



Building Supportive Schools from the Ground Up

**Community
Recommendations on
Federal Relief Funds
for Education**

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Children First
IDRA
— Transforming Education

All students deserve to go to excellent and equitable schools that prepare them for college. Yet, many still attend schools that are underfunded; lack technology, diverse teachers and access to rigorous coursework; and do not use the culturally-sustaining supports and strategies that we know help students thrive. These challenges – which have long existed for systemically-marginalized students, including students of color, emergent bilingual students and those from families with limited incomes – only worsened with COVID-19.

In response to the pandemic's impact on education, the federal government passed three COVID-19 emergency relief packages that provide billions of dollars to schools across the country.

To understand the best and most equitable uses of those funds, IDRA convened listening and learning sessions with parents, students, teachers and advocates. We compiled their recommendations in this report, which focuses on three community-driven strategies for how to spend federal relief funds equitably:

- ▶ Supporting school communities;
- ▶ Fostering supportive and culturally-sustaining schools; and
- ▶ Ensuring meaningful presence and participation for all students.

The sessions were held from June to July 2021 with approximately 50 individuals who self-identified as students, teachers, parents, family members and advocates. During the learning sessions, we helped participants gain a shared understanding of how federal relief funds for schools can be used and distributed. We then asked them to spend time brainstorming the most pressing issues facing schools and students and how they would use federal relief funds to solve them. Finally, the participants came together in small groups to develop recommendations together for sharing with the full listening and learning cohort.

Through the sessions, we urged participants to develop thoughtful, concrete and creative recommendations for how the funds can be used to address emergency needs and to tackle the deep systemic issues that have created educational inequities for generations.

The recommendations can be used by community advocates to change policy and practice in their schools. We suggest that these recommendations be pursued through community-driven advocacy projects, based on IDRA's research-based community engagement [Education CAFE](#) model (IDRA, 2021b; [Montemayor, 2017](#)).

The recommendations also are meant for school district and campus leaders who seek to use the significant infusion of federal funds (uses explained below) to examine the challenges their students face and invest in the people, programs and policies that can bring about lasting change.

For more information about IDRA's policy recommendations, educator resources and community-lead research, [sign up for IDRA's email alerts](#) and check out:

- ▶ [Learning Goes On](#), a COVID-19-focused resource hub (IDRA, 2021e);
- ▶ [Knowledge is Power](#), a resource hub focused on culturally-sustaining schools (IDRA, 2021d); and
- ▶ [Student Reflections on Schooling During COVID-19](#), a report of student-driven participatory action research and policy recommendations for schools and policymakers (Campos, et al., 2021).

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Federal COVID-19 Relief Funds for Schools Explained

To address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the U.S. education system, the federal government allocated billions of dollars for K-12 schools and colleges. It designated some funds for distribution by state governors and some for colleges and universities. But the bulk of federal emergency education funds were for K-12 schools via the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER).

Federal money has been allocated to the ESSER Fund three times so far. At least 90% of the monies must be distributed to K-12 school districts in the same way other federal funds (known as Title I funds) are, based on levels and concentrations of poverty in school districts.

- ▶ **“ESSER I” The CARES Act (March 2020):** The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act provided approximately \$13.2 billion to the ESSER Fund. School districts must commit to spend ESSER I money for specific purposes by September 30, 2022.
- ▶ **“ESSER II” The CRSSA Act (December 2020):** The Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act added about \$54.3 billion to the ESSER Fund. School districts must commit to spend ESSER II money for specific purposes by September 30, 2023.
- ▶ **“ARP ESSER” The ARP Act (March 2021):** The American Rescue Plan Act added about \$122 billion to the ESSER Fund. School districts must commit to spend ARP ESSER money on specific purposes by September 30, 2024. ARP contains two provisions – “maintenance of effort” and “maintenance of equity” – that are designed to ensure states do not reduce their own funding to their public schools, particularly to “high poverty schools” when they receive federal relief monies.

The [ARP requires](#) states and school districts to seek broad public input to develop spending plans (U.S. Dept. of Education, Nov. 2021). These plans must comply with the [act’s requirements](#) for how funds can be spent, including (U.S. Dept. of Ed., (2021):

- ▶ addressing “learning loss” (at least 20% of funds must be spent on this goal);
- ▶ coordinating COVID-19 preparedness and response efforts and ensuring safe school facilities;
- ▶ addressing the needs of children from low-income families, children with disabilities, English learners, racial and ethnic minorities, students experiencing homelessness and foster care youth;
- ▶ planning for or implementing activities during long-term closures, including providing meals to eligible students and providing technology for online learning;
- ▶ purchasing educational technology (including hardware, software, connectivity, assistive technology and adaptive equipment);
- ▶ providing mental health services and supports;
- ▶ planning and implementing activities related to summer learning and supplemental after-school programs; and
- ▶ other activities that are necessary to maintain operation of and continuity of and services, including continuing to employ existing or hiring new district and school staff.

Importantly, funds can be used to support one-time expenditures and long-term investments as long as the uses are within the list above. For longer-term strategies, it is critical that states and school districts identify how they will use state and local funds to sustain any programs put in place with federal relief monies.



Community Listening and Learning Session Recommendations

The strategies and spending recommendations below were identified by listening and learning session participants, including students, families, educators and other advocates.

Community Key Strategy 1

Supporting School Communities



Priority 1: Build authentic relationships between students and families and their schools

When relationships and communication are strong, schools can better identify the hopes and needs of their communities and work with them to develop effective resources and programs. The relationships between students and families and their schools have been tested during the pandemic, particularly during long periods of remote learning when in-person communication methods could not be used. Still, even accounting for access to digital communication methods, families and students of color were less likely to have strong and frequent communication with their schools, signaling a deeper underlying issue.

During our listening and learning sessions, we consistently heard the need for better student and family engagement programs. Participants shared the following recommendations for how school districts can use the COVID-19 relief funds to support school communities through strong engagement strategies.

Provide support for student engagement

Many students want to be more involved in programs in their schools but may need to work outside of their campuses to support themselves and their families – a reality that has been exacerbated by the pandemic and its impact on many families' economic stability. Schools could use federal funds to support these students by providing financial support

for participation in programs that would benefit the entire school community. These could include robust near-peer mentorship programs across K-12 schools, like the [IDRA Valued Youth Partnership](#) program (IDRA, 2021f). Schools could also invest in “grow-your-own” teacher programs that compensate high school students to work as teaching assistants, tutors and tech support and provide equal amount of funds to support students' teacher preparation in college.

Hire community leaders and parents

Some schools already support family liaisons, who are often parents tasked with reaching out to the school community to ensure everyone feels connected. Federal funds should be used to develop and expand family liaison programs, specifically by hiring bilingual community leaders who can ensure authentic, two-way communication between families and schools and help to identify community needs.

Authentic communication requires lots of touchpoints of contact, like phone calls, house visits and small group meetings. Community leaders and parents can provide the people power to strengthen school-family relationships (see [Rouland & Montemayor, 2020](#)). Our listening and learning session participants emphasized the importance of this outreach to ensure schools are not simply waiting for families to come to them but are proactively engaged in meaningful outreach to strengthen relationships.

“Money should be allocated to developing more robust peer mentor services across K-12 schools (students will be paid for participating) and instituting more robust student-family engagement programs to restore authentic engagement in schools, more closely assess family needs and promote better communication between families and schools.”

Build independent engagement boards

Several listening and learning session participants noted that some school districts highlight their family engagement programs but do not understand how their programs are ineffective because they rely on their own data and evaluations to measure success. They do not ask families whether real, authentic engagement is happening, and they continue to use ineffective strategies that leave out those most in need of connections.

School districts should use federal funds to create independent family engagement boards or to support existing local organizations, made up of parents and students, that can ensure effective communication between schools and families and provide feedback to schools on how to improve their engagement programs so they are responsive to needs. While the board would receive funding from the school district, school leaders should enable board autonomy to ensure it can operate effectively and without pressure. Boards could set indicators and processes that represent authentic engagement, including family-informed or -created surveys, online focus groups and student-informed or -created surveys concerning campus culture and specific issues.

Audit and improve family engagement programs

Listening and learning session participants noted that their schools and districts claim to have family engagement programs, but sometimes these programs just consist of robocalls or fliers sent home in backpacks. These one-way methods of communication are often ineffective and can mask the lack of authentic relationships.

School districts should use federal funds to evaluate their family and student engagement programs (including through community feedback) and invest in best practices, which may include the recommendations described in the priority area above. Evaluations should focus on the experiences of systemically-marginalized families and should lead to opportunities for those families and schools to co-create more inclusive campuses.

Priority 1: Ensure students and families are connected to resources in their communities

Schools are in a unique position to facilitate connections between teachers, students and families and the community-based resources that can meet their needs. Some of those needs, including access to food, digital devices and healthcare were highlighted during the pandemic, but they existed long before COVID-19.

During our listening and learning sessions, students, families, educators and other advocates shared the following recommendations for how to use federal funds to ensure schools are better equipped to serve as resource hubs and connectors for those in their communities who may need support.

Adopt best practices to connect community resources and enable schools to be centers of support

Even during times of remote learning, many schools served as hubs to provide support to families, including access to meals and learning devices. This practice simply makes logistical sense and is consistent with research-based models like community schools, which focus on identifying and providing easy access to needed services to members of the campus community.

School districts should use federal funds to support and expand these proven models, including by performing needs assessments to determine the types of resources campus community members most need.* Session participants noted that many in their own communities continue to need access to healthcare, food, services for immigrant families, digital literacy tutoring through community partnerships and additional support to access higher education opportunities.

Not only should schools serve as hubs for resources to serve their communities, they should use federal relief funds to initiate resource coordination opportunities with

local service providers. This way, the impact of ESSER funds can be amplified through blending with other community resources, including other federal relief funds that have been allocated to cities, states and organizations.

Extend school services like afterschool care and meals

Extending afterschool care and meals to all students, without requiring an application or documentation of income, can help to ensure every person in a school community has more access to resources, like academic and social-emotional supports, childcare and food.

The need for these resources has always existed and was certainly heightened during the pandemic. Federal relief funds should be used to provide these services by providing stipends to teachers, school employees and community members who staff the programs

** To support those efforts, the U.S. Department of Education specifically provided guidance on the use of federal relief funds to develop full-service, evidence-based community schools.*



Community Key Strategy 2

Fostering Supportive and Culturally-Sustaining Schools

Priority 1: Focus on mental health and wellness

Listening and learning session participants were asked to spend some time thinking about the most pressing needs of students, teachers and families in schools. The need for mental health services was identified most often. Easily-accessible mental health care was a necessity long before COVID-19 and was made worse by the social isolation, unpredictability, grief and trauma that came with the pandemic. Many adults and young people, particularly students of color, may need additional mental health support as they grapple with multiple forms of racism and discrimination and the important protests for racial justice that have peaked during the pandemic.

Listening and learning session participants made the following recommendations for how to use federal relief funds to address the mental health needs of adults and young people in schools.

Provide accessible, school-based mental health services to everyone in a school community, including teachers, students and families

Though the American School Counseling Association [recommends](#) (ASCA, nd) a student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1, most schools were failing to meet that ratio before the start of the pandemic. This [failure was even greater](#) in schools with majority students of color, whose student-to-counselor ratios were higher than majority white schools (NCES, 2019). During the pandemic, the [impact of this lack of access](#) to counselors and other school-based mental and behavioral health professionals, like psychologists, social workers and nurses, was heightened as students experienced more mental health issues (Sparks, 2021).

School districts should use federal relief funds to hire mental and behavioral health professionals in schools and develop school-based mental health clinics and community partnerships to ensure all adults and young people can quickly and easily access the supports they need. Additionally, all teachers and other staff should be trained to recognize trauma and grief so they can help their students and fellow staff identify support.

Set up systems for intergenerational mental health support

As needs for mental health services heightened during the pandemic, resources for teachers, students and families diminished. Many could not rely on access to the few supports that were in their schools when campuses were closed and many, particularly in marginalized communities, never had sufficient access to support even before the pandemic. This lack of access to resources has existed for generations so the impact is intergenerational.

School districts should use federal funds to build programs through which entire families are encouraged to access mental health services. By focusing resources on families, rather than individuals, school districts can help to address the intergenerational impacts of COVID-19 and the underlying inequities the pandemic has exacerbated. These connections can be made through on-campus services and through sustained partnerships with community-based mental healthcare providers.



Priority 1: Ensure the entire school climate supports all students and teachers

School districts should always work to foster school climates that are safe and supportive for all students, teachers and families. Programs and strategies that focus on improving school climates and creating culturally-sustaining schools have always been critical ways to address the inequities felt by systemically-marginalized students and teachers. These strategies also can help schools support those in their communities who are coping with the impacts of COVID-19, especially communities of color and communities with limited wealth and income opportunities that have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

Listening and learning session participants developed the following recommendations for how school districts should use federal relief funds to foster supportive and culturally-sustaining school climates that support all in the campus community.

Rethink “learning loss” and support students through culturally-sustaining schools

There are already indicators that schools have struggled to serve all students during the pandemic, especially during times of remote learning and particularly for systemically-marginalized students. At least 20% of the American Rescue Plan Act funds received by school districts must go toward strategies to address what many refer to as “learning loss,” a term that focuses on what students are missing rather than on what school districts and education agencies have struggled to provide over time.

Listening and learning session participants noted that it is critical that schools not measure so-called learning loss against the pre-pandemic achievement of students. To do so could lead to a return to pre-pandemic teaching strategies and assessment methods, which often do not adequately or equitably

serve students of color, those with disabilities, emergent bilingual students and those from families with limited incomes.

Rather, federal funds should be used to examine how schools were inadequate for systemically-marginalized students prior to the pandemic and invest in strategies, like culturally-sustaining policies (Caldera, 2021), schoolwide practices, curricula and instructional methods that fully engage all students. These approaches should include:

- ▶ Expanding access to [ethnic and cultural studies](#) courses and coursework (IDRA, 2021a);
- ▶ Funding more electives that connect students to their cultures and others;
- ▶ Investing in strategies to recruit and retain teachers of color;
- ▶ Training all staff, students and families in [restorative practices](#) as a strategy to build stronger campus communities and address conflict (Johnson, 2019); and
- ▶ Requiring training for all administrators and school staff in culturally-sustaining educational practices and approaches that advance racial equity.



Community Key Strategy 3

Ensuring Meaningful Presence and Participation for All Students

Students can feel excluded from their schools in a number of ways – a reality made even more challenging by the isolation that came with the pandemic. Many schools have affirmatively enacted policies and practices, or have struggled to address student needs, in ways that isolate students and prevent them from fully engaging in school. For example, many schools have not provided the resources emergent bilingual students need to excel in their classrooms; have pushed Black and Latino students and students with disabilities out of their schools through the use of exclusionary discipline and policing; and have been unable to address the digital divide that students of color and those from families with limited incomes experience.** Listening and learning session participants emphasized the following recommendations for how school districts can use federal relief funds to ensure no school policy or practice prevents students from being fully present and participating in school.



Priority 1: Increase resources for programs that serve emergent bilingual students

Invest in teachers, aspiring teachers and classroom aides

School districts across the country experience bilingual teacher shortages, a problem that is worsening with the additional demands and safety concerns teachers are feeling during the pandemic. School districts should use federal relief funds to invest in bilingual educator recruitment and retention strategies, including

- ▶ increasing bilingual teacher salaries;
- ▶ investing in grow-your-own programs to provide incentives to aspiring teachers to become certified and teach in their communities;
- ▶ providing stipends for bilingual people to serve as teaching aides in schools; and
- ▶ providing additional professional development and certification opportunities for current teachers.

Increase multilingual supports for families

While schools must do more to strengthen their authentic family engagement strategies, this is particularly true for their engagement with the families who speak languages other than English, including the families of emergent bilingual students. School districts should use federal relief funds to support

outreach to and engagement with these families with more bilingual school staff; provide digital platforms and programs in languages other than English; and ensure opportunities to meaningfully collaborate in the formation and changing of schools' policies and practices to better support emergent bilingual students (see Community Key Strategy 1 above for recommendations for stronger community engagement).

Invest in culturally-relevant ways to assess students and their language proficiency

Assessing emergent bilingual students' learning and language proficiency certainly became more challenging during the pandemic, exacerbating the issues with these assessments that existed well before the pandemic. Listening and learning session participants' observations and recommendations related to assessments for emergent bilingual students are consistent with the policy recommendations of other experts, including recommendations that schools ensure families understand and are involved in assessment processes by providing translated materials; invest in assessment materials that are research-based and developmentally appropriate; and require professional development for staff to ensure they understand current best practices in culturally-relevant assessment procedures.

*** Each year since 1986, IDRA has released its high school attrition study, examining Texas attrition rates and comparing those rates year-to-year. The studies reveal the impact of certain state and school district policies on attrition rates, connecting how those particular policies contribute to the isolation and exclusion of systemically-marginalized students. IDRA's attrition studies can be found at https://www.idra.org/research_articles/idra-attrition-studies/.*

Priority 2: Dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline

Stop punishing and policing students by investing in schoolwide strategies that work

Schools across the country continue to rely on exclusionary discipline (like suspensions and alternative school placements) and school police [despite ample evidence](#) that these approaches create negative school climates and funnel students into the school-to-prison pipeline (IDRA, 2021c). Even during school closures, schools punished students and involved law enforcement in interactions with students over remote learning platforms, even using new methods of punishment like muting students in what some have dubbed the [“zoom-to-prison pipeline”](#) (Harvard, 2020).

Listening and learning session participants were clear that these harmful practices must stop in schools, particularly because they are discriminatory, disproportionately impacting Black students, students with disabilities and LGBTQ students.

Harmful policies must be eliminated through state and federal laws and in school district regulations and codes of conduct. Importantly, there must be an investment in the strategies that work to identify and address adult and student needs, tackle teacher biases, build strong school communities and repair harm when it occurs.

School districts should use federal relief funds to support schoolwide research-based strategies [like restorative practices](#) that do not rely on exclusion or law enforcement intervention (Wilson & Johnson, 2021). These programs can be supported by

- ▶ providing initial training and ongoing professional development for teachers and staff,
- ▶ hiring restorative practices coordinators to support students and staff,
- ▶ providing training and resources for families to continue restorative practices at home, and
- ▶ conducting evaluations of school data to determine the impact of restorative practices and whether the strategy is being implemented with fidelity.



Priority 3: Address the digital divide

While nearly all young people were thrown into a difficult remote learning environment due to COVID-19, students of color and students from families with limited incomes experienced the impacts of limited technology and connectivity – [the digital divide](#) – more significantly than their peers (Marshall & Muñoz, 2021). The digital divide was perhaps one of the inequities that surfaced most quickly after the pandemic began. The lack of access to connectivity and devices and limited user knowledge were significant obstacles to a rapid transition to remote learning. These obstacles create challenges for many communities, even during in-person learning. [Research on the “digital homework gap”](#) shows that an even greater number of students are unable to complete at-home assignments, particularly those from

Black and Latino communities and households with limited incomes (Auxier & Anderson, 2020).

Listening and learning session participants recommended school districts use federal relief funds to address the digital divide through:

- ▶ collaboration with state and federal policymakers to encourage investments in broadband infrastructure, which is lacking across the country in both rural and urban communities;
- ▶ distribution of and updates to digital devices that students need to participate in class and complete homework; and
- ▶ providing teacher, student and family digital literacy training and supports.



Conclusion

Listening and learning session participants identified critical needs and how federal relief monies and funds from other sources can address those needs. There are requirements for how and when federal funds must be used (described above) and the responsible and equitable use of those funds depends on strong partnerships between members of campus communities, schools and districts and state and federal education agencies.

Students, families and local advocates must be part of changing policies and practices in schools. Campus and school district leaders must implement sustainable strategies that are responsive to community needs, focused on solving large systemic problems and rooted in strong partnerships with students, families and community-based organizations and individuals.

States must support these efforts with their own resources and federal relief funds and by investing in public schools, particularly those with the greatest economic needs. Finally, federal leaders must monitor the use of funds and quickly respond when states and districts fail to invest in research-based, equitable and long-term strategies.

State Example

Texas' ESSER Funds

Texas K-12 schools were entitled to nearly \$20 billion in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds from the three federal COVID-19 emergency relief laws ([TEA, 2021](#)):

- ▶ ESSER I (CARES Act-March 2020): Approximately \$1.2 billion
- ▶ ESSER II (CRSSA Act – December 2020): Approximately \$5.5 billion
- ▶ ARP ESSER (American Rescue Plan Act – March 2021): Approximately \$12.4 billion

How the Funds were Allocated

ESSER I: Texas used the first round of federal relief funds to replace state funds that would have been spent on public schools. This meant that school districts could not use ESSER I funds to cover new COVID-19 costs as they had hoped. The final ESSER I amounts that went to each school district are on the [TEA website](#) (TEA, 2020).

ESSER II: Texas released the application for these funds to school districts and charter schools in [June 2021](#), more than six months after they were made available to the state (TEA, June 3, 2021). The Texas Education Agency specified that the funds may be reduced due to the state using them toward attendance funding for districts that had drops in attendance losses during the pandemic (also called “hold harmless” funding). The final ESSER II amounts that were allocated to each school district are on the [TEA website](#) (TEA, Nov. 2021).

ARP ESSER: Texas made the application for these funds open to school districts and charters in [April 2021](#), nearly seven weeks after they were available (TEA, April 2021b).

For this round of funds, the U.S. Department of Education specifically warned states that they could not use the ARP ESSER funds to replace their own state-level funding obligations to public schools. Information about how much ARP ESSER money Texas school districts and charters are entitled to can be found on the [TEA website](#) (TEA, April 2021a).

Texas' State Spending Plan for ARP ESSER Funds

In order to receive all ESSER funds from the American Rescue Plan Act, states are required to submit community-informed spending plans detailing how they will use funds to safely reopen schools for in-person instruction. All state plans are on the [U.S. Department of Education website](#) (Nov. 2021).

In its [plan](#), the Texas Education Agency highlighted two main issues facing students and schools in Texas and how they must be addressed (U.S. Dept. of Ed., April 2021b).

Learning loss due to lost in-person instructional time should be addressed through high-dosage tutoring, high-quality instructional materials, professional learning opportunities, extended school day and extended year programs, and afterschool and summer learning programs.

Mental health challenges due to social isolation, grief and trauma should be addressed through support and guidance to school districts on how to use on-campus mental health professionals and local and regional resources, guidance on the impact of grief and trauma and trauma-informed care and tools to help school districts identify needs and resources to fill gaps through the state's Safe and Supportive Schools Framework.

State Example

Georgia's ESSER Funds

Georgia schools were [entitled to](#) more than \$6 billion in ESSER funds from the three federal COVID-19 emergency relief laws (Ga Dept. of Ed., Nov. 2021):

- ▶ ESSER I (CARES Act-March 2020): Approximately \$411 million
- ▶ ESSER II (CRSSA Act – December 2020): Approximately \$1.8 billion
- ▶ ARP ESSER (American Rescue Plan Act – March 2021): Approximately \$4.2 billion

How the Funds were Allocated

ESSER I: The final ESSER I amounts that went to each school district are on the [Georgia Insights website](#) (2020).

ESSER II: The final ESSER II amounts that were allocated to each school district are on the [Georgia Insights website](#) (Jan. 2021).

ARP ESSER: Though Georgia released these funds to school districts, [experts fear the state's planned divestment](#) from public schools in its 2022 budget may cause it to be out of compliance with federal ARP protections for "high-poverty schools" (Owens, 2021). Information about how much ARP ESSER money Georgia school districts and charters were entitled to are on the [Georgia Insights website](#) (Aug. 2021).

Georgia's State Spending Plan for ARP ESSER Funds

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In its [plan](#), the Georgia Department of Education highlighted its top priorities (Ga. Dept. of Ed., July 2021):

- ▶ Accelerating learning by identifying the academic impact of lost instructional time;
- ▶ Personalizing supports for students, educators and districts to recover from COVID-19; and
- ▶ Promoting opportunity by ensuring a 21st century standard of learning.

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