

How to Approach an “ESSER Health Check”

Deciding what investments to stop, start, and scale

We’re halfway through ESSER’s funding timeline, but leaders still have time to create lasting change.

Now is the time for district leaders to step back, reflect on their ESSER investment strategy, and decide what investments to start, stop, and scale in order to maximize impact moving forward. There’s two years left on the clock, and that’s more than enough time to spend ESSER funds in strategic ways that make a difference for the children who need it most.

Planning time is precious, and district leaders can benefit from focusing that time with tested, proven resources. **That’s where this guide comes in: to help facilitate productive conversations, supported by data, that lead to better outcomes for students.** With these discussion areas, district leaders can understand what is working about their ESSER spending strategy and make strategic decisions about where to re-focus efforts for better outcomes.

What to Expect From This Guide

Our ESSER Health Check process occurs in three distinct phases designed to support district leaders as they embark on a thought-provoking, insightful reflection process on their ESSER strategies.

For each phase, you’ll find a guiding framework, discussion questions and exercises to complete—helping to illuminate the strategic next steps that will lead to maximized impact.

- **Phase 1. Data Collection**
 - In this phase, district leaders collect quantitative and qualitative data around ESSER spending to date in three areas:
 - Student Needs
 - Spend to Date
 - Initiatives
- **Phase 2. Meaning Making**
 - In this phase, district leaders interpret and make meaning out of the data to understand the impact of decisions made so far in three areas:
 - Equity
 - Sustainability
 - System Conditions
- **Phase 3. Action Planning**
 - Now comes the fun part: This is where district leaders put their heads together to reflect on learnings from the first two phases and identify:
 - Key Resources
 - Strategic Next Steps



Phase 1: Data Collection

Purpose: Collect quantitative and qualitative data on three major categories: student needs, spend to date, and the status of ESSER initiatives.

Data Collection Priority Area #1: Student Needs

Guiding Question for District Leaders


Do we have a shared, current, and nuanced understanding of student need that's driving our decision making for ESSER investments?

Why This Matters

In the most effective ESSER strategies, funds are used to:

- 1) address emerging needs by directing resources to the students who need them most
- 2) disrupt longstanding inequities that continue to create barriers to success for specific student groups.

To work towards this, district leaders must first quantify need across the district—by student group, grade level, and school—before guiding the allocation of resources.

 Make sure to include families, teachers, and students themselves as part of this data-gathering process. Reflect: Who might be missing or underrepresented in these conversations? How can leaders elevate their voices?

EXERCISE: Student Needs Assessment

Conduct a self-assessment with the following questions:

- Does our district have reliable, regular formative assessment results across all grades and subjects? How are these results used to inform decision-making?
- Does our district have a shared approach for assessing student wellbeing and engagement? How is this information used to inform decision-making?
- Does our district have a shared understanding of patterns of inequity and the ways that these create barriers to success for specific student groups? How is this information used to inform decision-making?
- Does our district have a standard way of identifying highest priority schools and classrooms that require additional supports? How is this information used to inform decision-making?
- Does our district have a reliable, inclusive approach to getting representative stakeholder input? How is this information used to inform decision-making?



Data Collection Priority Area #2: Spend to Date

Guiding Question for District Leaders

How have our ESSER funds been spent to date, and how much funding remains to be spent?

Why This Matters

The end goal of the Health Check is for leaders to know how to stop, start, or scale their investments to make the most of the remaining ESSER timeline. Before that can happen, though, there needs to be an understanding of how ESSER dollars have been allocated to date and what is still available.

EXERCISE: Spend to Date Tracker

Create a tracker of your ESSER spending and allocation to date. Below is an example chart of how a district could start to track these numbers. The categories enable tracking of ESSER spending along the various steps of budgeting and expenditure. Ultimately, this allows more precise estimates of what dollars have been spent (or are slated to be spent) with a high degree of confidence, and which dollars are available for reprogramming.

	Spent to date Dollars expended to date	Encumbered Dollars set aside for confirmed future expenses	Forecasted Salaries Dollars set aside for unfilled positions	Contingency Dollars set aside for emergencies or unexpected expenses	Savings Dollars from past unfilled positions and under-budget expenses	Not yet allocated Dollars that have not yet been budgeted
Total						
<i>Example: Extended Learning Time</i>	\$6.2M	\$0.9M	\$1.2M	\$0.5M	\$0.2M	\$10M
<i>ESSER Strategy Category 2</i>						
<i>Etc.</i>						

Data Collection Priority Area #3: Initiative Status

Guiding Question for District Leaders

What are our ESSER initiatives, how are they progressing, and what impact are they having on student outcomes?

Why This Matters

For maximized outcomes, ESSER spending must be aligned with the overall district budget and strategy *and* any new investments should be cohesive with existing ones. This step encourages districts to track the timeline, budget, and spend for each initiative, laying the groundwork for leaders to determine a cohesive, strategic path forward.

⚠️ Data suggests that there’s no “golden ticket” solution that’s guaranteed to work immediately or in standardized, scalable ways. Every strategy will need to be adapted over time using reliable data and community input.



EXERCISE: Initiative Status Tracker

1. Compile a “database” or spreadsheet that tracks all initiatives funded by ESSER, including data on the timeline, budget, and amount spent for each initiative.
2. Assess progress and alignment on the suggested key categories below.

Initiative Information	
Alignment to District Strategy Bucket	How does this investment align to your district strategy?
	Owner (<i>district point-person for initiative or strategy</i>)
	Is this investment a "Big Bet" in our district strategy?
Timeline & Dollars	
Timeline	What phase is this initiative intended to be during each SY (21-22, 22-23, 23-24)? (<i>Planning, Piloting, Implementing, Fully Implemented</i>)
Budget	How many dollars are allocated towards this initiative in each SY (21-22, 22-23, 23-24)?
Expended	How many dollars have been expended on this initiative in each SY (21-22, 22-23, 23-24)?
Effectiveness & Student Impact	
Implementation	Rollout: Are we getting this initiative off the ground?
	Uptake and Equity: Are students, teachers, or other stakeholders participating in the initiative at the rates we expected?
	Equity: Are we reaching students and schools with the highest needs through this initiative?
	Fidelity: Are we actually implementing the initiative we designed?
Leading Indicators	Satisfaction: Are students & families, teachers and other stakeholders satisfied with the initiative?
	Short-Term Learning: Are students achieving the desired performance on formative and lower stakes assessments as a result of this initiative?
Outcomes	Proficiency: Are we seeing increases in overall student proficiency, as measured by long-term summative assessments?
	Growth: Are students growing, as measured by long-term summative assessments?
Upcoming Milestones	
Milestones	Are there any upcoming decision making milestones on this initiative?
	Are there any upcoming board or cabinet updates on this initiative?
	Are there any other upcoming milestones on this initiative?
Student & Teacher Supports	
Alignment to Power Strategies	How does this initiative align to ERS' Power Strategies?
Changes to Scheduling	Does the initiative result in students having more time and customized support to help them catch up on unfinished learning?
	Does the initiative result in teachers having more time to work independently and in teams on planning engaging content, assessing students' progress, and figuring out additional supports to accelerate learning?
	Does the initiative result in teachers having more time to invest in building relationships with students and families ?
	Does the initiative enable the ongoing identification of students' socioemotional needs and matching students with appropriate supports?
	Does the initiative expand the reach of teachers most equipped to support students with the greatest needs , and help other teachers figure out how to do so too?



Phase 2: Meaning Making

Purpose: Interpret and make meaning out of the data to understand the impact of decisions made in three key areas: equity, sustainability, and system conditions.

Meaning Making Priority Area #1: Equity

Guiding Question for District Leaders

Is our ESSER spending targeting our higher need schools?

Why This Matters

As mentioned in [Phase 1](#), the most effective ESSER strategies:

- 1) address emerging needs by directing resources to the students who need them most
- 2) disrupt longstanding inequities that continue to create barriers to success for specific student groups.

To address emerging student needs (#1), district leaders must carefully consider which investments should be equally applied across all students or schools, and which should be targeted or differentiated based on their needs analysis.

⚠ Remember: uniformly allocating dollars on a per pupil basis means that some schools will have much less to meet the more intensive needs of their students.

To disrupt patterns of inequity (#2), district leaders must use data to reflect on the systems, structures, and practices that contribute to inequitable experiences and outcomes for students. Then, they can identify ways that new investments can work to correct them.

Example: If students with the greatest learning needs are also the least likely to have access to strong teaching, ESSER could be used to create teacher incentives for hard-to-staff schools.

EXERCISE: Equitable Spending Analysis

1. Look at school reported \$pp and note what proportion of central funds were actually allocated to higher need schools compared to lower need schools. Are additional ESSER funds are being targeted towards higher need schools and students?
2. Consider what the main barriers have been to equitable spending. What could be done differently moving forward?



Meaning Making Priority Area #2: Sustainability

Guiding Question for District Leaders

How have we planned for positive student impact, in alignment with long-term financial forecast, in a post-ESSER landscape?

Why This Matters

As we focus on leveraging ESSER funds to make long-term student impact, we have a responsibility to prepare for what these investments will look like in a post-ESSER world. ESSER dollars won't be around forever, so it's important to prepare *now* for what these investments will look like and accomplish post-ESSER.

EXERCISE: Sustainability Self-Assessment

Conduct a qualitative self-assessment to understand how sustainability has been factored into strategies to date. Use the following scale to rate your district's progress in four areas:

- 7: We are doing this consistently and well
- 6: Work in progress; we are doing this in targeted ways
- 5: Work in progress; we want to get better at doing this
- 4: Work planned for SY22-23
- 3: Desired, but not yet planned
- 2: We are not prioritizing this, and that's okay
- 1: Not in consideration at this point

Sustainability Metric	Possible actions and key considerations	Self-Assessment
We have a sense of what are potential ongoing costs and are undertaking the work to size their full costs into the future.	Size the full cost of implementing strategies over time. Consider all the cost components of implementing a strategy well. Estimates should include amounts for each main component (for example, tutoring includes tutor pay, training, and instructional materials), as well as assumptions about the number of students the strategy will serve.	
Our ESSER strategies are making changes to student and teacher schedules.	Invest in building bridges to new ways of organizing. For example: deepen investments in relationship-building and social-emotional learning by freeing up spending from punitive discipline; expand investments in high-quality virtual learning options in high school by freeing up spending from small, specialized upper-grades courses; or invest in targeted small group sizes by enabling slightly larger overall class sizes.	
We are deliberately managing the use of short-term surpluses to give ourselves flexibilities to invest past the deadline, avoiding a spending frenzy at the end of the window.	Plan out how spending and organization will shift to sustain critical investments over time. Identify which expenditures will go away over time, and which will stay and shift over time. For example, short-term investments in technology may shrink to only maintenance costs, while short-term approaches to tutoring may evolve into a broader vision for differentiated teacher roles or community and school partnerships.	
We are on track to have the necessary information about the potential set of trade-offs required to sustain high-impact investments going into next budget cycle.		



Meaning Making Priority Area #3: System Conditions

Guiding Question for District Leaders

Do we have the right structures and processes in place to enable effective ESSER fund planning and resource use at the district and school levels?

Why This Matters

When it comes to ESSER, many decisions need to be made quickly. It’s important that district leaders are clear about the structures and limitations in place that could impact decision-making and resource use. By doing so, district leaders will be better equipped to make nimble moves that meet student needs.

EXERCISE: System Conditions Self-Assessment

Conduct a qualitative self-assessment to understand how system conditions have been factored into strategies to date. Use the following scale to rate your district’s progress in four areas:

- 7: We are doing this consistently and well
- 6: Work in progress; we are doing this in targeted ways
- 5: Work in progress; we want to get better at doing this
- 4: Work planned for SY22-23
- 3: Desired, but not yet planned
- 2: We are not prioritizing this, and that's okay
- 1: Not in consideration at this point

Systems Conditions Metric	Possible actions and key considerations	Self-Assessment
School leaders have clarity over decision making roles	<p>Be deliberate about specifying which decisions related to your investment strategy will be made by schools versus central office. Consider factors like who has the information needed to make the best decisions and whether central decision-making might better capture economies of scale, leverage community resources, ensure equitable student experiences across schools, and pilot innovation.</p> <p>For instance, what decisions can (or should) be made by the school versus the central office? Where is it important to collaborate with the school board or local community? Try taking a strategy area (e.g. extended learning time) and outline the different decision-makers for (a) who covers the time, (b) when it is scheduled, and (c) what it is used for.</p>	
School leaders feel supported to make necessary changes	<p>Once you know which decisions will be made at the school level, organize the information and support that school leaders and their teams need to make those decisions well. Consider providing data to inform decision-making, examples of scheduling and staffing models, and suggested metrics and routines to aid continuous improvement.</p>	
Central teams have the right collaboration structures, norms and processes to be effective	<p>Ensuring district-level “enabling conditions”—the policies and context that make bold, positive change possible. Examine whether district-imposed limitations on the strategic and equitable use of resources exist, and take steps to remove such barriers if they do. Often, this involves providing school leaders with additional flexibility and autonomy around how they organize and adjust their talent, time, technology, and money.</p>	



Phase 3: Action Planning

Purpose: Use the data and reflection from Phases 1 and 2 to identify the strategic shifts in ESSER spending that need to happen, the key resources to enable them, and next steps to get the ball rolling.

Action Planning Priority Area #1: Key Resources for Consideration

Guiding Question for District Leaders

How much of our ESSER funds are not yet allocated? How does this compare to our expectations?

Why This Matters

In order to identify what investments to stop, start, or scale, leaders need to be clear on what dollars are available to be used. Creating a shared understanding of spend, encumbered dollars, and contingency allotments—as well as unplanned/unallocated dollars—allows for increased transparency and informed decision-making.

EXERCISE: Key Resources Summary

Using the [data gathered in Phase 1](#), identify the total amount of ESSER funds not yet allocated and available to be re-programmed. This information will inform the final step of this Health Check: action planning on strategic next steps to impact student outcomes.



Action Planning Priority Area #2: Strategic Next Steps

Guiding Question for District Leaders

What ESSER strategies should you stop, start, and scale in order drive the most impact for students?

Why This Matters

Using the data and reflection done through this Health Check process, district leaders are ready to identify adaptations to their ESSER strategy and maximize its impact moving forward. Take a look at these guiding principles that can help anchor the discussion on what to stop, start, and scale.

EXERCISE: Mapping Next Steps

Use the chart below to understand our [7 Principles for Investing ESSER Funds in Recovery & Redesign](#). Consider what each means in the context of your district’s current progress, and then prioritize your focus areas—including what areas to stop, start, and scale—accordingly.

Guiding Principle	What does this mean?	What is critical to focus on next?	Key resources
Understand and quantify students' needs.	Expand set of need indicators to include wellbeing measures and engage broader group of stakeholders to keep a pulse on new and ongoing student needs .	Analyze formative assessments, wellbeing and engagement data, with an eye towards prioritizing work across schools and student groups.	
Invest in proven, high-impact strategies.	Use ESSER dollars to support investments in strategies that address critical student needs now and lay foundation for lasting improvement	Scale investments that are successfully addressing student needs. Select additional high impact investments to start— there is still time .	Do Now Checklist
Design new staffing and schedule models.	Redesign staffing and scheduling to enable more customized support time for students and planning & collaboration time for teachers.	Develop and scale successful staffing and scheduling moves now for implementation in the fall.	ESSER Guidance for School Staffing, Spending, and Scheduling
Design for equity.	Direct resources to students who need them most and disrupt longstanding inequities that create barriers to success.	(Re-)make design decisions, with targeted community engagement, to ensure that additional staff and support are serving the highest need schools where staffing challenges are most intense.	Investing ESSER Funds Equitably
Plan spending for long-term sustainability.	Target both near-term COVID-recovery needs and lay the groundwork for long-term redesign .	Looking across all funds, invest in cost-reduction strategies and buy down future costs to extend available timeline to leverage this funding.	Building Towards Sustainable Change
Create system conditions.	Clarify decision making roles and create structures to enable strategic spending of ESSER.	Broaden the set of ESSER stewards with supporting collaboration structures. For instance, find third-party support and engage any remaining internal teams that can reasonably shift focus (i.e. innovation offices) to support implementation. Revisit principal agency over ESSER funds to improve efficiency and service delivery.	
Define success, measure, and adjust.	Identify metrics to track over time, engage community, continuously improve ESSER strategy with rapid cycles of inquiry .	(Re-)define metrics to track and share across all dimensions of strategy (including student wellbeing, equity, sustainability, implementation, and leading indicators of success).	Implementing a "Continuous Improvement ROI" model to maximize ESSER outcomes