

COVID-19 Impact Memo

Promising Practices In Education

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruption to all levels of education that could impact student outcomes for months and possibly years ahead. The SCORE series of COVID-19 Impact Memos analyzes challenges, examines emerging innovations and research-supported practices, and highlights student-centered approaches for educators to consider.

ESSER 3.0: From Emergency Response To Reinvention

Spring 2021

COVID-19 And The Tennessee Context

Through the American Rescue Plan passed in March 2021, Tennessee is expected to receive the largest single federal investment in K-12 education in history. This investment from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund can help address significant student learning needs caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This support is especially needed for students from [economically disadvantaged backgrounds](#), students facing [digital divide challenges](#), and Black and Hispanic students who disproportionately [lacked access to in-person learning options](#) during the pandemic or did not choose them out of safety concerns.

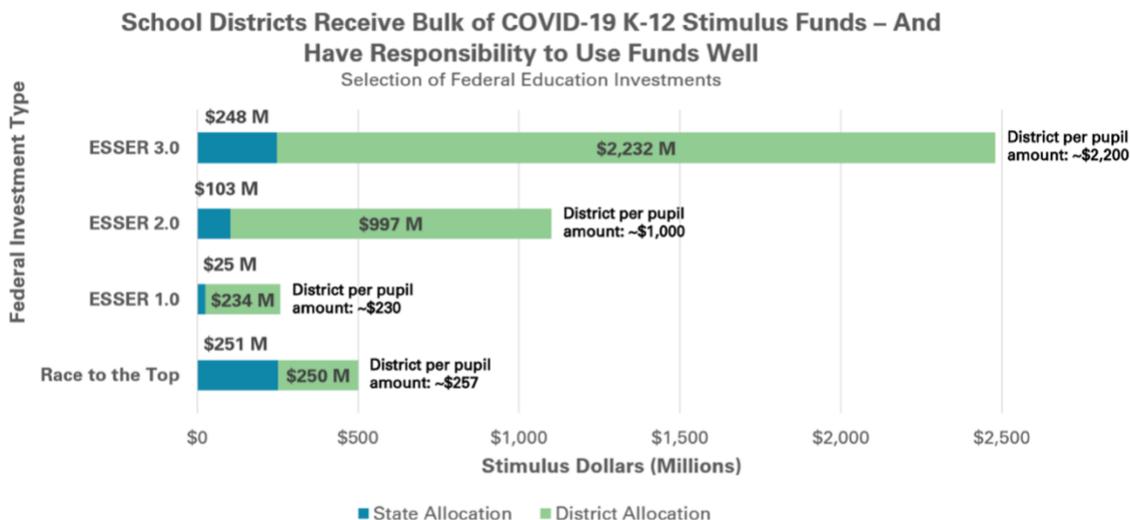
ESSER 3.0 represents a rare opportunity for school districts to demonstrate what is already well documented in a [significant and growing](#) body of research: additional education resources can make a difference for student learning, [even more so for economically disadvantaged students](#). By aligning investments to address long-term challenges while responding to short-term recovery needs, districts will invest wisely and concretely articulate what more they can do to improve student learning in the long run.

ESSER Dollars Explained

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government has contributed an unprecedented amount of aid to combat the pandemic's impacts, including [three rounds](#) of K-12 education stimulus funding through the ESSER Fund.

- **Responding To A Crisis, March 27, 2020:** The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, ESSER 1.0, contributed \$13.2 billion at the start of the pandemic to help schools with emergency **response**.
- **Recovering From Losses, December 27, 2020:** The Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, ESSER 2.0 contributed \$54.3 billion to help schools navigate reopening for in-person learning and **recover** from learning losses.
- **Reinventing Toward A Better System, March 11, 2021:** The American Rescue Plan Act, ESSER 3.0 contributed \$122.8 billion — the largest single federal investment in K-12 education. These funds are an opportunity to work toward long-term **reinvention**.

Tennessee will receive around \$3.8 billion across all three ESSER distributions. District allocations can be found [here](#). On average, Tennessee districts will receive \$3,894 per student and — after accounting for the state’s special schools — ranges from \$200 to \$11,498 per student.



Source: US Department of Education

ESSER 3.0 Outlines Uses Of Funds And Reporting Requirements For LEAs

States and districts have received revised [guidance](#) on allowable uses of ESSER funds in light of the recent American Rescue Plan Act. Districts are required to commit at least 20 percent of funds to address learning loss in an evidence-based way, consult with community stakeholders when developing their plans, and share how investments address the needs of students most impacted by the pandemic.

Guiding Principles For Student-Focused Investment Of ESSER Dollars

District plans should operate with a few key principles in mind:

Principle 1: Cast a vision, set public goals

Multiyear goals aligned to a student-focused vision empower educators, leaders, and communities to have productive conversations about priorities, aligned investments, and sustained action. Rather than just address immediate recovery needs, districts can also revise and reimagine practices and policies to be more equitable for students with sustained, multiyear, and publicly transparent approaches. Leaders who go beyond basic compliance on federal guidance for stakeholder engagement and reporting on investment impacts may find stronger support to make systemic, longer-term changes. The [Illinois Learning Renewal plan](#) is one example. School districts can develop [strategic priorities linked to specific costs](#) that help the public understand how investments align with the district’s goals.

Principle 2: Build upon and learn from change

Districts and educators have been in the driver’s seat for pandemic response since the beginning of the crisis. The pandemic forced changes to practice and required schools and districts to rethink



instructional delivery and student support. Some of those changes must become fixtures of a more equitable education system in the future, while other changes were long overdue. District leaders should consult with educators on practices that worked and should be kept as well as those that did not and should be ended. This will also be important as one-time ESSER dollars jumpstart learning acceleration strategies that may need to be funded by regular operational dollars in future years. Using this opportunity to try new things, study them, and smooth over trade-offs will enable sustainability in the future. For example, [districts across Tennessee](#) started tutoring pilots during the pandemic based on research while addressing key implementation challenges that will influence their ability to serve more students in future years.

Principle 3: Center on equity

Even before the pandemic, gaps in student outcomes for historically underserved students were wide and troubling trends persisted. For example, Tennessee’s chronic absenteeism rate was 11 percent — more than 100,000 students each year missed more than 10 percent of the school year. Despite Tennessee’s rankings on the Nation’s Report Card rising from the 40s to a solid middle of the pack showing, wide gaps remain for students who are Black and Hispanic, from high-poverty families, who are English Learners, or have disabilities. Supports for student learning that may have been too costly in the past are now within reach — but only if students facing the largest opportunity gaps are the focus of our investments.

Leveraging ESSER To Pivot Toward Enduring Student-Focused Strategies

While each school district is unique, research and evidence can help districts prioritize investments and focus on key practices that are applicable in almost all school settings. Regardless of context, students will need to:

- Have an academic experience that maintains **high expectations**
- Graduate from high school with a **secure on-ramp to college and career**
- Receive **concentrated and equitable supports** based on evidence and demonstrated need

Whether at the beginning of pandemic recovery or far along in reinvention in a few years, district leaders should prioritize the following strategies that are based on a forward-looking vision, include immediate action steps, and align to long-term change.

MAINTAIN RIGOROUS ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS WITH TUTORS AND MORE HIGH-QUALITY TIME

Design Toward Disrupting These Long-Term Trends

- **Learning gaps remain wide.** Achievement gaps for historically underserved students remain large despite Tennessee’s improvements in the last decade. On the 2019 NAEP results for [eighth-grade mathematics](#), for example, White students were twice as likely to be proficient compared to Hispanic students — three times compared to Black students.
- **Higher-cost interventions can help.** Despite additional state investments for intervention in recent years, districts across Tennessee [hired nearly twice the number of interventionists](#) than the state’s funding formula outlines. Interventions such as high-dosage tutoring are resource-intensive — costing per student from \$2,500 to \$4,000 — and may not have been realistic without ESSER resources.



Concrete Approaches To Take Now

1. **High-dosage tutoring.** There is a [research consensus](#) that high-dosage tutoring can address learning loss and accelerate learning. Districts across Tennessee are piloting high-dosage tutoring and working through [key implementation issues](#) such as tutor training and curriculum. In addition to state policymakers making the practice a pandemic recovery priority with state funding, [outside-of-school efforts](#) aligned to the research are also underway in Tennessee. Done well, high-dosage tutoring with a consistent adult or mentor can also support stronger student engagement in school.
2. **Weeklong “vacation” academies.** First documented in successful school turnaround efforts in Massachusetts, [vacation academies](#) are intensive, small-group programs taught over vacation breaks by carefully selected teachers and often with a targeted group of students. Leveraging effective teachers with up to 12 students at a time, these academies were shown to accelerate student learning and improve student attendance.
3. **High-quality summer school.** Summer learning can be an [important opportunity to extend learning time](#) — if done well. State resources providing for [summer school](#) for 2021 and in future years gives districts a chance to scale up this practice with a focus on quality over time. Key elements include the use of high-quality instructional materials, flexibly leveraging the most effective educators to lead instruction, and sufficient educator professional learning.
4. **Effective implementation of high-quality instructional materials.** [High-quality instructional materials](#) (HQIM) are a [foundation for deep instructional improvement](#) and a key way to support students toward high learning expectations. However, even before the pandemic, not all students had access to engaging and rigorous instruction supported by HQIM. In addition to leveraging federal resources to build educator capacity for strong HQIM implementation, districts can lean on their HQIM to better connect other recovery strategies — like tutoring and summer school — to create a coherent academic strategy.

SECURE THE ON-RAMP TO HIGH-QUALITY COLLEGE AND CAREER PATHWAYS

Design Toward Disrupting These Long-Term Trends

- **No degree or credential:** Nearly nine out of ten economically disadvantaged students in Tennessee are [at risk of ending their education without a degree or credential](#). Data show that students who graduated high school in 2017 and entered the workforce directly earned \$13,000 a year — an income level that qualifies for government assistance.
- **Unfulfilled postsecondary intentions:** Despite a steady increase in the number of Tennessee Promise applications — suggesting an increase in student intent to obtain a postsecondary credential or degree — [less than one-third of Promise applicants](#) actually enrolled at an eligible institution for Fall 2019.

Concrete Approaches To Take Now

- **Deeper collaborative partnerships between K-12 and local postsecondary institutions.** While Tennessee has adopted important college-access policies — like Tennessee Promise and the expansion of early postsecondary opportunities — the next frontier of that work is in cross-sector collaborative partnerships that better align the student experience. Models



like [Better Together](#), a joint partnership between Metro Nashville Public Schools and Nashville State Community College, provide key supports like dual enrollment, one-to-one tutoring, and student success courses that smooth the pathway to college.

- **Upgrade college and career advising, supports.** The pandemic likely disrupted student momentum toward postsecondary and career choices, creating a need for [additional support](#) for current students. Students need [strong advising supports](#) both before and during the postsecondary experience to succeed. While the pandemic forced a “back to the basics” approach to college access (such as FAFSA completion and taking the ACT) districts could develop more robust college and career advising supports with the support of ESSER money to reevaluate their current approaches.

CONCENTRATE SUPPORT TO STUDENTS WHO NEED IT MORE, MOST

Design Toward Disrupting These Long-Term Trends

- **School-level spending is opaque.** In 2020, for the first time Tennessee [publicly reported school-level per-pupil expenditure data](#) that provided greater transparency on resource allocations. On average, Tennessee schools spent nearly \$9,600 per student. While this data is still new, the public will now have greater transparency on school finances — an expectation further articulated in federal guidance for school districts to post public plans on ESSER 3.0 spending.
- **Insufficient resources for students.** Education Week’s [2020 Quality Counts Report](#), an evaluation of individual states’ educational performance relative to national averages, gave Tennessee a D+ on school finance, ranking 42nd in the nation. While Tennessee received an A- in equity — which measures differences in both funding and spending levels between high- and low-poverty districts — it received an F in overall spending. In the same report, Tennessee scored a C and ranked 12th for K-12 achievement — surpassing the national average — while scoring just below the national average in “chance for success” and overall categories. School districts have the opportunity to bring Tennessee to nationally leading status through a focus on increased, targeted spending and investment in strategies that effectively improve student learning.

Concrete Approaches To Take Now

- **Student-based budgeting.** While the federal government’s Title I formula determined how much school districts received, districts should consider more equitable ways to allocate their ESSER dollars within the district so that schools serving higher needs populations receive more resources. One such strategy is [student-based budgeting](#) — a practice in use in [Nashville](#) and [Memphis](#). In addition to using student enrollment data, the district assigns weights based on student characteristics that historically have higher needs, such as those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds or English learners. This process empowers school leaders to be responsive to their school context while giving district leaders the opportunity to equitably allocate resources. Districts new to this approach can consider a student-based budgeting approach with federal dollars to build leader capacity over the long-term.
- **Embracing evidence-based resource-intensive solutions for students most in need.** The pandemic forced educators to change practices to better serve students, with federal



stimulus funds making higher-cost interventions possible that were too expensive to consider before — particularly in the short term to get students back on track with time-limited resources. One example of this is Hamilton County Schools’ Flex Academy. After noticing that a significant number of high school seniors were chronically absent during the 2020-21 school year, staff at one high school organized a blended-learning flexible-hours model to ensure that seniors had individualized plans to stay on the path to graduation. The district leveraged additional federal funding to provide this opportunity to students.

Conclusion

As district leaders and educators reflect on this historic moment of challenge and resilience in public education, they are also in a position to set the terms of the recovery and reinvention of the education system going forward. ESSER 3.0 provides much needed resources — at an unprecedented level — that can accelerate student learning and comes with significant flexibility. The best strategies will prioritize long-term gains for students in the form of programs to reduce learning loss — especially for underserved students — and to increase equity and opportunities for students who need more support. Invested wisely, these resources can change the course of Tennessee’s education outcomes and the lives of our state’s 1 million-plus students.

