

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.

Using ESSER II Funds To Accelerate Student Learning

Winter 2020

The pandemic continues to bring operational and instructional challenges for school districts as educators and leaders work to provide a high-quality education for all students. Economic disruptions may limit the ability some states, counties, and cities to support K-12 education for the next several years — even as federal spending provides some stability for the immediate moment. **These challenges bring urgency to how schools and districts can best leverage education dollars to advance equitable student opportunity and learning.** How to spend this money is a key consideration as Tennessee charts a path toward long-term recovery from COVID-19.

What are ESSER II Funds?

On December 27, 2020, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA) was signed into law. CRRSA provides around \$54 billion for the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER II), with Tennessee receiving \$1.1 billion. This represents a little over \$1,000 per public school student, or about 10 percent of the total annual spending of all of Tennessee’s public schools. These new federal stimulus dollars provide districts in Tennessee the first of several opportunities to align resources with immediate needs as well as plan for long-term education recovery. To put the ESSER II funds in context:

Funding Source	Total Funding Amount To Tennessee (and as a percentage of ESSER II)	Amount Of Total Funds To Districts	Percent Of Total Funding Passed Through To Districts	Approximate Per Pupil Amount Of District Funds*
<i>ESSER II</i> December 2020, funds available until September 2023	\$1.1 billion	\$997 million	90%	~\$1000
<i>ESSER I</i> March 2020, funds available until September 2022	\$259 million, or about one quarter (23%)	\$234 million	90%	~\$230
<i>Race to the Top</i> March 2010	\$501 million, or about half (46%)	\$250 million	50%	~\$257

*Because ESSER funds are distributed using the Title I formula that prioritizes students for low-income backgrounds, the per pupil amount will vary between districts. For Race to the Top, the dollar amounts were not adjusted for inflation.

[Here’s a look at how ESSER I and ESSER II compare at the district level.](#)



ESSER II builds on the flexibility provided in ESSER I by adding two key spending priorities around **addressing learning loss** and **school facility repairs and maintenance**. These funding flexibilities build on the following allowable uses from ESSER I:

- ◆ Providing summer learning and supplemental after-school programs
- ◆ Addressing the unique needs of special populations (students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, English Learners, students with disabilities, students experiencing homelessness)
- ◆ Providing mental health services
- ◆ Purchasing education technology
- ◆ Planning for long-term closures
- ◆ Conducting other activities necessary to maintain operation of services, employ existing staff, and coordinate activities

The Tennessee Department of Education has given school districts a tentative March 1 deadline to submit funding applications.

Addressing Learning Loss With ESSER II Funds

ESSER II's significant flexibility in allowable uses provides district leaders with broad discretion on how best to respond to student needs. Addressing school facility improvements, for example, may make sense in cases of deferred maintenance or where adding more physical space to promote social distancing is important. To focus their ESSER II funds on research-based approaches to address learning loss, district leaders will want to focus on the following strategies:

High-Dosage Tutoring: [Research](#) overwhelmingly finds that high-dosage tutoring tied to classroom content can be very effective at addressing learning loss — up to two years of mathematics learning in one year's time, according to some studies. The most effective models, like the [Match Corps](#), cost approximately \$2,500 per student with a two-student-per-tutor ratio. Based on research, some of the key considerations in this design include:

- ◆ **Time:** Three or more sessions per week of 30-60 minutes each. Once-a-week tutoring is generally **not effective**. Sessions embedded into a school day are more effective.
- ◆ **Group Size:** Ideally two students per tutor, but up to three or four students can still be effective. The more students per tutor, the higher degree of skill and training required of the tutor.
- ◆ **Tutors:** If using nonteacher tutors, such as college students or volunteers, ensure that they are intensively trained and supported throughout their program. Students should have consistent tutors that facilitate positive tutor-student relationships.
- ◆ **Student Targeting:** Avoid negative stigma where tutoring is seen as a punishment for students by striving for a program that targets all students in a lower-performing grade level or school.
- ◆ **Student Learning:** Use high-quality instructional materials and collect information on student learning throughout the experience.

"Vacation" Acceleration Academies: As part of their school turnaround strategy, Massachusetts' Lawrence Public School district offered ["Vacation Academies,"](#) which were intensive instructional programs for struggling students taught over weeklong vacation breaks and drove improvements in both mathematics and English language arts. Some key design considerations include:

- ◆ **Time:** Weeklong, full-day experiences over vacation breaks.
- ◆ **Group Size:** Approximately ten students to one teacher.



- ◆ **Personnel:** Leveraged effective teachers who were paid stipends and given an opportunity to participate in the program with additional training.
- ◆ **Student Learning:** Focused on one subject for the entirety of the weeklong experience.
- ◆ **Student Targeting:** The example in Lawrence, Massachusetts, elevated acceleration academies as a special opportunity for students and leveraged student prizes and recreational opportunities to sustain high engagement.

Addressing Specific Student Need: Ongoing research and examples from across the country demonstrate that certain students are likely more impacted by learning loss than others. District leaders should examine whether their data reflect the national trends identified below and ensure specific student needs — digital access, learning gaps in early grades or for particular student groups, and others — are addressed in any intervention:

- ◆ **Be Subject-Specific:** Using assessment data from fall 2020, researchers found that students [lost more ground in mathematics](#) than in reading.
- ◆ **Target Early Grades, Transition Points:** [Health and education experts](#) alike believe that students in the earliest grades struggled the most with remote learning and had the most to gain from in-person instruction that was not consistently available in fall 2020. Districts in [Tennessee](#) and [nationally](#) saw acute enrollment declines in kindergarten, which could widen learning gaps in early grades. The [San Antonio Independent School District](#) is planning to focus programming for early grades and high school students for credit recovery over summer 2021.
- ◆ **Students Who Struggled With Remote Learning:** [Digital divide](#) issues as well as life circumstances exacerbated by the pandemic mean that not all students successfully engaged in remote learning. While navigating school reopening in fall 2020, Baltimore City Schools focused on students who were [offline for at least 20 percent of remote classes](#) in addition to students experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities, and English learners.

Short-Term Needs, Long-Term Recovery, Data-Driven Response

In addition to planning for the use of ESSER II funds, districts will face a host of key investment and budgeting decisions in the coming months that will impact current student learning and the longer-term recovery needed. In addition to state investments coming out of the [Tennessee General Assembly's special session focused on education](#), districts are undergoing the regular cycle of budget planning for the 2021-22 school year at a time when the scope of additional federal stimulus funds in the future is unclear. As districts develop spending plans in this environment, there are three key considerations to maximize use of these funds:

- ◆ **Make *one-time investments with one-time funds* to avoid a “fiscal cliff.”** ESSER II funds are one-time funds that expire in 2023. School finance experts at the Edunomics Lab [point out](#) that while these funds can help fill immediate needs, leaders should avoid investments that add to the district's long-term cost structure and impact the district's future ability to invest in educators or other priorities. With uncertainties in both [the state's economic outlook](#) and the possibility of additional federal stimulus, districts will need to be ready to respond to future fluctuations in financial resources in order to avoid this fiscal cliff when federal relief aid expires. For example, research shows that [staff layoffs have negative consequences](#) for students, which suggests that strategies to reduce the likelihood of future layoffs — such as leveraging one-time bonuses or payments for additional work from educators and ensuring all staff capacity is maximized — will benefit students.
- ◆ **Invest in practices that aid in *long-term recovery*, such as high-dosage tutoring.** With learning loss expected to be more significant for [younger students and in mathematics](#),



districts have the opportunity to try new practices to address targeted student needs. For example, despite a research consensus that [high-dosage tutoring](#) remains one of the most promising education practices to support learning recovery and acceleration, few schools or districts have found ways to bring this practice to scale. While the state is beginning to provide resources for tutoring and summer camps, districts may consider leveraging ESSER's flexibility to extend the reach of these state investments or even develop highly localized models based on the research as these supports come online.

◆ **Sustain public support by making *choices with data on student needs and per pupil costs.***

While district leaders and educators need to nimbly respond to many needs during the pandemic, data-driven, research-supported investments will be essential for maintaining stakeholder support for recovery initiatives. With finite resources and many choices on how to recover, district leaders need to recommit to data on student learning and needs. For example, districts might consider choosing between lowering class sizes or high-dosage tutoring. By making a data-driven case on student needs and tying that to comparable costs (i.e. how much does it cost per student for each initiative), district leaders can build strong and sustained support for this work in the coming years. Developing a prioritized, comprehensive, and data-driven list of needs now will enable district leaders to have a stronger resource allocation strategy if additional funds become available — such as any future federal stimulus packages or state transportation funds to bolster the state's summer camp programs.

Conclusion

The federal government has provided additional funds to help students and schools recover from the learning, operational, and financial challenges of COVID-19. These much-needed resources also come with considerable flexibility for district leaders to decide how best to use the funds to meet local needs. 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. Used wisely, these additional resources can help more students learn at their highest levels and reach grade-level expectations.

Additional Resources

As district leaders continue developing their strategies to address learning loss with ESSER II funds, the following practitioner-focused research memos from the [EdResearch for Recovery](#) Project may be useful in supporting research-based decision making.

- ◆ [School practices to address student learning loss](#)
- ◆ [Accelerating student learning with high-dosage tutoring](#)
- ◆ [Reducing district budgets responsibly](#)
- ◆ [Guidance and support for students moving into postsecondary](#)

