



# Watch Out for the Fiscal Cliff:

## Advocating for Education Equity as ESSER Spending Winds Down

Time is running out to spend the unprecedented, one-time federal pandemic-relief funds — the deadline will happen around September 30, 2024. Between now and then, there is an opportunity for families and education advocates to encourage their school district leaders to spend down and sustain investments that are successfully addressing educational inequities. Federal pandemic relief via the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, better known as [ESSER](#), provided states and districts with money to spend on vital resources that address the needs of students, like laptops, mental health resources, and tutoring. But once the money dries up, schools and districts will still need to continue to invest in programs and supports to address [unfinished learning](#), in addition to inequities that existed long before the pandemic.

After the ESSER funds expire, district budgets could be slashed by an average of [\\$1,200 per student](#) in the 2024-25 school year, through a combination of [declining enrollment](#) and the end of ESSER funds. While [states](#) have a key role to play in supporting districts through this transition, district leaders will likely need to make tough choices about what investments and programs will be sustained and which will be cut from district budgets.

To ensure that districts are making these decisions in ways that center equity and improve student outcomes, caregivers, and advocates can ask questions of district leaders in three key areas about existing ESSER investments as the spending deadline approaches:

### **1. How are district ESSER investments equitably addressing the unique needs of students in the district? Are students with the highest need getting access and seeing success?**

Even if districts are achieving their overall goals, school- or district-wide averages could be masking inequities in outcomes. The pandemic only exacerbated existing inequities, [disproportionately](#) affecting students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, student with disabilities, and English learners. So, it's important for districts to be held accountable for improving outcomes for these students as they evaluate their investments. Districts should work with advocates to examine whether all students are having their unique needs met by looking at data across schools and student groups.

To better understand outcomes, district leaders should ensure that they are considering students' access to ESSER-funded programs and investments, as this could impact plans for sustainability. For example, if a district invested in summer learning but found limited growth among students from low-income backgrounds, leaders might assume that expanded summer learning is not worth sustaining in the coming years.

However, if students from low-income backgrounds who attended summer programs regularly actually saw gains in math achievement, low attendance could be the cause, due to a lack of access to transportation. Therefore, advocates could urge districts to provide extra funds for transportation, rather than scaling back the program. If cuts in funding mean scaling back is the only option, districts leaders should prioritize access for students with the most need, rather than having open enrollment for all district students, as [Nashville and Dallas](#) have done.

**2. What are the stated goals of district ESSER investments? Are these programs achieving their goals? How do we know?**

To know if an investment is successful, it must be tied to specific, measurable goals that are grounded in supporting students with the greatest needs. For instance, if a district invests in a tutoring program using ESSER funds, they should be able to articulate which subject(s) were the focus of tutoring and how much growth they are aiming for — including for specific students or student groups. Districts should develop these goals with input from families and communities and then communicate them in clear, accessible language so that community members are able to understand and articulate the purpose and intended outcomes of the district’s strategy.

In addition to having specific goals, districts should be collecting and actively tracking data that can show the progress toward these goals. For instance, in [Nashville](#), district leaders collected weekly survey data from tutors and students, social emotional learning data, and academic growth and performance data to measure the success of their tutoring. District leaders should also be actively having conversations around the data with families and making them publicly available in multiple languages.

If this data isn’t publicly available, school and district leaders should work with advocates to release the data and have conversations with families and community members about it. In districts that don’t have clearly stated goals, advocates can push district leaders to consider a range of specific student outcomes, rather than just program inputs, in conversations about post-ESSER budget priorities.

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>If district-set goals are being met, or if substantial progress is being made:</b></p>          | <p>District leaders should work with caregivers and advocates to consider what this means for the sustainability of the given investment. For instance, it might mean limited funds can be redirected to other high-need areas. Conversely — and probably more likely — this means that district leaders could consider prioritizing sustaining these investments with reoccurring funds — either within existing budgets or through other state or federal funding options.</p> <p>For example, district leaders who successfully invested ESSER funds to develop a more high-quality, diverse educator pipeline could consider applying for federal grant programs or working with states to unlock federal funding through existing funding streams via Title II of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to sustain the funding for these programs. Similarly, districts could use ESSA Title I funds to sustain targeted, intensive tutoring.</p>   |
| <p><b>If district goals are not being met, or programs are not being implemented as intended:</b></p> | <p>It’s important to consider why and the impact it has on students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Having data on how well programs are being implemented in alignment with evidence-based practices, including advocate and community perspectives about the experiences of students and families, will be key to answering these questions. This information can be used to discuss roadblocks to success, whether these barriers can be addressed through targeted changes, or if the program should be phased out and funds redirected to preserve more impactful investments.</p> <p>If districts are providing access to mental health supports for students after school but aren’t seeing improvements in attendance, behavior, or students’ feelings of belonging and well-being as measured by student surveys, district leaders can examine student participation, staffing, or specific information on the supports being offered. District leaders should connect with students, families, and educators to provide context, including barriers to access, and consider adopting promising practices happening in other states and districts.</p> |

### 3. How do ESSER investments fit into districts' overall strategy for addressing the needs of students?

In addition to program specific goals, district leaders should consider how their ESSER investments fit into the district's overall strategy for addressing student needs. One way to do this is by examining the dimensions of resource equity that are connected to each ESSER investment. District leaders should work with advocates to consider what else is being done to address student needs in each of these dimensions and how well the ESSER investment complements these other district practices. This analysis can help determine whether the ESSER program should be phased out or possibly replace another pre-existing strategy that's less effective.

For example, a district focused on improving student proficiency in math may have already been using double blocks of math instruction for students in need of support and then added targeted, intensive tutoring using ESSER funds. Given that these programs are both resource intensive and focused on the same outcome for students, district leaders should work with educators and advocates to assess the effectiveness of these programs and determine which should be sustained or how they could be combined, such as using one of the additional math blocks for targeted tutoring or small-group instruction.

It's also important to remember that each investment is likely related to more than one dimension of resource equity. For instance, a tutoring program would likely be connected to [instructional time and attention](#) (timing and size of tutoring groups), [teaching quality and diversity](#) (recruiting and retaining tutors), and [empowering, rigorous content](#) (tutoring curriculum). If possible, district leaders should work with advocates to [assess district performance](#) in each of the 10 dimensions of resource equity to determine which areas to prioritize as ESSER funds expire. (See box.)

District leaders should also work with advocates to consider ESSER investments and other programming in terms of desired outcomes — as stated in program goals. For instance, if there are multiple programs focused on improving [student attendance](#), districts should examine how these programs are working together to address student reengagement, with a particular focus on targeting students most in need. Since these investments are all focused on the same outcome, gaining insights from involved school staff (such as educators, school counselors, and family liaisons), students, and families will be key to identifying where districts can consider changes to, or consolidation of, programs to address student needs while also tackling budgetary challenges.

The [Alliance for Resource Equity](#) provides a toolkit that can be used as a guide for advocates and district leaders as they jointly consider how to address the unique needs of students amid the end of ESSER funding. The toolkit focuses on [10 dimensions](#) of resource equity and asks leaders and advocates to consider local data to determine the extent to which existing resources are being used to equitably meet student needs — questions that can apply to specific ESSER investments or overall district services — via the [diagnostic tool](#).

Each dimension of resource equity also has a corresponding [guidebook](#), which allows districts and advocates to consider the root causes of identified inequities and provides specific action steps to address these root causes. The toolkit also features an [advocate guide](#), including a [sample meeting agenda](#) to facilitate working through district data via the dimensions with district leaders.