

# EARLY LITERACY OVERVIEW:

Investing ESSER funds to organize resources as part of a "Do Now, Build Toward" approach



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**ESSER GUIDANCE**  
STAFFING • SPENDING • SCHEDULING

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# Introduction

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Early literacy is foundational to everything that comes after it. But it's clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified both students' needs and existing inequities.



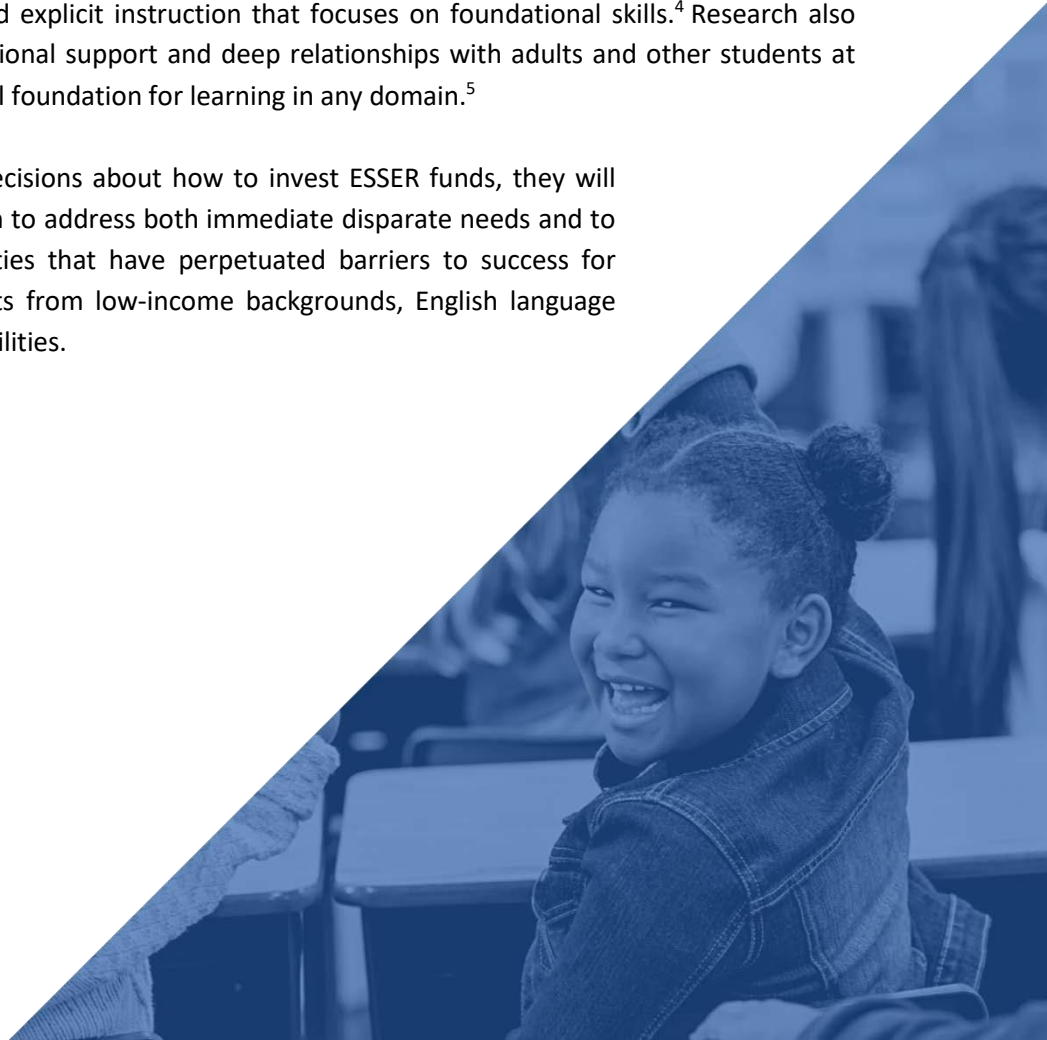
Research shows that students who are not proficient in reading by 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade are four times as likely to drop out of high school.<sup>1</sup> But recent research about the impact of the pandemic suggests unfinished learning will be greatest in primary grades and for students who were already behind.<sup>2</sup> Additional data suggests that in particular, 1<sup>st</sup>- and 2<sup>nd</sup>-graders lost ground in skills that are foundational for learning to read, such as phonics and letter recognition — and this trend was most significant for Black and Latinx students.<sup>3</sup>

A crucial part of addressing these challenges will be leveraging ESSER funds to deepen investments in growing students' early literacy skills. District and school leaders can do this work best by taking a **“Do Now, Build Toward” approach** — choosing doable starting points 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.



Fortunately, a significant body of research also shows us what works to impact early literacy growth: systematic and explicit instruction that focuses on foundational skills.<sup>4</sup> Research also notes that social-emotional support and deep relationships with adults and other students at school provide a critical foundation for learning in any domain.<sup>5</sup>

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.





# ESSER Guidance for School Staffing, Spending, and Scheduling

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To help with these challenges and opportunities, our *COVID Recovery and Redesign* guides 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 four initial topics for elementary schools and early literacy:

1



2



3



4





## 1 SMALL GROUP INSTRUCTION

### WHY

Students have always needed different levels and types of support to access grade-level instruction — and the spectrum is even wider now.

#### DO NOW

- Invest in more staff or time to directly support opportunities for small group learning — including what teachers will need to be successful, such as planning time and coaching.
- Improve the quality of assessment data and platforms used for data analysis, so that teachers have timely and relevant information to inform student groupings.
- Consider how to invest in designing new roles and/or schedules that will keep small group instruction sustainable after the ESSER funding window.

#### BUILD TOWARD

*Small group instruction that focuses on foundational reading skills and adjusts based on meaningful data about students' skills.*

- Flexible structures that involve regularly regrouping students and teachers to match needs and skills — potentially including groupings across classrooms even grade levels.
- Small group instruction that is cohesive with both strong Tier 1 instruction, as well as targeted supports for students with disabilities and English Language Learners.
- Sufficient time and support for teachers to plan and adjust their small group instruction.

## 2 RELATIONSHIPS & SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SUPPORTS

### WHY

Families are expressing concerns about the impact of the pandemic on their children's relationships and social-emotional health and development. And research shows that "strong, supportive, and sustained relationships with adults in schools consistently predict children's capacity for resilient behavior, even in the face of traumatic experience."<sup>6</sup>

#### DO NOW

- Invest in a coherent set of strategies that encourage strong relationships and connect students to support systems, such as:
  - The materials and time needed for dedicated and embedded social-emotional learning.

#### 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



- Counseling.
- Systems for meaningful, ongoing family engagement.
- Opportunities for teacher collaboration and learning.

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 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.

### 4 PROFESSIONAL LEARNING & COLLABORATION

#### WHY

Elementary school students need access to high-quality teaching to learn foundational reading skills. These learning opportunities will be deeply shaped by educators' capacity, skills, support, and materials.

#### DO NOW

- Invest in high-quality, culturally relevant instructional materials and assessments

#### BUILD TOWARD

*Every student has engaging, high-quality, culturally relevant literacy instruction because*





— or evolve existing materials to embed a deeper focus on foundational reading skills, 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.

*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 literacy instruction.<sup>7,8</sup>

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## Key changes moving forward

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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. Elementary school leaders will need support from their districts, their communities, and from policymakers to enact **six big-picture shifts**:

1. More nimble **approaches to scheduling and staffing** to support the following...
  - ✓ Expanded time for targeted small group and individual support, focused on foundational reading skills.
  - ✓ Ensuring students have equitable access to strong teaching and to teachers with expertise in early literacy.
  - ✓ Time for relationship-building and social-emotional skill development.
2. High-quality, culturally relevant **curriculum and instructional materials** that are aligned to rigorous standards, scaffold learning over time, and that infuse social-emotional learning and students' cultural backgrounds, interests, and lived experiences.
3. More **time for teachers to collaborate** in teams, while receiving expert support from school leaders, coaches, or teacher-leaders.
4. A broader set of complimentary **teaching and leadership roles** to help 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.

Elementary 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

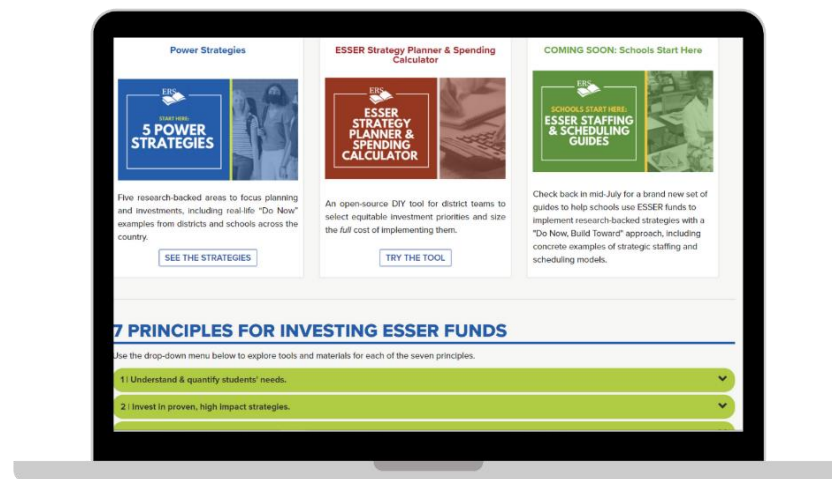
**Achieving a “Build Toward” vision will require shifting the underlying structures that drive the ways resources are used.** For example, in the short-term, this might look like adding more collaboration and reflection time to teachers’ schedules or using ESSER funds for additional staff to allow for 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 reading instruction 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 (varying by grade level), students can be engaged in learning without being directly facilitated by their core teachers. And in many places, learning opportunities facilitated by community-based organizations strengthened the bridge between the work of schools and community partners in ways that could support deeper partnerships during the school day going forward. Innovations like these offer an opportunity to explore ways to use time, technology, and partners in ways that optimize learning and engagement for students and teachers. And integrating them as part of new schedules can help ensure that the work teachers do to plan and individualize lessons and connect with students can happen *inside* the teacher workday, instead of after hours.
- Deepen **partnerships with outside providers** to provide students with cohesive support inside and outside of regular school hours, and to enable educators to focus on the highest-priority instructional work. Throughout the pandemic, outside, community-based providers have demonstrated strengths when it comes to supporting and engaging students and families with academic, wellness, and childcare needs. Districts and schools can build on this by integrating these partnerships more deeply both inside and outside the school day.



**See the full “Do Now, Build Toward” toolkit**





# Sources

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