

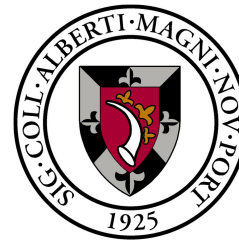


Theories of Action in ARP ESSER Plans Executive Summary

JULY 2025

**Center for Connecticut
Education Research Collaboration**

Partner Institutions





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Joy S. Kaufman, Ph.D.¹

Jennie Weiner, Ed.D.²

Alexandra J. Lamb, Ph.D.²

Jacob Werblow, Ph.D.³

¹ Yale School of Medicine

² University of Connecticut

³ Central Connecticut State University

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.





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Executive Summary

This project aimed to understand the theories of action embedded in Connecticut school districts' ARP ESSER proposals. A theory of action is the logic behind how elements of a plan might be connected and thus successful, specifically the objectives, levers, and outcomes of a proposed initiative or change. Objectives are the goals of a proposed change or intervention that usually address an identified need. Levers are the activities and tools to meet those objectives. Outcomes are the measures to evaluate to effectiveness of the proposed change. Taken together in the context of the ARP ESSER plans, these elements offer insight into how school districts in Connecticut think about the process of changing practices and implementing new initiatives. This study investigates these collections of objectives, levers, and outcomes and their resultant theories of actions in both the plans and in situ to better understand how planning practices work and how we might better support district leaders in those processes.

The study had three goals:

1. Identify the strategies proposed across districts for determined priority areas;
2. Create a meta-theory of action per each priority area;
3. Conduct focus groups with district leaders and plan implementers to understand how these theories of action are implemented.



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Key Findings

Planning:

- **Similarity Across District Plans.** Districts across Connecticut, regardless of district demographics, selected similar objectives, levers, and outcomes in planning for ARP-ESSER funds.
- **Initiatives involving student learning offered tight alignment between need, intervention, and desired outcomes.** Districts turned to a set of commonly used interventions often focused on increasing staffing to give students more individualized instruction.
- **Levers for building community and family relationships were more similar across districts than were levers for other priorities.** Most of these initiatives were oriented towards building parents' capacity to attend to school needs (e.g., academic support).
- **Planning for student well-being was the most dissimilar across districts.** There was less alignment between objectives, levers, and outcomes for this priority than others, indicating a lack of options for districts to address their socio-emotional needs.

Implementation :

- **Plans and Corresponding Theories of Action Filled Pre-existing Gaps.** Theories of action and underlying interventions most often included: (1) reinstating or bringing in programs of interest that were not economically feasible previously and, (2) increasing the number of staff.
- **Human Capital was a Key Determinant in Implementation Success.** Districts reported implementing most of their intended interventions. Participants noted that when things were not successful it often had to do with human capital constraints, raising important questions about the efficacy of districts' initial plans.
- **Reported Outcomes were Strong, but Major Needs Remain.** While participants spoke of the benefits, student and school needs continued to grow after the pandemic. With the potential loss of ESSER funds and thus the interventions, many participants felt they were losing a lifeline.
- **Sustainability was a Major Concern.** The responses to questions about sustainability of initiatives were mixed. While investments in new physical or technological resources such as Language Line were sustainable, with the exception of more affluent districts, there were widespread concerns about how to sustain human capital investments.
- **Need to Improve the Planning Process through Support and Oversight.** When asked for feedback for the state, districts noted: (1) appreciation for directives regarding priority areas; (2) a wish for more support for implementation and managing the grant; and (3) a desire for more accountability regarding spending and how it aligned to the outcomes.

Recommendations

1. **Create a state-sponsored clearinghouse to support district initiatives.** If the state functioned as a clearinghouse to aggregate and monitor proposed interventions, it would be more aware of potential resource limitations and able to guide districts that implement the same strategies.
2. **Enhance the talent pipeline for Connecticut teachers.** The pandemic further highlighted the need to expand and retain the pool of credentialed K-12 educators and mental health professionals (i.e., counselors and social workers) in Connecticut.
3. **Provide guidance on grant management.** Future funding initiatives should provide districts with more administrative guidance and clarity about managing these grants.
4. **Revise state grantmaking policies.** District leaders recommend the state: (1) implement longer timelines for grant applications and spending, and (2) increase accountability regarding how monies are spent.
5. **Create a mechanism for state-wide support for best practices.** Some strategies implemented at the district level showed considerable promise (e.g., Language Line) and could be adopted more broadly. We recommend that the state create a process for districts to identify these 'best practices' and assist districts in scaling up and promoting equity across districts.

In this report, the terms in the table below are used to describe planning elements and key features of this study.

Term	Definition	Example
Objectives	Stated goals of a proposed intervention often with allusions to existing problems/needs.	Increase instructional time to support stagnating student learning.
Levers	Approaches/practices that were used to meet desired objectives, i.e., how those implementing the plan facilitate change.	Extend the school day
Outcomes	Selected measures to evaluate the implementation of levers and/or effectiveness of objectives.	Increased percentage of students performing at grade level on standardized assessments
Activity	A described initiative in the ARP ESSER plan that includes a bundle of objectives, outcomes, and levers. There may be multiple outcomes or levers per activity based on how districts wrote their plan. In each priority area, districts may have multiple activities listed.	The 188 ARP ESSER plans had 603 activities written into Priority Area 1. A district might write that they want to differentiate instruction (objective), so they implement a tutoring program (lever), and will measure that with student achievement, attendance, and behavior referrals (outcomes).
Theory of Action	A theory of action is the logic behind how elements of a plan might be connected and thus successful, specifically how the objectives, levers, and outcomes of a proposed initiative or change work together.	The theory of action reveals how district believe one element of an activity leads to another. In the example above, tutoring will allow students to get their individual needs met and will thus increase learning which in turn raises achievement scores, increases attendance, and decreases behavior incidents.



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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