



CCERC

**Identifying Effective and Equitable
Socio-Emotional Supports for
Students and Educators**

Executive Summary

JULY 2025

**Center for Connecticut
Education Research Collaboration**

Partner Institutions





Identifying Effective and Equitable Socio-Emotional Supports for Students and Educators

Executive Summary

JULY 2025

Project Lead.....Sandra M. Chafouleas, University of Connecticut

Co-PIs.....Latoya Haynes-Thoby, University of Connecticut
Thomas Lee Morgan, Sacred Heart University
Michael J. Strambler, Yale University

Research AssistantsMolly Ferreira
Michael Weiner
Kathleen M. Williamson

About CCERC

The Center for Connecticut Education Research Collaboration (CCERC) is a research partnership between the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) and institutions of higher education across Connecticut. CSDE sets the agenda, identifies projects, and allocates funding for CCERC. The University of Connecticut manages funding and provides an administrative team. A Steering Committee composed of researchers from various Connecticut institutions guides the administrative team in developing and approving research projects and reports. Researchers from Connecticut universities and colleges constitute the research teams. The mission of CCERC is to address pressing issues in the state's public schools through high quality evaluation and research that leverages the expertise of researchers from different institutions possessing varied methodological expertise and content knowledge.

CCERC was formed initially using federal relief funds to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning and well-being and recovery efforts in the state's schools. The partnership was subsequently institutionalized to respond to ongoing evaluation and research needs of the CSDE, provide research opportunities for Connecticut researchers, and foster collaboration across the state's institutions of higher education.





Identifying Effective and Equitable Socio-Emotional Supports for Students and Educators

Executive Summary

JULY 2025



Isolation, trauma, challenge, and loss defined much of 2020 and 2021 for many and has had broad and not yet fully understood impacts. Many districts have used ARP ESSER (American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds to hire or develop support structures for students during this difficult time. (Stock Photo)

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the socio-emotional well-being of students, teachers, administrators, and communities in deep and ongoing ways. Isolation, trauma, challenge, and loss defined much of 2020 and 2021 for many and has had broad and not yet fully understood impacts. Many districts have used ARP ESSER (American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds to hire or develop support structures for students during this difficult time. This study provides a deeper understanding of the types of proposed supports during and following the pandemic, and the potential effectiveness of those strategies. Results provide a map of the current landscape as well as suggested paths forward in supporting individuals, schools, and the communities to which they belong. The mixed methods project was guided by the following research questions:

1. What do districts report as planned socio-emotional supports?
2. What do districts and schools report as the socio-emotional supports actually being delivered, for whom and under what conditions?
3. How do districts and schools report that the pandemic generally, periods of isolation due to remote learning, and return to in-person schooling have influenced the socio-emotional well-being of students, teachers, and administrators?
4. How are school district and building leaders supporting teachers and other school staff to promote equitable so-

- cio-emotional outcomes for students?
5. How do key groups (students, teachers, school leaders, district leaders, families, community members) perceive effectiveness of the supports being delivered?

This overall project involved three parts: (1) analysis of districts' ARP ESSER plans with regard to social, emotional, and mental health supports of students and staff; (2) a district leader survey; and (3) interviews with district leaders.



(Stock Photo)



Isolation, trauma, challenge, and loss defined much of 2020 and 2021 ... Many districts have used American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds to hire or develop support structures for students during this difficult time.

Executive Summary

PART ONE

In Part 1 of this report, findings are provided from the analysis of districts' ARP ESSER plans in Priority Area 3 (social, emotional, and mental health supports of students and staff).

Five priority areas outline the use of ARP ESSER funds and goals in Connecticut; this report focuses on Priority 3, the social, emotional, and mental health supports for students and staff. Connecticut districts submitted ARP ESSER plans that capture details about the social, emotional, and mental health supports each district plans to implement, as well as budgetary details and background information about the district itself. Coders categorized district ARP ESSER plans by the types and quality of planned socio-emotional supports and used the recommendations provided in the October 2021 report by US Department of Education and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health Needs, as the organizing framework to evaluate the quality of the supports.

PART TWO

In Part 2, findings are provided from the analysis of the District Leader Survey.

District leaders in all 201 districts across the state were invited to complete a survey in the fall of 2023. The survey asked district leaders to report on the following district practices and processes from Fall 2021-Fall 2024: 1) what districts planned to do to provide social-emotional supports; 2) what supports districts actually implemented (across elementary, middle, and high school levels); 3) what student groups districts targeted with those supports; 4) whether and/or how districts supported teachers and staff; 4) how districts addressed equity; and 5) how districts assessed the effectiveness of implemented social-emotional supports.

The degree to which findings can be generalized to the state is limited given that only 15% of districts responded. However, findings still hold value for understanding some district efforts and challenges, especially when considered in combination with other data in the other two reports. For services directed towards students, individual-level services and universal school-based services were reported as the most common approaches used by districts. For the latter, social and emotional learning (SEL) was a commonly reported approach with Second Step, RULER, and Responsive Classroom being the top three programs used. Although districts gave attention to gaps in students' social and emotional concerns across groups, they tended to focus more on students in special education. The greatest challenge reported for supporting students' was the lack of time available for engaging

in programming. Regarding staff, district leaders reported hiring and professional development as key approaches for supporting students' and educators' well-being. They also reported recognizing educators' efforts and providing group activities as a means of teacher support. Similar to reported efforts to support students, leaders reported the lack of staff and staff time as the main challenges to supporting staff.

PART THREE

In Part 3, findings are provided from the analysis of the District Leader Interviews

The third component of this comprehensive mixed methods research project aimed at understanding and enhancing how public school districts in Connecticut are fostering equitable socio-emotional outcomes for students in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This portion of the project involved interviewing district leaders from three districts to understand how socio-emotional supports were understood and implemented for students, educators, and families. This study is driven by the pressing need to address the multifaceted challenges posed by the pandemic, particularly in terms of its impact on the emotional and mental well-being of students, educators, and administrators. The primary objective of this research was to delve into how district leaders responded to these challenges with a focus on equity, ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, have access to the support they need to succeed. Through the use of interviews, the study aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of how Connecticut's public school districts are navigating the complex landscape of socio-emotional support in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a strong emphasis on equity, effectiveness, and the well-being of the entire school community.



 (Stock Photo)

FINDINGS: PART 1

The vast majority of Connecticut districts (94%) submitted ARP ESSER Plans (188 out of 201).

- Of the 188 districts that submitted ARP ESSER Plans a little more than three-fourths (77%) planned to use funds specifically for social, emotional, and mental health of students and staff (Priority 3). The remaining 23% of districts did not indicate specific allocation to Priority 3.
- Districts planned to spend over \$80 million of ARP ESSER funding on the social, emotional, and mental health of students and staff (Priority 3). On average, 16% of proposed ARP ESSER funds per district were allocated to Priority 3.
- Almost all (97%) of the proposed strategies were strongly aligned with recommendations provided by the US Department of Education.

- With regard to the comprehensiveness of proposed strategies in relation to the seven recommendations provided by the US Department of Education, a little over three-fourths (77%) of proposed strategies addressed one to two recommendations, whereas almost one-quarter (23%) included more than three.
- A total of 460 strategies were proposed across the 144 districts that planned to use funds for Priority 3. Over half (52%) of those districts included plans to enhance workforce capacity, with hiring staff (63%) proposed more than skill-building (32%).
- The majority of proposed strategies were focused district-wide (77%) and were directed toward universal supports (59%) whereas 22% focused on targeted or intensive supports and 13% on addressing across tiers of intensity.



(Stock Photo)

FINDINGS: PART 2 AND 3

All 32 surveyed districts reported that they implemented social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) supports for the 2021-23 and 2023-24 school years.

- Over 50% of districts reported that they implemented social, emotional, and behavioral supports a great deal during the school years.
- These supports were most commonly funded by federal grants, state grants, and district or school financial funding.
- Most district leaders indicated that they provided universal/schoolwide supports (88%, commonly referred to as Tier 1 supports) for SEB programs.

- The three most popular SEL programs implemented during this period were **Second Step, RULER and Responsive Classroom**, which were reported by 12 (43%), 9 (32%), and 5 (18%) district respondents, respectively.
- Over 90% of districts reported they planned to **continue these SEL programs** in the 2023-2024 school years.
- The majority (over 93%) of districts reported that they provided resources to students to seek **supports outside of school** during the 2021-23 and 2023-24 school years.

In Part 2, findings are provided from the analysis of the District Leader Survey.
In Part 3, findings are provided from the analysis of the District Leader Interviews.

District Services & Challenges Related to Students

- Nearly 90% of responding district leaders reported an increase in students seeking support for social, emotional, and/or behavioral concerns.
- Most districts reported implementing schoolwide and individual-level services related to social, emotional, and behavioral supports.
- Social and emotional learning programs were commonly implemented, with the most popular programs being Second Step, RULER, and Responsive Classroom in that order.
- Districts reported gaps in students' social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes for various demographic groups, and districts tended to focus on reducing gaps in outcomes for students receiving special education services.
- The greatest challenges around implementation involved finding the time to provide services as well as the staffing to provide them.

District Services & Challenges Related to Staff

- Districts used staff hiring and professional development as key means for supporting staff and students.
- The most common approaches noted by districts were:
providing them with professional development;
acknowledgment and recognition; and
group activities (e.g. yoga, classes, meditation, walking clubs)
- Of the supports offered to staff, they used professional development the most.
- The most common challenge concerning staff reported by leaders was their lack of personnel and time to implement programming **supports outside of school** during the 2021-23 and 2023-24 school years.



ct.gov/ccerc

CCERC Administrative Team

Ajit Gopalakrishnan

Co-director

Chief Performance Officer, CSDE

Dr. Morgaen Donaldson

Co-director

Associate Dean for Research, University of Connecticut

Dr. Alexandra Lamb

Project Manager

Postdoctoral Research Associate, University of Connecticut

Steering Committee

Dr. Eric Loken

University of Connecticut

Dr. Betsy McCoach

University of Connecticut

Dr. Kayon Morgan

University of Hartford

Dr. Michael Strambler

Yale University

Dr. Tricia Stewart

Western Connecticut State University

Dr. Christopher Trombly

Southern Connecticut State University

Dr. Wesley Younts

University of Hartford