**ESSER Funding & Sustainability: Key Takeaways**

**Every child deserves a quality education — one that recognizes their unique needs and provides them the resources they need to reach their full potential. At the same time, we can’t forget the impact of school closures and disruptions on students’ learning and mental health during the pandemic. Here are some key takeaways:**

* The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated already existing inequities, [disproportionately](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/28/us/covid-schools-at-home-learning-study.html) affecting students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, students experiencing homelessness, and English learners.
* Students in high-poverty schools operating fully remotely in 2020-2021 lost more than 22 weeks of academic instruction.
* According to the most recent [NAEP](https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile?chort=1&sub=MAT&sj=&sfj=NP&st=MN&year=2022R3) (National Assessment of Educational Progress) report, math performance fell for the first time in history and reading scores saw the biggest drop in 30 years.
* There are strong indications from both testing and non-testing data that the nation’s 5 million English learners have been among the most disproportionately affected groups of students.
* There was a [14% decrease i](https://schoolhouseconnection.org/fy24-ehcy-fact-sheet/)n the enrollment of students experiencing homelessness during the 2020-2021 school year, a rate four times higher than the 3% decrease in enrollment seen among all students.
* While students from all backgrounds experienced [chronic absenteeism](https://urldefense.com/v3/__https%3A/www.attendanceworks.org/todays-chronic-absenteeism-requires-a-comprehensive-district-response-and-strategy/__;!!LBFcHN3WCgnqDQ!ij7JvZliqbjq7R7t97lXVGb2-6Xse5E7siuGA0VX9PS_u5aBC204UUvgou7IGovC1Jbl4mh5i2RW8W7w5rsKGhmWk8gFSOrPSb_n$) during the pandemic years, the greatest impact has been at schools serving more students from low-income backgrounds. In schools where 3 out of 4 of students qualify for free or reduced-priced meals, [chronic absenteeism almost tripled](https://www.attendanceworks.org/todays-chronic-absenteeism-requires-a-comprehensive-district-response-and-strategy/), from 25% to 69%, between the 2017-18 and 2021-22 school years.
* There was a 51% increase over one year in suspected suicide attempts among girls 12-17 years old.

**The federal government invested nearly** [**$190 billion**](https://covid-relief-data.ed.gov/?utm_content=&utm_medium=email&utm_name=&utm_source=govdelivery&utm_term=) **through ESSER (Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief) funding in K-12 education to meet students’ academic needs and provide social-emotional support during the pandemic, with a specific focus on the resulting learning loss — as well as to help address systemic inequities exacerbated by the pandemic.**

In March 2020, school districts received [a bulk of the ESSER funding](https://edunomicslab.org/esser-spending/), and district leaders had the authority to prioritize how these pandemic relief funds were spent. While this emergency, one-time funding was intended to primarily address the impact of the pandemic on student learning during this unprecedented time, districts used ESSER funds to help address a wide range of student needs. This included tutoring and summer learning programs, mental health supports, upgrading facilities, technology, and activities to re-engage students and their families.

**ESSER funding will end in September 2024.**

While these funds were always intended to be a one-time investment to address urgent pandemic-related needs, most states and districts have not analyzed which of these investments they may need to continue to avoid an even [greater backsliding](https://edtrust.org/resource/watch-out-for-the-fiscal-cliff-advocating-for-education-equity-as-esser-spending-winds-down/) in student performance. So, as these federal funds come to their expected end, districts across the country — in urban, rural, and suburban and communities of color — will face a steep “[fiscal cliff](https://www.erstrategies.org/tap/analysis_esser_funds_fiscal_cliff_by_state).” The average district has relied on ESSER funding to support roughly [8% of its budget](https://coloradosun.com/2023/09/26/colorado-schools-fiscal-cliff-esser-funding/#:~:text=The%20average%20district%20has%20relied,for%20labor%20expenses%2C%20Roza%20said.) in recent years, but for some low-income districts, these funds supported between [16-18% of their pre-pandemic budget](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-esser-fiscal-cliff-will-have-serious-implications-for-student-equity/?utm_campaign=Brown%20Center%20Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=273973450&utm_source=hs_email). So, the loss of these funds will hit low-income school districts the hardest:

Districts in more affluent areas received just over $1,000 per student, while urban, rural, and suburban high-poverty districts received more than $6,000 per student. District leaders could be forced to close schools, lay off teachers and staff, end student support services, including transportation, or stop providing academic recovery strategies that are producing promising results. Such cuts could be especially devastating for students attending schools in high-poverty districts and districts with the largest percentage of students of color.

**State leaders need to support recovery efforts, particularly in urban, rural, and suburban high-need districts, by addressing funding inequities within their states and for specific student groups.**

Before the pandemic, across the country, districts with the highest proportion of students of color on average received [substantially less](https://edtrust.org/resource/equal-is-not-good-enough/) state and local revenue than districts with the fewest students of color, and high-poverty districts received less state and local revenue than low-poverty districts. The districts with the most English learners receive 14% less state and local revenue, compared with districts with the fewest English learners. Less than 1 in 5 school districts received dedicated federal funding to identify and support students experiencing homelessness, compared to over 50% of school districts under pandemic-related [ARP-HCY](https://oese.ed.gov/offices/american-rescue-plan/american-rescue-plan-elementary-secondary-school-emergency-relief-homeless-children-youth-arp-hcy/) homeless funding. Districts that predominantly serve students of color and high-poverty districts will face steep fiscal cliffs when ESSER funding ends. State leaders can proactively support such urban, rural, and suburban high-need districts by addressing [state education funding inequities](https://stateofeducationfunding.org) in their state. ESSER funding may have temporarily reduced the funding gaps that existed between high-need and low-need districts within states during the pandemic, but that is ending and no students should have to suffer when that happens.

**If state leaders work to address funding inequities in education, they can help sustain COVID-19 recovery efforts in rural, urban, and suburban high-need districts, beyond ESSER funding.**

State funding could be allocated equitably if state leaders ensured that the state education funding system had three key features:

1. School districts serving students of color, more students from low-income backgrounds, English learners, and students experiencing homelessness should not lose funding.

1. Low-wealth districts should be provided more — not equal — funding.
2. Students most affected by school closures and the pandemic continue to receive the academic and mental health supports they need for accelerated learning, healing, and improved student outcomes.

**NOTE:** *The U.S. Department of Education data on total ESSER funding received by each state and district, how those funds were spent, and how much funding remains can be found* [*here*](https://covid-relief-data.ed.gov/)*. Data on state allocations of ESSER funding allocated to students experiencing homelessness may be found* [*here*](https://oese.ed.gov/offices/american-rescue-plan/american-rescue-plan-elementary-secondary-school-emergency-relief-homeless-children-youth-arp-hcy/)*. State plans for the funding can be found* [*here*](https://oese.ed.gov/offices/education-stabilization-fund/elementary-secondary-school-emergency-relief-fund/stateplans/)*.*