



DRAFT

SETTING STRATEGIC SPENDING PRIORITIES

Six Questions for Identifying High-Priority, High-Leverage Investments



Council of the Great City Schools
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Purpose and Overview

Districts will soon be receiving an unprecedented amount of federal funding to address the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on student learning and to build their instructional capacity moving forward. As district and instructional leaders begin the process of **prioritizing** and planning for high-leverage investments that improve teaching and learning systemwide, they should **resist the urge to simply solicit funding wish lists from departments across the organization**. Instead, leaders should **take the time to engage in strategic investment planning**.

This process will require cross-functional teams of staff working together to determine how well current instructional systems and structures are functioning—and for which students, where the greatest instructional and social-emotional needs lie, how to systematically prioritize the needs of students disproportionately impacted by the COVID 19 crisis and school closures, and what investments are likely to have the greatest impact on student outcomes in the short and long term.

A set of overarching principles for optimizing relief funds are provided in the Council’s previous document, [ESSER Funds Optimization Guidance](#). To help districts apply these principles in their investment planning, the following brief provides a set of **six questions for identifying high-priority, high-leverage investments**. For each question, we provide guidance on how the inquiry process should drive district planning, as well as **common pitfalls that a district should avoid** to create a thoughtful, forward-looking investment strategy.

Six Questions for Identifying High-Priority, High-Leverage Expenditures to Improve Teaching and Learning

District leaders or teams charged with developing an instructional spending plan should ask the following six questions about any given expenditure:

1. How does this investment address current and long-term student needs?

- *Implicit in this question is the need to study what achievement patterns, indicators of social-emotional wellness, and quality of student work reveal about the current level of learning and support for students, and how this looks for different groups of students across schools. The process of setting investment priorities should therefore begin with a **comprehensive assessment of student academic and social-emotional needs** based on a clear vision of how the district defines student success, quantitative and qualitative data on the current strengths and weaknesses in instruction and mental health support systems, and how a potential investment will address these needs and build sustainable systemwide instructional capacity.*
- *District planning for investments should **employ best practices in strategic thinking and decision-making** (such as the “[5 Whys](#)” process of root cause analysis) and **connect proposed initiatives to expected outcomes** using logic models and the articulation of a clear [theory of action](#).*
- *In defining the student needs to be addressed with relief funding, districts should involve key stakeholders to ensure that **equity is emphasized** in their overall instructional investment strategy and that the plan **prioritizes the most vulnerable students and those who have been disproportionately impacted** by the COVID-19 crisis and school closures.*
- *To address current instructional needs, resources or programs should be **anchored in essential learning standards** and explicitly address [unfinished learning](#) within the context of grade-level content and rigor in Tier I instruction that reflects the district’s vision and beliefs about teaching and learning.*
- *Investments should build on what we have learned over the past year about the role of technology in supporting student learning inside and outside of the classroom. A district’s investment strategy should address the skills, resources, or infrastructure required to **advance the effective use of educational technology, expand access, and support the distance or blended learning models** that are likely to persist both in the immediate future and in years to come.*
- *Answering this question also requires districts to look at long term student needs that will only be met through investments that **build the quality of Tier 1 instruction and***

expand access to high-quality curriculum content and social emotional learning for all students as part of the district's multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS).

- *What to avoid:*
 - *Investments with no clear relevance to the academic, social/emotional, or mental health needs of students returning to school during or after the COVID-19 pandemic.*
 - *Investments unlikely to improve the quality of Tier 1 instruction and social-emotional learning moving forward.*
 - *An investment strategy that relies on remedial instruction and interventions.*
 - *Investments that do not meet the needs of students disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.*
 - *Investments that do not provide the supports necessary to guarantee access to grade-level standards and instruction for students with diverse learning needs, such as English learners and students with disabilities.*

2. How does this investment advance the strategic plan and instructional priorities, vision, and goals of the district?

- *This question should prompt district teams to adopt the kind of systems thinking discussed in the [Funds Optimization Guidance](#) document. While there will be a temptation to consult department wish lists of investments or tackle backlogs of delayed expenses, each expenditure should **explicitly reflect the district's overall strategic plan and priorities and connect with/reinforce other investments**. Programs, materials, or strategies that are funded with relief aid should ideally fit together into a coherent campaign of improvement that **builds the capacity of school leaders, teachers, and support staff rather than bombarding them with disjointed initiatives or resources**.*
- *This question should lead to a discussion of whether instructional investments reflect the mission and values of the district, including a commitment and **explicit focus on equity, access, and supports for diverse learners and those students most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic***. Investments should therefore enhance or create academic and social-emotional learning experiences that translate the district's mission and values into classroom practice.
- *District investment strategies should continue to build on the **outreach and involvement of parents and families**, which was a critical component in supporting student learning during the pandemic and will continue to drive the success of the district's instructional vision and goals.*

- *What to avoid:*
 - *Investments in programs, materials, or strategies that are not aligned to the district's strategic plan and send mixed signals to schools regarding the district's overall instructional vision.*
 - *Investments that don't reflect the district's commitment to equity, access, support for diverse learners, and the engagement of parents and families.*
 - *Investments in disconnected, contradictory, or redundant programs that place an undue burden on staff time, attention, and resources.*

3. What do we know already about the efficacy of this investment or the likelihood that a new, innovative initiative will be successful?

- *In weighing investment decisions, districts should consider resources, projects, or programs that are **backed by educational research or are considered best practices** in the field.*
- *Any proposed investment should be accompanied by **evidence that supports the efficacy of the product, program, or approach in improving desired outcomes.***
- *Public scrutiny over the way districts use these new funds will be greater than ever, so districts should **take the lessons of the past into account** and ensure that they **invest in approaches or resources with the best possible chance of success in improving student outcomes.** For example, our experience as big city school districts with outsourcing tutoring on a large scale without district guidance and monitoring under the Supplemental Educational Services (SES) program of NCLB revealed that such investments were ripe for mismanagement and exploitation, and ultimately produced little in the way of student gains.*
- *Having a **communication plan that clearly articulates the rationale, evidence-base, and ultimate decision for purchases** will help establish transparency with the public and get in front of presumptions of distrust and mismanagement.*

- *What to avoid:*
 - *Investments in programs, materials, or strategies without any clear evidence of efficacy or track record of success in improving student outcomes in urban schools.*
 - *Making investment decisions based solely on evidence from organizations or companies that have a stake in selling the district a product or service.*
 - *Investments in programs, materials, or strategies that are not possible to effectively support and monitor when implemented at scale across a large school system.*
 - *Making investment decisions without full transparency and open communication with stakeholders about the rationale and purpose of expenditures.*

4. What will it take to effectively and equitably implement this program or strategy?

- *Answering this question will require districts to not only investigate the logistical, procurement, and planning considerations for a given investment, but to ensure that they **have the “right people at the table” for planning and implementation.** This question should therefore prompt a discussion that includes staff and leaders from departments across the organization and school representatives.*
 - *For example, if a coaching program requires new school-based staff to be hired, or the redeployment or retraining of current staff, this conversation would benefit from the input of the human resources department, as well as a cross-section of district and school staff and leaders to help think through staffing and other practical implementation needs and concerns, as well as plans for when funding ceases in three years.*
 - *Likewise, for digital materials and instructional technology, the IT department will be a critical partner, ensuring that everyone has a shared understanding of what resources are supported by the technology infrastructure the district has in place, or what will need to be updated or enhanced to support a particular device or resource.*
 - *Staff from the ELL department, Special/Exceptional Education, and Equity department should also be involved in any decision-making, planning, or materials selection process to ensure that materials or programs meet the needs of ALL students, and to help the district think through any work that needs to be done to ensure equitable access for diverse learners.*

- *What to avoid:*
 - *Investments in programs, materials, or strategies that the district lacks the capacity to implement or will struggle to support effectively.*
 - *Making investment decisions without involving a broad cross-section of district staff to provide insight on what is needed for planning and implementation.*
 - *Investing in and attempting to implement an initiative or program without adequate professional development and thoughtful rollout.*
 - *Making narrow investment decisions that fail to optimize economies of scale or miss opportunities to enhance supports for various student groups or to improve instruction across content areas.*

5. How will this investment be sustained or continue to build district capacity after the three years of relief funding ends?

- *This question should prompt district teams to think deeply about how they plan to **sustain the benefit of a given investment after the funding runs out.** If a given resource or service will no longer be available or affordable at the end of this federal funding*

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period, or if a district will no longer be able to pay for staff positions that were created using these funds, that might indicate that an alternative investment will have greater long-term value.

- *Districts should **prioritize investments that build internal instructional capacity** and are thus likely to continue adding value the in the years to come.*
- *The need for sustainability doesn't preclude working with external vendors and partners, but it should encourage districts to be clear about how their services **advance the long-term instructional vision** and transfer the expertise to district staff by the end of the project.*

- *What to avoid:*
 - *Investments that the district will not be able to sustain or afford after relief funds expire.*
 - *A lack of transparency with staff and stakeholders concerning the sustainability of investments in staffing, materials, or programs.*
 - *Investments in materials or services that do not improve programming in the long run or build the instructional capacity of district staff.*

6. How will success be measured? What are the metrics that will be employed?

- *Considering evaluation from the outset and **being transparent about what success will look like and how progress will be measured during implementation, at the end of funding, and beyond** will help districts “plan with the end in mind.” Moreover, identifying what intermediate progress and ultimate success will look like in the long term will help districts think about whether they are aiming for the right goal, and how a given investment is likely to get them there.*
- *Districts also need to be realistic about their expectations for the return on investment in the short term. Change does not happen overnight, and districts need to develop an evaluation plan that takes into consideration **the time needed for new programs, approaches, or strategies to take root.***
- *The process of identifying indicators of success will also require districts to **monitor the quality of implementation** and build structures to ensure that projects and programs are implemented with fidelity or as the program was envisioned.*
- *Developing a plan for evaluation and progress monitoring should also prompt a larger discussion about accountability, how the district will **hold leaders, staff, and external partners responsible for meeting the short- and long-term objectives of any given investment**, which should ultimately be tied to the achievement and progress of all students.*

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- *What to avoid:*
 - *Investments without clear objectives and meaningful and measurable outcomes.*
 - *Metrics that are not reliable and valid for assessing the extent to which specific intended outcomes are achieved (e.g., using a single measure, relying on standardized test scores, etc.) or that cannot be collected consistently throughout and after the funding period.*
 - *Setting unrealistic expectations for short-term evidence of success and abandoning investments in new programs or strategies because they do not yield immediate and dramatic gains.*
 - *Making investment decisions without involving the research department from the beginning to monitor the quality of implementation and assess both short-term progress toward stated goals and long-term success in improving student outcomes.*

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Council of the Great City Schools
Federal Funds Optimization Task Force
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