



PROMISING PRACTICES:

A School District Guide to Advocating for Equity in American Rescue Plan Spending

Since March 2021, school district leaders have been developing and implementing plans to spend their “ARP dollars,” that is, the historic \$122 billion allocated from the American Rescue Plan to help districts recover from the devastating effects of the pandemic. The money, also referred to as ESSER funds (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief), is intended to help with schools’ reopening and recovery.

But the district planning and spending processes have been murky and difficult to follow. Some districts clearly report ARP spending on their websites, while others lack detail, leaving advocates and families wondering where all this federal money is going. Also unclear is whether districts are spending their funds on programs and practices rooted in evidence, and if they are prioritizing equity — that is, targeting funds to students who need it most.

This federal investment is crucial for students, especially students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, who are not only more likely to live in communities most impacted by the pandemic, but also who have been long underserved by our nation’s schools.

This guide is designed to help advocates ask district leaders questions about the details of their ARP spending plans to ensure their school district is prioritizing rigor and equity and using funds on practices and strategies that have been proven to work.

What is a promising practice?

While districts can and should spend funds in ways that are informed by community members and meet their unique needs, there are several fundamental aspects of an equity-focused, evidence-based approach to supporting students in pandemic recovery. Ed Trust evaluated ARP spending plans across the nation in search of districts that are using ARP funds on “promising practices” — those that research suggests will advance equity. We evaluated district spending plans based on the [five things](#) we believe are most important:

- Accelerating student learning, including targeted intensive tutoring and expanded learning time
- Student, family, and community engagement
- Safe and equitable learning environments
- Teacher recruitment and retention
- Data equity and reporting transparency



While these practices are promising, only students, teachers, and other stakeholders on the ground can shed light on how these plans are being implemented. In this guide, you will hear from district leaders on how they designed their plans, what challenges they face, and lessons learned.

Looking ahead, long-term data will provide deeper insight on how effective these promising practices are. But for now, they provide a high standard that other districts should strive to meet.

WHAT COVID-RELIEF FUNDS WERE MADE AVAILABLE TO SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS?

To provide relief to struggling states, school districts, and schools during the pandemic, the federal government passed a series of monetary relief packages known as the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act, and the American Rescue Plan (ARP), which included \$122 billion in emergency grants and investments directly tied to school districts known as Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER). Discussions on and references to these funds use many acronyms, a few of which are detailed below:

- ESSER I – one-third of the total funds dispersed, established by the CARES Act
- ESSER II – additional funding that was provided in the CRRSA Act
- ARP ESSER or ESSER III – additional ESSER funding provided by ARP

The funds provided were unprecedented both in size and scope; districts were given large amounts of money (90% of ARP flowed directly to districts) and a lot of discretion in how to spend that money. For ESSER III, districts are required to set aside at least 20% of their funding to “address learning loss”^{*} and to build in supports for the social-emotional well-being of students. The remaining dollars could be used toward any policies that address needs arising from the pandemic that are previously authorized by state and federal spending guidelines. This could include, but is not limited to, hiring school counselors, making improvements to facilities, providing trainings and professional development for teachers, and purchasing new curriculum and technology.

**Note: Ed Trust uses the term “unfinished learning.”*



TARGETED INTENSIVE TUTORING & EXPANDED LEARNING TIME

The pandemic has resulted in unfinished learning for all students across the country, and especially for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. [Targeted intensive tutoring](#) and [expanded learning time](#) are two high-leverage strategies to address unfinished learning.

Targeted intensive tutoring, often referred to as high-dosage tutoring, consists of having the same tutor work over an extended period of time (e.g., all year, every school day) on academic skills, such as math or reading. In the most effective versions, an individual tutor works with one or two students at a time, using a skill-building curriculum closely aligned with the math or reading curriculum used throughout the school and targeted to the student's academic needs.

[Expanded Learning Time \(ELT\)](#), including after-school, summer, and in-school programs, can also give students an opportunity to catch up. ELT encompasses programs or strategies implemented to increase the amount of instruction and learning students experience. During the pandemic, students with the most need received [less instructional time](#). A national survey of school leaders revealed that students in high-poverty districts were expected to spend far less time on instructional activities during virtual learning than were their peers in low-poverty districts.

[Evidence](#) is clear that, when implemented well, targeted intensive tutoring and expanded learning time are incredibly effective strategies for accelerating students' learning and for giving them a strong relationship with another supportive adult. Importantly, for these learning strategies to be effective they should [focus on acceleration](#), rather than remediation. This is particularly important to prioritize, as students of color and students from low-income backgrounds tend to receive remediation coursework. (For additional details on best practices, check out our briefs, [Strategies to Solve Unfinished Learning](#).)

Targeted Intensive Tutoring

What key questions should advocates ask to evaluate whether their district is planning for a high-quality and equitable targeted intensive tutoring program?

- Is the practice targeting students with the greatest need (e.g., students from low-income backgrounds)?
- Is the practice targeting students who have experienced unfinished learning (i.e., based on assessment results or other data)?
- Is the program free and accessible to students and their families?
- Is the practice evidence-based?



- Does the practice include tutors who have experience in education (e.g., certified teachers, paraprofessionals, retired teachers, etc.)?
- Are teachers receiving additional compensation for the extended learning time?
- Is the tutoring practice conducted in groups of four students or fewer?
- Is the program using a skill-building curriculum aligned to grade-level content?
- Are students receiving the tutoring during the school day?
- Are students receiving tutoring frequently (i.e., at least three days a week)?
- Are tutors receiving supervision, training, and/or ongoing support?
- Will districts and/or schools collect and publicly report data on the program?
- Is the district leveraging relationships with community-based organizations?

Look for:

- Tutoring programs that use certified professionals (e.g., teachers, paraprofessionals) or trained volunteers, have small student to teacher ratios, occur all year and at least several times a week, and target students with the greatest need
- Programs that use data to identify students most in need of support, monitor students' progress, and assess program effectiveness

Beware of:

- Tutoring programs that use only peers or untrained volunteers, have larger student to teacher ratios (more than four students per tutor), or are not using a skill-building curriculum
- Programs that are not specifically prioritizing students with the greatest need
- A lack of attention to the quality of instruction throughout the school day



Spotlight on Nashville

Similar to students in many U.S. school districts, Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) students experienced unfinished learning as a result of the pandemic. This was particularly prominent in elementary school reading and middle school math, where the pandemic worsened existing inequities. Enter the [Accelerating Scholars Program](#).

In its first year, this targeted, intensive tutoring program served more than 4,000 students. MNPS originally had an ambitious goal of serving 7,000 students, but district leaders scaled back in the first year to maintain quality.

Students in the Accelerating Scholars Program receive tutoring three times per week for at least 30 minutes at a time, always with the same tutor, and with no more than three students. All of the tutors, whether full-time educators or volunteers, are trained in tutoring best practices. Curriculum is on grade level, not remedial, because district leaders believe that this is essential to accelerating learning.

To ensure that the Accelerating Scholars Program is effective and prioritizes students most impacted by the pandemic, the district created an equity matrix using academic data. Nashville prioritized schools and students based on academic need (e.g., students who scored below the 60th percentile on Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment) and readiness to host tutoring based on a school's infrastructure. The program collects weekly survey data from tutors and students, social emotional learning data, and MAP data to measure success.

“Tutoring is the right thing to do, but not the easy thing to do. I am concerned about the national conversation around tutoring. I am worried that in our haste to implement tutoring that we are not holding true to research-based practices. When we do it, let’s do it right.”

—KERI RANDOLPH, FORMER CHIEF STRATEGY OFFICER, METRO NASHVILLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS





Lessons Learned:

Keri Randolph, former chief strategy officer of Metro Nashville Public Schools, shared a few considerations and lessons learned:

- 1. Quality should be prioritized over quantity.** While more students could have received SOME tutoring, research shows that growth happens when students receive GREAT tutoring, which is why MNPS kept their tutor to student ratio low, even though that meant fewer students received services in the first year of the program.
- 2. Stakeholder engagement is crucial to a program's success.** Tutoring takes time and investment from all involved. Families, community organizations, and school leaders have to work collaboratively to achieve potential academic gains.
- 3. Targeted intensive tutoring can be fiscally feasible and is worth the effort.** Generating curriculum and finding enough staff to operate a large-scale tutoring program takes a lot of time and energy. It may seem like outsourcing to vendors is a good option when time and resources are limited. MNPS realized, however, that vendors would cost almost six times as much to run their tutoring program and that the district would lose the flexibility to tailor curriculum to their district and students. Though it took much more effort upfront, the tutoring program can now be sustained for only about \$450 per student per semester, which is cost effective.





Expanded Learning Time

What key questions should advocates ask to evaluate whether their district is planning for a high-quality and equitable expanded learning time program?

- Is the practice targeting students with the greatest need (e.g., students from low-income backgrounds)?
- Is the practice targeting students who have experienced the greatest amount of unfinished learning (e.g., based on assessment results or other data)?
- Is the program evidence-based?
 - Does the program use a skill-building curriculum aligned to grade-level content?
 - Is extended learning time offered during the school day or, if out-of-school time, is attendance mandatory?
 - Is the additional learning time conducted by certified professionals or trained volunteers?
- Is the program free and accessible to students and their families?
- Are teachers receiving additional compensation for the extended learning time?
- Is there a plan for maximizing student attendance (e.g., ensuring adequate and safe transportation, pairing academic acceleration with high-interest enrichment activities)?
- Does the plan detail how much time students will spend receiving expanded learning time?
- Are teachers receiving supervision, training, and/or ongoing support?
- Is the district leveraging relationships with community-based organizations?

Look for:

- Programs that use certified professionals (e.g., teachers) or provide regular training and supervision to ELT educators
- Programs that are mandatory, prioritize small groups, and use individualized high-quality curriculum

Beware of:

- Programs without clear goals or support for teachers and programs with large class sizes and untrained individuals
- Programs where attendance is not required or, if voluntary, the district does not have a plan for encouraging students to attend consistently
- Programs that do not provide translation for families who speak a language other than English



Spotlight on Dallas

Like many districts in the U.S., Dallas Independent School District (Dallas ISD) saw longstanding inequities in access and opportunities [worsen](#) as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students of color and students from low-income backgrounds faced more barriers to participate in online learning and, when schools reopened, had less access to after-school and extracurricular programming to supplement their learning. Dallas ISD leaders viewed their ESSER funding as an opportunity to expand their extended learning plan.

As part of a comprehensive approach, the district focused heavily on an extended school year option to address unfinished learning. To extend the school year, schools went through a six-month planning process that required 80% of staff and families to weigh in on the change. Forty-six schools, serving 22,000 students, implemented an extended school year. In the interest of increasing learning time as a means of increasing equity, all high-priority campuses (schools that have large populations of students of color, emerging bilingual students, and students from low-income backgrounds) were required to go through the planning process.

Those same high-priority schools were priorities for after-school programming, which rolled out at 55 schools that served a majority of students from low-income backgrounds and did not have access to the same enrichment activities that wealthier schools in the district did. The after-school programming is free to all students and run by school staff for three hours Monday-Friday for the entire academic calendar year. Activities, including accelerating learning opportunities in small groups, are offered on a school-by-school basis based on student need and interest. After-school site coordinators receive a \$5,000 stipend; the staff are paid \$31 an hour. The program will collect data on re-enrollment, growth on the MAP assessment, and how engaged students feel. This data, as well as other assessments, will be essential for understanding the impact of the district's approach.

“We are looking to use extended time to focus partly on academic acceleration and intervention...and to provide enrichment opportunities. It is really about equity for us. We know that many after-school programs in our city are located in geographies that do not provide access, particularly to Black students, or they come with significant cost.”

—DEREK LITTLE, DEPUTY CHIEF OF TEACHING AND LEARNING, DALLAS ISD



Lessons Learned

- 1. Stakeholder engagement is crucial, especially for programs outside of normal school hours.** Dallas ISD leaders believe in the equalizing power of their programming, but students will only gain those benefits if they attend. This requires family involvement and understanding of the goals of the programs. It also requires enough teachers and staff to operate the necessary programming. Leaders surveyed families at multiple stages, gauging interest before the program started and its impact once it was in motion.
- 2. Be clear and upfront about the program goals.** Rolling out a new program is no easy feat. It is made easier by having clear program goals; Dallas ISD had a clear goal to create a program that would provide academic and social-emotional enrichment opportunities.
- 3. Establish a plan for collecting and monitoring data.** Efficacy is an important part of any program and measuring efficacy is easier when the infrastructure is already in place before the program begins. This also requires setting up a clear vision for impact. Dallas ISD is measuring the retention of students in the district, how the extra time accelerates academic growth on formative and summative state assessments, as well as interest development in students as evidenced by attendance data.



SAFE & EQUITABLE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Too often, schools focus on teaching social-emotional skills and [not enough on creating safe and equitable learning environments](#), especially for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Every student deserves a safe learning environment that fosters growth and belonging. Creating a positive school climate is particularly pressing right now as students have faced pandemic-related stress and turmoil. Districts can use their ESSER funds to help create safe and equitable learning environments.

What key questions should advocates ask to evaluate whether their district is planning practices that create a high-quality, safe, and equitable learning environment?

- Are students with the greatest need (e.g., students from low-income backgrounds) prioritized?
- Is the practice free and easily accessible?
- Does the district have a [multi-tiered system](#) with universal supports as well as targeted supports based on individual student needs?
- Does the practice encourage building strong relationships between students and certified professionals (e.g., teachers, school counselors, social workers, clinicians, etc.)?
- Is the district conscious of cultural and linguistic responsiveness and/or engaging families and communities?
- Does the practice have a specific goal (e.g., increasing student engagement, supporting student mental health)?
- Does the practice use an assessment to help identify an appropriate intervention (e.g., the Devereux Student Strength Assessment [DESSA] System)?
- Will districts or schools collect and publicly report data on the program?



Look for:

- Evidence-based practices that build positive relationships (e.g., restorative practices that build and repair relationships when conflict occurs)
- Culturally and linguistically sustaining practices to create inclusive environments
- Practices focused on student mental health and wellness
- Adults in schools who are trained to support students socially, emotionally, and academically (e.g., school counselors, school psychologists, restorative justice coordinators)

Beware of:

- Punitive practices used to alienate or remove students from classrooms (e.g., suspensions and expulsions)
- Practices that police students and treat students as threats (e.g., threat assessments, metal detectors)
- Having adults who police students in schools, but not enough support staff dedicated to students' development (e.g., school resource officers but no school counselors or nurses)

STUDENT, FAMILY & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Schools with strong family and community engagement [are more likely to](#) improve students' academic outcomes, have better parent-teacher relationships, and create a more positive school environment for students and families. For these reasons, [family and community engagement is key](#) to addressing students' unfinished learning.

What questions should advocates ask to evaluate whether their district is planning for high-quality and equitable student, family, and community engagement practices?

- Is the practice targeting students with the greatest need and their families (e.g., students of color or students from low-income backgrounds)?
- Is the practice evidence-based? Is there research showing that this practice will increase partnerships between families and schools and increase student learning (i.e., rooted in trust, linked to student learning, based on student and family assets, culturally responsive, collaborative and interactive)?
- Are the practices supported and embraced by district leadership, integrated into all district strategies and practices, and sustainable through long-term resources and infrastructure?
- Does the practice leverage community expertise, partnership, and engagement from students' own communities?
- Does the practice put the responsibility of family engagement on practitioners (rather than families) to build trusting relationships rooted in two-way communication?
- Does the district provide training and ongoing professional development to support family engagement?
- Will districts and /or schools collect and publicly report data on the program?



Look for:

- Practices rooted in evidence (e.g., Dr. Karen Mapp's [dual-capacity framework](#))
- Engagement practices that have strong links to accelerating student learning
- Family engagement practices that are integrated into the strategic plans of the school/district as key for student learning
- Practices that are [solidarity-driven, liberatory, and equity focused](#)

Beware of:

- Focusing on niche programs instead of the ongoing practice of family engagement
- Practices rooted in a deficit approach that prioritize fixing “problems” over collaborating with families as equal partners and decision-makers
- Building capacity of families without also providing training and development for educators
- Not communicating in or providing translation for families that speak a language other than English

Spotlight on Alexandria City Public Schools

While located in one of the most affluent cities in Virginia, 60% of families in Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) rely on school meals to feed their children, and many were not aware of the resources available to them through the district because the district faces barriers connecting with families whose home languages are not English.

When schools were closed during the pandemic, ACPS opened a multilingual help line for families to get assistance with technology or distance learning. Close to 80% of the calls were in Spanish from families looking for help with medical needs, technology, and even where to get food. ACPS saw a need and used a portion its ESSER funds to hire an additional division-wide Spanish-speaking family liaison. The school board also allocated funds in its operating budget to increase the role of the division-wide Arabic-speaking and Amharic-speaking family liaisons, from part-time to full-time, to meet the needs of all families.

ACPS created the additional role and framework using the [Dual Capacity Building Framework](#), which is designed to support the development of family engagement strategies, policies, and programs. The role was filled with an individual who was from the community and understood the needs and barriers for families. The district leaders see this person as a connector, bringing families to the resources that they need, connecting them to internet providers, food banks, housing subsidies, medicine, etc. Their hope is to build on what they have started by training more staff on how to work with families from a cultural competency lens and build a community of Spanish-, Amharic-, and Arabic-speaking families that are able to be advocates and support programs in the district. Their metric for success will be increased educator competence when communicating with families and increased family engagement.



Lessons Learned

Krishna J. Leyva, family and community engagement manager at ACPS, identified a couple of key considerations and lessons learned:

1. Ask families what they need. Before the pandemic, the district held a successful family and community evaluation survey complete with focus groups and used that as an initial planning tool for family needs. When the help line was set up, they were able to gather additional data about family needs and specifically hired someone who could support families with these needs (e.g., getting connected to a food bank or help with a [Pandemic Electronic Benefit card](#)).

2. The district should be responsible for meeting families where they are, not the other way around. Before adding the additional Spanish-speaking role, ACPS added similar roles in two other languages, knowing that simply having translated documents was not enough for families. A person with an understanding of the community and the ways in which members of the community best receive and access information is essential. For example, communication at the district is now offered through WhatsApp because the survey showed that most immigrant families used the service as their main form of communication. The district recently launched [ParentSquare](#) as its new mass communication tool to communicate with families in their preferred language through consistent two-way communication.

TEACHER RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

Nearly half of U.S. schools are facing COVID-related [staffing shortages](#). These shortages, due to factors like early retirement, burnout, and teachers exiting the profession in response to negative school climates, are so severe in some districts that leaders have been forced to send staff from their central offices to fill in as substitute teachers. Districts can use their ARP funds to address staffing shortages and provide incentives for hard-to-fill positions. At the same time, districts must think about [long-term solutions](#), such as ensuring safe and responsive working conditions for staff and increasing support and compensation. It is important that district leaders use data on precisely where staffing shortages are most acute so they can develop the most effective and targeted [policy](#) response.

What key questions should advocates ask about using ARP funds to address teacher shortages?

- Does the district plan to collect and publish school-level data annually on teacher turnover? Is it disaggregated by race/ethnicity?
- Is the district using supports/incentives to hire and retain staff in schools serving higher percentages of students of color and students from low-income backgrounds?
- Is the district using supports/incentives to hire and retain staff specifically for hard-to-staff subjects (i.e., special education or any other hard-to-staff subject that the district indicates)?
- Is the district specifically targeting hiring or retention for math and English and other subjects that are historically short-staffed?



- Who is the district offering incentives to in order to staff schools (e.g., retired teachers, substitute teachers, tutors, etc.)?
- Is the district creating a pipeline for temporary staff to get certified to become full-time educators (e.g., [Grow Your Own](#) programs)?
- Are district leaders investing in strategies to recruit, support, and retain educators of color and multilingual educators?

Look for:

- Districts that are also prioritizing ongoing support, including safe and responsive working conditions, for current educators and staff (not just newly recruited teachers)
- Districts that are prioritizing hiring culturally and linguistically diverse staff
- Districts that are investing in evidence-based practices (e.g., [Grow Your Own](#) programs)

Beware of:

- Districts that are hiring large numbers of novice teachers to fill staffing shortages
- Districts that are lowering standards (e.g., not requiring college degrees or evidence of preparation to become a teacher) to hire teachers, particularly in schools that serve high concentrations of students of color or students from low-income backgrounds

Spotlight on Providence Public School District

Providence Public School District (PPSD) in Rhode Island, which serves over [80% students of color](#), is using their ESSER funds to recruit and retain teachers. Providence competes with other large cities nearby so has had difficulty attracting candidates. After looking at vacancy data on open positions and the number of applicants for each, PPSD decided to offer incentives for the hardest positions to fill: math, science, special education, dual language/bilingual, speech and language pathology, school psychology, social work, library, or nursing. Anyone who joins the team in one of these areas is eligible for up to \$13,000 in incentives.

The district also provides financial incentives for signing a contract early, relocating from another state, and having three or more years of experience. For example, candidates hired in hard to fill areas receive a \$5,000 stipend immediately. If they sign a contract early (by March 1), they receive an additional \$2,500.

To improve long-term hiring trends, PPSD is conducting surveys or interviews with all candidates who accept positions to understand why they were interested in PPSD, if the financial incentives made a difference, and what incentives they look for when applying to positions.



Lessons Learned

Gina D’Addario, PPSD’s senior director of human resources, identified a few key considerations and lessons learned:

- 1. Getting people in the door should not be more important than who you hire.** Many PPSD schools already face challenges due to being turnaround schools, or schools facing intervention, in addition to staffing shortages. Hiring adults who are not good fits for the schools can be more detrimental than helpful. That’s why PPSD is changing some of its screening processes and working conditions, including giving school leadership teams more autonomy and implementing a new applicant tracking system to support with screening and selection.
- 2. New people may come for the incentives, but districts need to support and reward current teachers.** In addition to incentives for new hires, PPSD is using ARP funds to offer current employees referral bonuses, pay for teachers to get additional certifications, and pay teachers an additional \$500 stipend plus an hourly rate to help with recruitment as part of its Campus Champions program. Current teachers also received a one-time \$3,000 bonus last school year that was funded by ESSER.
- 3. Hiring strong teachers requires strong hiring practices.** According to D’Addario, PPSD was about 10 years behind in their hiring infrastructure (i.e., not enough applicants and no systems in place). The district has been working on systematizing the hiring process. This includes training hiring managers to norm processes, gathering additional data on vacancies, emphasizing early hiring, and placing surveys of current teachers and exit data in one place (not siloed as it had been in previous years). The district is also working on retention strategies.





DATA EQUITY & REPORTING TRANSPARENCY

Data is key to ensuring district ARP plans are prioritizing equity. Not only should district leaders use data to drive their spending decisions, they must also ensure their plan for using ARP dollars is transparent, easily understandable, and accessible to a wide range of stakeholders. This transparency is a fundamental step for district leaders to actively communicate and engage stakeholders in the ARP decision-making process.

What key questions should advocates ask about data equity and reporting transparency?

- Does the district have a website showing ARP spending?
- Is the website regularly updated?
- Is the website useable and understandable (e.g., does it have a dashboard)?
- Does the website provide detail on how the funds will be used? Or is it high-level (e.g., “nutrition services” versus “giving school cafeteria workers an 8% raise”)?
- Does the website link to resources where families and other stakeholders can get more information?
- Does the district provide detail on efforts to engage families and communities in ARP decision-making?
- Is the school board monitoring and providing [updates](#) to the community on how ARP funds are being used and its impact on students, especially those who are underserved?

Look for:

- Easy-to-understand information on district websites that takes only a few clicks to access

Beware of:

- No information about ESSER spending, outdated information, or information that is difficult to access and understand