

ESSER FUNDS OPTIMIZATION GUIDANCE

Goals, Strategies, and Guiding Principles



Council of the Great City Schools
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ESSER Funds Optimization Guidance

I. Overarching Goals: High-level outcomes for ESSER investments

1. Safely reopen schools for all students.
2. Address pre- and post-pandemic unfinished learning.
3. Build lasting, equitable systems of teaching and learning.

*Emerging high-level **strategies** for achieving these goals:*

1. Attend to the immediate health and safety requirements as well as the social, emotional, and mental health needs of students and adults.
2. Ensure grade-level, standards-aligned instruction with just-in-time academic and social-emotional support.
3. Invest in staff capacity and lasting infrastructure that closes the opportunity, resource, and digital divides and ensures equitable outcomes for *all* current and future students.

Guiding Questions:

1. How does each ESSER investment address one of these three goals?
2. What is the logic model?
3. What is the evidence?

II. Spending Parameters

Department of Education's [Guidance](#) for the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER)

III. Lessons Learned

1. 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) Education Stimulus
 - i. School Improvement Grants (SIG)
 - ii. Race to the Top (RTTT)
2. Supplemental Education Services (SES from NCLB)
3. CGCS Strategic Support Teams

Based on lesson learned from these previous experiences,

we offer the following guidance.

Emerging Principles and Considerations

(A) Planning and stakeholder engagement.

1. **Go slow to go fast: *Resist the pressure to rush to create a plan.***
 - a. Take the time to build a coherent plan using a cross-functional team of stakeholders to address current needs and lay a foundation for long-term acceleration of student achievement.
2. **Plan engagement: *Think deeply about who is at the table.***
 - a. Engage a range of stakeholders: students, teachers, families, school leaders, board members, central office staff, research and evaluation teams, community leaders, and university, business, and civic partners.
 - a. Launch two-way collegial and community communication.
 - b. Consider listening sessions with students and families that include those who have had a variety of experiences, learning contexts, and outcomes over the past year.
 - c. Explore participatory budgeting processes.
 - d. Equity lens: Ensure that schools and students who need more targeted support are represented in the planning process and receive the resources they need to attain district goals.
 - e. Teaming: Carefully designate and define the purpose, membership, roles, responsibilities, and deliverables within and across various working groups.
 - f. Harness the heightened engagement of parents and families that resulted from the pandemic and transform it into an ongoing district practice and new opportunities for meaningful family engagement in service of increasing equitable access to academic opportunities.

(B) Understand your needs.

1. **Conduct an equity-focused, student-centered needs assessment: *Gather baseline data to capture current conditions and identify priority needs of students.***
 - a. Craft a disaggregated snapshot of the needs by demographics such as race, gender, grade-level, SES, EL status, and level of participation in instruction during the pandemic.
 - b. Possible data points include: attendance, grades, assessments, samples of student work, surveys, and focus group feedback.
2. **Leverage your research department and partners on the front end.**
 - a. Include the research department, local university and/or research partners during this initial planning and throughout the project.

(C) Define your goals.

1. **Plan with the end in mind.**
 - a. Define your goals; state your commitments.
 - b. Define outcomes, measures, metrics, and evidence on the front end. Tracking the use of funds and ROI will be critical to reporting and evaluation. Congress and the public will ask for evidence that these funds were used well and produced measurable student outcomes.
 - c. Determine how you will keep track of the use of funds now.

2. **Do not start from scratch: *Build from the best of your current vision, mission, goals, values, and strategic plan.***
 - a. Align investments to the district vision, mission, goals, and values. Craft a theory of action for each investment.
 - b. Consider your current strategic plan for existing promising initiatives that would benefit from additional resources (i.e., larger scope, additional depth and support, accelerated timeline, etc.).
 - c. Be critical of how well projects have worked to date, for what target groups, and why.
 - d. Examine current strategic plan with a critical eye. Be willing to change or revise based on new data or experience from this past year.
 - e. Ensure that there is coherence across strategic and tactical plans. Avoid bombarding schools with many disparate projects and initiatives.
 - f. In site-based districts, ensure that there is a process to ensure that expenditures are tied to the district's strategic plan, are properly vetted, and monitored for student progress.
 - g. Create structures to support cross-functional collaboration so that departments routinely communicate with one another.

(D) Define priority investments.

1. **Use an equity lens: *Target investments to match needs and disrupt systemic inequities.***
 - a. Use a framework, such as *Targeted Universalism*, to establish explicit, high universal expectations for all students, while implementing the systems of supports needed for all student groups to be successful.
 - b. Attend to your community's multifaceted and varied experience of loss and trauma. The context for this federal investment is different from past economic recovery investments.
 - c. Consider creating a school-level and/or student-level COVID-19 response *Equity Index* to drive equitable allocation of funds based on the pandemic's impacts.
 - d. Capitalize on the new forms of family engagement that brought families more into the educational space as they supported their children to access virtual education. Establish more formalized parental engagement structures or processes to aid in the work to disrupt systemic inequities, thereby empowering families and expanding opportunities for students.
2. **Build capacity: *Invest in building staff knowledge and skills to have both immediate and long-term impact on student outcomes. Invest in educational infrastructure. Retain high performers. Develop homegrown talent pipeline programs.***
 - a. Ensure that internally-developed professional learning for instructional staff is coherent, high quality, sustained, and supported to build knowledge of content, how to address unfinished learning and accelerate student learning; and fosters professional collaboration for continuous improvement.
 - b. Attend to these same principles if writing an RFP for externally-developed professional learning. Ensure that any external professional development adheres to the district's priorities and that district staff acquire the knowledge and skills to support future professional development in the areas addressed in the RFP.
 - c. Consider investments in systems and supports that might be necessary for successful school-based or student-based programming.

- d. Invest in talent management structures to recruit, select, train, retain, and grow high performers.
- 3. **Focus on core instruction: *Put more funds into improving Tier I instruction than remediation programs.***
 - a. Invest in core educational infrastructure, such as district curriculum guidance, instructional materials, assessment, and aligned and coherent professional learning.
 - b. Align all work to state learning standards that develop essential learning across grade levels, assessments, and district/school curriculum expectations for what quality teaching and learning look like. Quality curriculum guidance adheres to the CGCS seven key features.¹
- 4. **Be student-centered: *Ensure that grade-level learning ignites student engagement, motivation, and builds on students' assets.***
 - a. Use asset-based language and incorporate approaches that enable students to embrace a growth mindset. Ensure all students feel seen, known, and cared for.
 - b. Hold all district and school staff collectively responsible for the outcomes of each student, including students most impacted by the pandemic.
 - c. Be wary of vendors who claim to have the magic solution. All too often their materials are drill and practice on low-level skills that do not support access to grade-level content or state standards, which may lead to students falling even further behind their peers.
 - d. Build a system that ensures all students have access to advanced coursework and opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills to participate successfully in advanced courses.
- 5. **Strive for high-leverage, high-impact investments or promising practices with a track record of success.**
 - a. Anchor instructional investments in essential learning, keeping kids on grade level while addressing unfinished learning with just-in-time supports.
 - b. Assess where staff at all levels of the organization need to enhance their knowledge and skills.
 - c. Invest in research-based strategies and carefully tailor programming to the district context without losing fidelity to what works.
- 6. **Embrace systems thinking: *Watch for disjointed projects, initiatives, or products.***
 - a. Ensure that coherence exists across strategic and tactical plans. Avoid bombarding schools with too many disparate projects and initiatives.
 - b. Think whole and part, and then whole again. Consider how various initiatives fit together. Connect the pieces and communicate this coherence to stakeholders.
 - c. In site-based districts, be sure that there is a process to ensure that expenditures are tied to the strategic plan, are properly vetted, and monitored for contributions to student progress.
 - d. Create structures for departments to communicate with one another.

¹ Council of the Great City Schools. (2019, October). *Curriculum quality rubric: A self-assessment tool for districts*. <https://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/4/Curriculum%20Quality%20Rubric.pdf>

(E) Plan a three to five-year spending timeline that invests in longer-term ROI.

1. Focus, prioritize, and sequence.

- a. Focus on implementing a few high-leverage investments really well.
- b. Choose priorities wisely and go deep. Only then should the district move to the next initiative. Systems can only handle so much change; people can only learn and get really good at so many things at once.
- c. Be end-user-centered. Think about individuals (e.g., the third-grade teacher, the algebra student, the middle school principal, etc.). Map all initiatives by user to understand collective impact.

2. Manage change: *Guide stakeholders throughout the process.*

- a. Communicate the clear vision, goals, expectations, and outcomes. Build shared definitions and understanding of terms and vocabulary used to describe the work.
- b. Demonstrate how the initiatives are connected to the mission and vision, how they fit together to achieve end goals, and what success will look like.
- c. Be explicit, be transparent, engage frequently with internal and external stakeholders and build systems for feedback, all focused on well-defined goals.
- d. Develop clear roles and responsibilities, both internally and externally.

3. Ensure sustainability.

- a. Be methodical in spending so that there is no last-minute rush to expend funds. Consider planning “through the funding cliff” (i.e., a five-year funding plan of which three years are financed by ESSER).
- b. Beware of the funding cliff. These funds will end in September 2023 or September 2024 with a Tydings waiver. Salary increases or large-scale hiring may lead to significant budget shortfalls.
- c. Plan for turnover. Build your bench and groom successors for key roles. Plan for new staff to be successfully onboarded during and after these investments.
- d. Give priority to building internal instructional capacity rather than purchasing services that will no longer be available at the end of this federal funding period.
- e. If external organizations are to be used, plan how their services can be incorporated into the district work to transfer their expertise to district staff. Require all external personnel and materials be aligned to the district’s vision, mission, values, goals, frameworks, and standards.

Council of the Great City Schools
Federal Funds Optimization Task Force
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