

Public and Stakeholder Input on

The Connecticut State Department of Education Plan for the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund

DUE MAY 24, 2021 AT 11:59PM

Introduction

Our Connecticut school communities—with students at the center—continue to be bold and innovative as they respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The United States Department of Education (USED) has recognized the importance of supporting these efforts, particularly with the infusion of resources to support education in Connecticut. The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ARP ESSER) has granted the State of Connecticut an additional \$1,105,919,874, providing the opportunity to develop bold, high-impact plans to address the substantial disruptions to student learning, interpersonal interactions, and social-emotional well-being. Our collective efforts must be grounded in equity and access. While earlier sources of federal relief funding during the pandemic supported our ability to first survive, and then thrive, ARP ESSER is Connecticut’s opportunity to transform our schools.

The federal government has requested that each state submit a plan (the ARP ESSER Plan) addressing how it will use ARP ESSER funds to support sustained access to in-person instruction and direct the funding to address the academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs of students. This plan must be developed by the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) and submitted to the USED by **June 7, 2021**. To aid in the planning process, the federal government provided a [template](#) which will be utilized in the structure of this document.

Meaningful Consultation with School Communities, Stakeholders, and the Public

We need your input - a major priority for developing Connecticut’s ARP ESSER Plan is to engage in meaningful consultation with stakeholders and the public. Below you will see five sections, which were pulled directly from the template, which we are seeking your input on:

- Describing the State’s Current Status and Needs
- Safely Reopening Schools and Sustaining their Safe Operations
- Maximizing State-Level Funds to Support Students
- Supporting LEAs in Planning for and Meeting Students’ Needs
- Supporting the Educator Workforce

In the following pages, you will see the above sections along with some information regarding CSDE’s approach to the topic so far, and questions to guide your thinking and feedback. **Please read this document in its entirety and share your feedback by submitting your comment at SDE.ARPESSEER@ct.gov and/or joining one of the two stakeholder public forums:**

- Thursday, May 20, from 5:30pm to 7:30pm; [Register Here](#).
- Friday, May 21, from 8:30am to 10:30am; [Register Here](#).

Bringing diverse perspectives to the table is essential to implementing a plan that advances equity and access while responding to the needs of students, families, and educators. We thank you for doing your part in progressing towards our collective goal of reimagining schools to transform students’ lives.

STATE-LEVEL PRIORITIES

The foundation of the Connecticut ARP ESSER Plan is built upon the following CSDE State-Level Priorities, as outlined in the [CSDE ARP ESSER Guidance document](#). These priorities are intended to guide districts in their planning for ARP ESSER spending and to reflect the collective call to think boldly and create transformative programs for the students of Connecticut.

Learning Acceleration, Academic Renewal, and Student Enrichment: Advancing equity and access in education for students in Connecticut remain top priorities. The CSDE continues to focus on academic supports to accelerate learning for our students, particularly those disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

Family and Community Connections: The complex issues brought about by the pandemic have made it clear that the success of schools, families, and communities are interdependent and all have a stake in students' well-being. The CSDE believes investing in mutually beneficial school-family-community partnerships will not only support students to achieve their full potential, but it will also strengthen families and stabilize communities.

Social, Emotional, Mental Health of the Students and of our School Staff: The school community experience during the pandemic has been one of collective challenge and trauma. The CSDE is taking a coordinated approach to providing social-emotional supports to students and staff that will allow the agency to build upon existing efforts already underway in districts across the state.

Strategic Use of Technology, Staff Development, and the Digital Divide: Applying what we have learned during the pandemic requires careful consideration of the importance of student access to in-person learning and enrichment balanced with the strategic use of technology to engage and expand learning opportunities.

Building Safe and Healthy Schools: Ensuring our school buildings are safe and healthy environments that enable all of our students to excel remains an important aspect of recovering from COVID-19. The CSDE is committed to supporting districts in their efforts to invest in changes that support the physical health and safety of our students and staff.

DESCRIBING THE STATE’S CURRENT STATUS AND NEEDS

What USED is asking CSDE to include in its plan:

“The United States Department of Education recognizes the extraordinary efforts made by Connecticut, districts, and educators to support students during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this section, the CSDE must describe the progress they have made, the priorities, and student needs guiding their ARP ESSER funding decisions.”

CSDE approach so far:

Despite being an unprecedented year that challenged our society, economy, and schools, Connecticut has been recognized as a leader in the nation for [its approach to reopening schools](#) and utilizing data to drive decision making. Below we highlight just a sample of the collective **progress** in Connecticut school communities and the **promising practices** developed in school districts across the state.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, CSDE has prioritized providing [support, guidance, and resources to school leaders, families, students, and educators](#). This has included maintaining a strong connection with the [Connecticut Department of Public Health, to facilitate things like prioritizing vaccinations for school staff and giving school communities priority access to COVID-19 testing](#).

While there is no replacement for in-person learning, [Connecticut addressed the digital divide](#) so that access to devices and connectivity would not present a barrier to learning. In addition, CSDE has provided free access [to digital resources to support online and offline learning](#) and [to technology](#) to aid in the facilitation of virtual, remote, and hybrid learning. CSDE also recognizes, and committed to addressing, [the social-emotional needs of students](#) that existed prior to—and were exacerbated by— COVID-19.

In March 2021, CSDE launched the [AccelerateCT Taskforce](#) to create a framework to assist districts in promoting renewal, reducing opportunity gaps, accelerating learning, and advancing equity post-pandemic. The document’s publication is forthcoming.

As a state, we have made great progress, but we know there is still work to be done. ARP ESSER provides the opportunity to utilize our state level priorities (seen on page 2) and create initiatives for all students—especially those disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.

Question to guide your thinking

Given the progress and promising practices coming from the CSDE in the last year, are there any other unidentified needs you would like to mention? In particular, what other needs should be accounted for when it comes to student populations most impacted by the pandemic?

SAFELY REOPENING SCHOOLS AND SUSTAINING THEIR SAFE OPERATIONS

What USED is asking CSDE to include in its plan:

“The Department recognizes that safely reopening schools and sustaining their safe operations to maximize in-person instruction is essential for student learning and student well-being, and especially for being able to address the educational inequities that have been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this section, CSDE will describe how it will support their LEAs in this vital area.”

CSDE’s approach so far

The CSDE has prioritized [keeping schools open safely](#) and has created a suite of resources with tools and guidance to help [districts](#), [families](#), and communities. All resources can be [found here](#).

Since September 2020, the CSDE has been collecting, on a weekly basis, the Learning Model (in-person, hybrid, or remote) offered by every district in every grade. These data are published on the [CSDE’s data portal](#), [EdSight](#), and updated on a weekly basis. These data have been used to strategize and ensure that districts receive the support necessary to move their learning models toward a fully in-person model in every grade. Thanks to these efforts, for the week of May 3-7, 2021, for the first time since March of 2020, 100% of Connecticut’s districts are operating either in-person or hybrid as their predominant school model.

Planning for the 2021-2022 school year, the CSDE has already established that in-person learning opportunities have been, and will be, a priority in Connecticut. Preliminarily, CSDE has provided clear guidance to districts that there will not be a mandate for continued remote learning, so long as that remains consistent with public health guidelines in place at that time. CSDE will be issuing additional guidance to provide guardrails for any potential use of technology inside and outside of the classroom, which will be developed with stakeholder input and consistent with statutory requirements in place.

Question to guide your thinking

How might CSDE best support school districts in sustaining their safe operations and preparing for Fall 2021?

MAXIMIZING STATE-LEVEL FUNDS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS

What USED is asking CSDE to include in its plan:

*“The Department recognizes that States have an extraordinary opportunity to address the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on underserved students through the American Rescue Plan Act’s required State set-asides to address the **academic impact of lost instructional time**, provide **summer learning and enrichment programs**, and provide **comprehensive afterschool programs**. In this section, CSDE will describe its evidence-based strategies for these resources.”*

CSDE’s approach so far:

The pandemic has caused a substantial disruption to our children’s learning, interpersonal interactions, and social-emotional well-being. The CSDE has allocated \$11 million of ARP ESSER in the form of [Summer Programming Grants](#) to fund engaging, transformative summer enrichment opportunities that help children re-engage with academic content and build relationships with peers. (Award notifications are forthcoming.)

To address the academic impact of lost instructional time, CSDE plans to provide statewide access to resources for core subject areas designed to supplement district core curricula scope, sequence, and learning outcomes as part of the ongoing commitment to providing all public school systems and educators with a model curriculum over the next three years in identified core academic areas.

CSDE is also considering how the ARP ESSER funding can expand comprehensive after school programs and provide additional social, mental, and emotional health and additional academic supports to Connecticut’s students and staff.

Question to guide your thinking

What ideas do you have to address “the academic impact of lost instructional time, provide summer learning and enrichment programs, and provide comprehensive afterschool programs”? Think about what this support looks like, how it addresses vulnerable students, and if it serves students who may have been the most disengaged this year.

SUPPORTING DISTRICTS IN PLANNING FOR AND MEETING STUDENTS' NEEDS

What USED is asking CSDE to include in its plan:

"The Department recognizes that the safe return to in-person instruction must be accompanied by a focus on meeting students' academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs, and by addressing the opportunity gaps that existed before – and were exacerbated by – the pandemic. In this section, CSDE will describe how it will support districts in developing high-quality plans for district's use of ARP ESSER funds to achieve these objectives."

CSDE's approach so far:

Throughout the year, the CSDE has prioritized developing a thorough process and system of support for districts as they worked to utilize federal relief funds. The key ways that the CSDE supports districts in developing high-quality plans is through:

Guidance and Inspiration: The CSDE seeks to provide guidance, or a road map, to districts through setting State-level priorities and publishing Guidance documents such as the [CSDE ARP ESSER Guidance](#) document. In addition, CSDE aims to spark innovation and encourage districts to reimagine their schools to transform students' lives through innovative initiatives, webinars, and other published material mentioned throughout this document.

Technical Support: Crafting high-quality plans that are implementable amidst a pandemic while running a district will take a concerted effort from the entire school community. The CSDE will support districts in this process by providing ample technical support from a variety of sources, including but not limited to our engagement through the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents of a dedicated team of experienced administrators (ESSER Advisors), internal cross-divisional teams of content experts, and Program Managers who work directly with each district.

The CSDE has already engaged in a webinar and multiple communications with districts on their development of the local school district plans and intends to continue this approach by providing districts a comprehensive application for funding that will support their planning, align with the state priorities, and emphasize the focus on meeting students' academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs while addressing the opportunity gaps exacerbated by the pandemic.

Questions to guide your thinking

How might you want CSDE to support districts in developing high-quality plans for their use of ARP ESSER funds?

SUPPORTING THE EDUCATOR WORKFORCE

What USED is asking CSDE to include in its plan:

“The Department recognizes the toll that the COVID-19 pandemic has taken on the Nation’s educators as well as students. In this section, CSDE will describe strategies for supporting and stabilizing the educator workforce and for making staffing decisions that will support students’ academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs.”

CSDE’s approach so far:

In order to achieve the goals of learning acceleration, academic renewal, and student enrichment, the CSDE recognizes the need for a qualified and well-trained educator workforce. Especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to attract more diverse talent and provide support to existing educators.

One immediate way CSDE served educators was by allowing districts a variety of [flexible measures](#) which included allowances for daily/long-term substitutes, expansion of [pathways for para-educators](#), and expanded utilization of education candidates to support instructional needs. In partnership with the Regional Educational Service Center Alliance, the CSDE has expanded mentor training through CT’s Teacher Education and Mentoring ([TEAM](#)) Program, has expanded reviewer training, and has re-designed mentor update training to include modules on social-emotional learning, equity, and cultural competency. TEAM typically supports all new teachers, leading to some of the highest retention figures in the nation for early career teachers.

CSDE is dedicated to the long-term stability of the educator workforce and has invested in partnerships and strategies that inspire younger generations to join the profession. One investment is “[NextGen Educators Program](#),” which enhances teaching innovation and teaching quality by bringing together a cohort of outstanding Teaching Fellows who support K-12 students. Another long-term strategy to help that supports Connecticut efforts to diversify the educator workforce is the [EdRising](#) program, which includes curriculum, teacher training, and “Beginning to Teach” micro-credentials for students, which is the centerpiece of the CSDE “grow your own” teacher recruitment strategy. CSDE has also been recognized by other states for [TEACH CT](#), the online marketing and branding strategy used to recruit the next generation of educators, which continues to yield positive results during the pandemic.

Questions to guide your thinking

How might CSDE best support the educator workforce—both in supporting current educators to address students’ academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs and in recruiting a diverse pool of new educators to fill vacancies caused by the pandemic?

We thank you for taking the time to provide input. CSDE will continue to engage in dialogue with our stakeholders. To submit this feedback directly to CSDE, save this form and email it to SDE.ARPESSER@ct.gov.

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