td>
<td>Help individuals see the direct impact of ESSER plans on themselves, children, and their community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Point out where there are <strong>differences</strong> in emerging needs and priorities across constituent groups, including policymakers, the school board, district and school administration, teachers, families, and students.</td>
<td>Demonstrate why spending might vary by building, classroom, or program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point out where there are <strong>similarities</strong> in emerging needs and priorities across constituent groups, including policymakers, the school board, district and school administration, teachers, families, and students.</td>
<td>Build a sense of shared challenges and values and reduce “us vs. them” mindsets.</td>
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</table>
This slide openly shares the perspectives and concerns that district leaders heard from various constituent groups.

Visit erstrategies.org to get the PowerPoint template for these “Stakeholder Input” slides and adapt them for your own context.
**Action #3: Define the Potential Impact of ESSER Priorities**

One of the most common questions district leaders are being asked right now is: “What exactly is ESSER money being spent on?” A good ESSER communications strategy not only provides clear and detailed spending information — it talks about these investments in relation to the problems they are designed to solve and the outcomes they aim to achieve.

By presenting ESSER investments in relation to the impact they are intended to have, districts can create room for the inevitable (and strategic) changes that will come, as new challenges emerge and leaders learn what works vs. what needs to be adjusted. It helps to send a signal internally that continuous improvement is an integral part of ESSER planning and implementation.

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<th>To effectively talk about ESSER priorities...</th>
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<tr>
<td>Connect ESSER funds to state priorities and your district’s strategic plan.</td>
<td>Demonstrate alignment between specific programs/investments and broader priorities/strategies, as well as how future changes are designed as part of a larger vision.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emphasize the intended <em>impact</em> of specific investments.</td>
<td>Lay a foundation for buy-in around future changes, as district teams learn how to better achieve the intended goal.</td>
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<td>Share a few positive examples and success stories.</td>
<td>Reduce cynicism and show what is possible.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop a few illustrative examples with fully fleshed out details.</td>
<td>Signal the complexity of program design/implementation and the attention to detail that will be needed from the leadership team, without overwhelming your local school board or other central office teams with excessively long presentations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connect your examples back to research.</td>
<td>Demonstrate the credibility of the program design and the likelihood of positive impact.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Include examples of progress monitoring plans.</td>
<td>Reinforce the district’s commitment to continuous improvement (especially in the face of uncertainty) and create much-needed flexibility to change as conditions continue to evolve.</td>
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**Action #3:**

**Define the Potential Impact of ESSER Priorities: Examples**

This slide connects each investment category back to the problems it is trying to solve.

This slide explains the types of factors that would cause the district to change investments around certain strategies.

This slide connects ESSER funds to state priorities and the district’s strategic plan.

This slide reinforces the district’s commitment to continuous improvement as part of ESSER planning and implementation.

Visit [erstrategies.org](http://erstrategies.org) to get the PowerPoint template for these “ESSER Priorities” slides and adapt them for your own context.
**Action #4:**

**Connect to Long-Term Strategy**

Actions #1-3 should lay the groundwork for your local school board, cabinet, and leaders throughout central office to understand the purpose and intended use of ESSER funds. But an effective ESSER messaging strategy should also show how the long-term plans for ESSER investments build toward joint accountability for making changes to resource-use in the future. For example, any given initiative could be:

- Rolled back as the need is addressed.
- Sustained by finding new funding sources.
- Sustained by making tradeoffs with existing resources.

By gaining clarity together about which approach is currently planned for key initiatives, your district will be better-positioned to involve others in those plans when they happen — for example preparing to roll back initiatives on a certain timeline or helping to identify new potential funding sources.

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<td>Communicate long-term funding approaches that show whether an investment will be sustained or not — and, if so, by use of new funds or by reallocating existing dollars.</td>
<td>Generate the pressure needed to sustain desired investments by advocating for new funding sources or adjusting underlying cost structures.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Show the impact of an unexpected future on the allocation of funds.</td>
<td>Explain the impact of external factors — such as the pandemic and federal/state policy — on future spending; prepare internal stakeholders for future investment shifts as a necessary part of responsible stewardship of funds.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connect short-term funding wins to longer-term impacts on the broader community.</td>
<td>Create a sense of urgency by connecting your vision and the outcomes you are fighting for to the broader success of students, families, teachers, and the community.</td>
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</table>
**Action #4:**

**Connect to Long-Term Strategy: Examples**

This slide connects current investment activities to longer-term, bigger-picture landscapes.

This slide clearly communicates criteria and examples for the types of investments that short-term or likely to be rolled back.

Visit [erstrategies.org](http://erstrategies.org) to get the PowerPoint template for these “Long-Term Strategy” slides and adapt them for your own context.
Action #5: Map Stakeholder Values, Priorities, & Key Messages

District leaders will also need to carefully plan for how to take internal ESSER presentations “on the road” and adapt messaging for external audiences, such as students, families, educators, and the broader community. Effective external ESSER messaging targets the people in each constituent group who are “persuadable” by speaking to their shared values, needs, concerns, and communication styles — while maintaining the same underlying North Star principles across all audience groups.

To plan for this type of differentiation, district leaders should lay out what is known for each of the following questions for the groups who will be most impacted by the use of particular funds, such as school leaders, teachers, families, and students.

- What are their values and priorities?
- What are their current beliefs about ESSER funds?
- What do we want/need them to understand about ESSER now?
- What do we want/need them to believe about ESSER in three years?

The more nuanced your understanding of each group is, the more likely your messaging strategy will be successful. Where you experience trouble answering these questions for a particular group, that can serve as valuable feedback to your district’s stakeholder engagement teams to ensure each group of people who is most impacted by the use of ESSER funds is brought into the process.