



The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ARP ESSER)

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The Elementary & Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund of the American Rescue Plan (ARP) provides over \$122 billion in federal funding to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on K-12 educational systems in the U.S. This fund, commonly referred to as ARP ESSER, is part of a series of federal education funds that includes the CARES Act (ESSER I) and the CRRSA Act (ESSER II). As one of the largest federal investments in K-12 education in US history, this brief focuses on the details and implications of ARP ESSER.

The purpose of this brief is to inform readers about ARP ESSER and provide tools for analyzing the implications for policy, practice, and equity. We organize this brief in three sections: an informational section with key points about ARP ESSER, a list of resources about ARP ESSER and other relief funds, and teaching notes to help faculty and students of educational leadership preparation programs think about the many implications for school leadership.

Why did Congress create the ARP ESSER Fund?

According to the U.S. Department of Education (ED), the purpose of awarding states and districts ARP ESSER funds is “to help safely reopen and sustain the safe operation of schools and address the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the nation’s students” (American Rescue Plan of 2021). Guidance on the allocation and use of ARP ESSER funds prioritizes three points of interest to the federal government: *communities, causes, and commitments*.

- **Communities of interest** include underrepresented student subgroups disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, namely children with specific identities and positionalities (e.g. race/ethnicity, income, disability, language, gender, migrant status, homelessness, and foster care).

POLICY OVERVIEW: ESSER

ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL EMERGENCY RELIEF (ESSER) FUND

ESSER I

CARES ACT



Section 18003 of Division B of the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security Act set aside **\$13.2 billion** to create the ESSER Fund.

ESSER II

CRRSA ACT



Section 313 of the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act allocated **\$54.3 billion** to the ESSER Fund.

ESSER III

ARP ACT



Section 2001 of the American Rescue Plan Act added **\$122 billion** to the ESSER Fund. Referenced as "ARP ESSER" in federal policy.

Important Acronyms

ARP: American Rescue Plan

CARES: Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act

CRRSA: Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act

ESSER: Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund

LEA: Local educational agencies

SEA: State educational agencies

- **Causes of interest** involve safely reopening and sustaining school operations and attending to the pandemic's impact on students' holistic wellbeing, including their social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs.
- **Commitments of interest** identify evidence-based interventions to specifically address learning loss¹, support for evidence-based summer enrichment programs and comprehensive after-school programs, along with a small percentage of each state's total ARP ESSER allocation for covering administrative costs and emergency needs attributed to COVID-19.

Federal Resources

[Frequently Asked Questions About the ESSER Fund](#) (U.S. ED 2020). Issued after the initial creation of ESSER; a good first step to learning more about the ESSER Fund

[U.S. ED Fact Sheet, American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, ESSER](#) (U.S. ED, March 2021). Key facts and primary differences between the ESSER I Fund under the CARES Act, the ESSER II Fund under the CRRSA Act, and ARP ESSER Fund

[Directory of State Plans](#) (Office of Elementary & Secondary Education website). Links to submitted state plans and updates on state plan approval and review

[MOE Requirements and Waiver Requests Under ESSER and GEER](#) (U.S. ED, April 2021). Information about Maintenance of Effort requirements under the ARP ESSER and GEER (Governor's Emergency Education Relief) funds

Partner & Foundation Resources

[Addressing Unfinished Learning After COVID-19 School Closures](#) (Council of the Great City Schools [CGCS], June 2020). Instructional guides for districts supporting access to grade-specific learning goals; primary audiences are district curriculum leaders and staff

[State Plans for Accelerating Student Learning: A Preliminary Analysis](#) (Council of Chief State School Officers, April 2021). Analytic overview of state efforts to stimulate student learning; thematic analysis of state initiatives

[Investing ARP Funds Strategically and Effectively](#) (GCS, June 2021). Framework for effective use of funds; overarching goals for using funds, larger investment strategies; planning, implementation, and evaluation stages.

[How Can States and Districts Use Federal Recovery Funds Strategically?](#) (Learning Policy Institute, 2021). Factsheets on use of funds to address learning time, educator preparation, and early childhood

To meet ED standards for approval of plans, SEAs and LEAs have needed to take these points of interest into account when developing pandemic response plans and obligating funds for use.

Equity Goals

ARP ESSER funds are also explicitly designed to promote equity. This is evidenced by the legislation's maintenance of effort and maintenance of equity provisions. [Maintenance of effort](#) means that SEAs must continue allocating the same amount of money that they do in an average year and cannot use federal funding to lower their contribution to education funding. [Maintenance of equity](#) means that historically underserved student groups must receive an equitable share of state and local funds.

Who can apply for ARP ESSER funding?

SEAs within the 50 states, Puerto Rico, and Washington, DC are eligible to apply for ARP ESSER funding. In turn, LEAs apply to their respective states. Only LEAs that received [Title I funding](#) for the 2019-2020 school year are eligible, and charter schools that are classified as districts may apply. Nonpublic schools are eligible for a separate funding stream. Bureau of Indian Education and the Outlying Areas (Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa,

¹ We discuss policy terminology like learning loss in our section "Problematizing Policy Narratives" on page 5.

Northern Mariana Islands) are eligible for a separate funding stream through the Education Stabilization Fund.

What can SEAs/LEAs use ARP ESSER funding for?

The ARP set aside about \$122 billion for the ESSER fund, making it much larger than ESSER I (\$13.5 billion) and ESSER II (\$57.9 billion). In general, these funds are intended for LEAs to use for two main purposes:

Learning Recovery

- Summer and afterschool learning programs
- Learning interventions
- Educational technology
- Social-emotional learning

Pandemic Management

- Supplies and upgrades in schools for sanitation, social distancing, and air quality
- Professional development and training about pandemic management
- Pandemic preparedness and response efforts

What is the process for funds distribution?

SEAs submitted plans for funding to ED, then LEAs submitted their own plans to SEAs. ED then dispersed funds to SEAs, which were required to disperse at least 90% of that funding to LEAs.

In accordance with ARP legislation, ED used the Title I funding formula to calculate SEA and LEA funding allocations. However, there are important distinctions in discretionary spending between Title I and ARP ESSER. Title I funds are subject to relatively narrow categories for how funds may be spent. In contrast, ARP ESSER was designed to give LEAs broad discretion for spending funds.

Timeline for ARP ESSER Fund use

Spring 2020: ED made initial awards; SEAs made awards as soon as practicable

Spring 2021: States returned funds not awarded

Spring/Summer 2021: ED made reallocation awards

Sept. 30, 2021: Last date ED could make awards

Sept. 30, 2022: Last date SEA, LEA, or other subgrantee can obligate funds

TEACHING NOTES

Planning for equity

District- and building-level administrators in your partner districts (or those within whose schools your students may be working) are in the process of planning how to use funds to meet students' needs while remaining within the parameters of ARP ESSER's funding requirements. We identified three central considerations for school leaders:

1. **Keeping the equity focus of ARP ESSER.** The bulk of ARP ESSER funding is targeted to schools and districts that already receive Title I funds, and it is explicitly

intended to prioritize the needs of students from marginalized and minoritized groups. As such, these funds should address issues specific to these students' learning in and experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. **Balancing immediate and long-term goals.** Funding is intended to address (a) public health concerns that will mitigate the impact of future pandemics (e.g., ventilation, cleaning and sanitization, spacing), and (b) student learning. However, this funding must be used within specific time limits; it is not a permanent

increase in federal funding. Therefore, leaders need to deploy funds in ways that will have immediate effects for students (e.g., supplemental programs) *and* that will have lasting impact without relying on continual renewed funding (e.g., facilities upgrades).

3. **Centering school/district needs.** New funding opportunities can stimulate the creativity of school leaders, and there are think tanks and interest groups advocating for specific ways of spending ARP ESSER funds. There are also for-profit outfits pushing programs and products to take advantage of the federal largesse. Some leaders will need to be vigilant that proposals are not a distraction from their preexisting school/district goals. Other school leaders will need to take the equity focus of ARP ESSER as an opportunity to shift school/district efforts toward equity and away from old systems that were not working.

Tending to the equity focus of ARP ESSER is a great example of a leadership activity that requires knowledge of equity-driven planning within federal guidelines. We see two central tensions in ARP ESSER with equity implications for school leaders' decision making:

- Short-term interventions *versus* long-term investments and
- Whole-school initiatives *versus* programs for students from targeted groups.

Some of the immediate needs presented by the pandemic (e.g., addressing interrupted learning, improving sanitation and ventilation) were less foreseeable than other immediate needs (e.g., limited access to technology, disparate impacts of the move to virtual learning, varied levels of vulnerability to economic downturn). This latter group of needs is the outgrowth of larger underlying issues that

have been on researchers' and school leaders' radar for decades.

As such, addressing those needs, immediate though they are, will not happen with patchwork solutions and updates. There is no simple antiracist equivalent to such one-time expenditures as installing sanitizing stations and a new HVAC system. Instructional needs are a short-term concern, but the conditions that led to, for instance, racial disparities in the severity of those instructional needs are a long-term issue that warrants more system-level and structural change.

Diem and Welton's (2020) decision-making protocol for antiracist leadership and policy lays out a framework for addressing the tensions between short- and long-term initiatives and between whole-school and targeted interventions. We see their framework in light of three planning domains:

People. A critical review of who is involved and how decision-making authority is distributed is important at the outset. Think carefully about the following questions:

- Who is involved in planning?
- Whose needs are at the forefront?
- How do the goals of ARP ESSER align with the goals/needs of communities and groups in the school/district?

Process. The elements of a plan should be continually monitored for the degree to which they are addressing school/district needs, not just meeting the guidelines of an external funder. Staying in touch with those who will be impacted by the plan will help keep it aligned with their needs.

- How are decisions made *with* the school community?
- How is input sought and considered?
- How are decisions communicated?

Practice. From an antiracist perspective, if new plans are not undermining old hierarchies, they are probably propping them up. To do a critical policy analysis of your own plan, consider who its priorities, metrics, and outcomes are benefitting.

- What is the priority in your plan?
- What shifts (e.g., in mindsets, resource distribution, structures, cultural norms) does your plan initiate?
- Are you taking constructive risks?
- What are the accountability mechanisms?

See Diem and Welton's [Anti-Racist Educational Leadership and Policy: Addressing Racism in Public Education](#) for a more thorough outline of this protocol.

Problematizing policy narratives

Taken directly from ARP Act policy language, “learning loss” is targeted as a key issue for ARP ESSER funding to address student learning challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the “learning loss” narrative is not embraced by all educational stakeholders, with some critiquing this as a misnomer steeped in [deficit-based language](#) and [racialized assumptions](#). We suggest using alternative language to describe the impact of COVID-19 on student outcomes, such as [interrupted learning](#), [unfinished learning](#), [learning disruption](#), or asset-based framing like [thriving gaps](#) and [learning opportunities](#).

Policy students can trace the consequences of rhetorical framing of ARP ESSER by investigating and comparing the distribution of power and resources in state and district plans. Comparative studies between states and of districts within states are an excellent opportunity to critically describe policy implementation. Horsford et al. (2018) identify a key consideration as an epistemological one: “Whose knowledge informs this policy?”

Similar critiques may be made of the “guidance” offered by think tanks and advocacy organizations, especially for the ways they frame students’ experiences of the pandemic, and for the kinds of interventions and policies they promote. We encourage instructors to use the federal guidance (links on page 2 of this brief) and additional resources from the Council of the Great City Schools, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the Learning Policy Institute to make sense of ESSER and its mandates. In addition, using other independently produced ESSER resources (e.g., AEI, Fordham, NEA, Brookings) can illustrate the political nature of policy research, especially at the federal level, where vast resources are at stake. Below are some guiding questions for students in principal preparation and policy studies programs.

Student questions

1. What systems or structures in your school contributed most to the inequitable impacts of the pandemic?
2. What are some examples of (a) immediate interventions in and (b) long-term reorganization of the systems/structures you identified in Question 1?
3. What short-term, system-level projects can be initiated that will not require continued funding after the ARP ESSER funding period is closed?
4. Who benefits from deficit-based framing of pandemic-related learning issues? What could explain why these issues were framed as such from the outset?
5. How do deficit- and race-based assumptions determine the kinds of interventions that local policymakers prefer? How does the language of crisis contribute to the appeal of these policy narratives?

References

- Diem, S., & Welton, A. D. (2020). *Anti-racist educational leadership and policy. Addressing racism in public education*. Routledge.
- Guarino, H., Harley, G., & Porter, B. (2021, April). *Analysis of emerging state plans for accelerating student learning*. Council of Chief State School Officers and National Governors Association.
- Horsford, S. D., Scott, J. T., & Anderson, G. L. (2018). *The politics of education policy in an era of inequality. Possibilities for democratic schooling*. Routledge.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2021). *American Rescue Plan of 2021. Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ARP ESSER)* [Fact Sheet].

Resources URLs

- Frequently Asked Questions About the ESSER Fund
<https://oese.ed.gov/files/2020/05/ESSER-Fund-Frequently-Asked-Questions.pdf>
- U.S. ED Fact Sheet, American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, ESSER https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/03/FINAL_ARP-ESSER-FACT-SHEET.pdf
- Directory of State Plans
<https://oese.ed.gov/offices/american-rescue-plan/american-rescue-plan-elementary-and-secondary-school-emergency-relief/stateplans/>
- MOE Requirements and Waiver Requests Under ESSER and GEER https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/04/MOE-Chart_with-waiver-FAQs_FINAL_4.21.21Update.pdf
- Addressing Unfinished Learning After COVID-19 School Closures
https://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/313/CGCS_Unfinished%20Learning.pdf
- State Plans for Accelerating Student Learning
<https://www.nga.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Review-of-state-learning-acceleration-plans-April-21-2021.pdf>
- Investing ARP Funds Strategically and Effectively
https://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/360/CGCS_Funds%20Resource%20Guide_v10.pdf
- How Can States and Districts Use Federal Recovery Funds Strategically?
<https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/federal-funds-factsheets>

Suggested citation

Thelen-Creps, C., Clement, D., Nagbe, M., & Bainazarov, T. (2021, November). *UCEA policy brief. The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ARP ESSER)*. University Council for Educational Administration.

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