

Federal Pandemic Relief Funding for Massachusetts' Schools: Where Did It Go and What's Next?

By Cara Stillings Candal, Ed.D.



MISSION

Pioneer Institute develops and communicates dynamic ideas that advance prosperity and a vibrant civic life in Massachusetts and beyond.

Vision

Success for Pioneer is when the citizens of our state and nation prosper and our society thrives because we enjoy world-class options in education, healthcare, transportation, and economic opportunity, and when our government is limited, accountable, and transparent.

Values

Pioneer believes that America is at its best when our citizenry is well-educated, committed to liberty, personal responsibility, and free enterprise, and both willing and able to test their beliefs based on facts and the free exchange of ideas.



This paper is a publication of Pioneer Education, which seeks to increase the education options available to parents and students, drive system-wide reform, and ensure accountability in public education. The Center's work builds on Pioneer's legacy as a recognized leader in the charter public school movement, and as a champion of greater academic rigor in Massachusetts' elementary and secondary schools. Current initiatives promote choice and competition, school-based management, and enhanced academic performance in public schools.



Pioneer Health seeks to refocus the Massachusetts conversation about healthcare costs away from government-imposed interventions, toward market-based reforms. Current initiatives include driving public discourse on Medicaid, presenting a strong consumer perspective as the state considers a dramatic overhaul of the healthcare payment process, and supporting thoughtful tort reforms.



Pioneer Transportation seeks reforms that allow commuters to take full advantage of the coming mobility revolution — with access to a range of affordable and on-demand public and private transportation options, as well as transit-friendly real estate development.



Pioneer Opportunity seeks to keep Massachusetts competitive by promoting a healthy business climate, transparent regulation, small business creation in urban areas, and sound environmental and development policy. Current initiatives promote market reforms to increase the supply of affordable housing, reduce the cost of doing business, and revitalize urban areas.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	4
ESSER Funding in Massachusetts	6
The Challenge of Assessing ESSER Impacts and a Looming Fiscal Cliff	11
What Districts Can Do Next	13



Executive Summary

Since 2020, the federal government has distributed almost \$2 billion to American school districts to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 pandemic school closures. Released in three separate tranches through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund, the Trump and Biden administrations outlined parameters for spending this unprecedented amount of money and ensured that most of it went directly to local school districts, with a comparative sliver going to state education agencies.

Federal regulations require that districts spend the last of their ESSER funds by September 2024. After that date, all districts will have to budget without an ESSER cushion. Some districts, specifically those who invested ESSER funds in recurring expenses, may have to cut budgets and even lay off personnel who were hired and sustained with the COVID-relief funding.

As ESSER investments wind down and districts grapple with the immense learning loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many stakeholders, including parents and community members, still struggle to understand where the money has gone. Investments in some communities are visible in the form of new facilities, but in others big bets on technology or optional summer and after-school programming are more difficult to see.

Some available data shed light on where ESSER funds have gone to date. The federal government required each district to submit an ESSER plan to the state before the state would release the district's ESSER allocation. Some districts have voluntarily reported on the extent to which actual spending aligned with those proposed plans. Districts spent ESSER funds on everything from new ventilation systems to new methods for teacher recruitment and retention—items and initiatives that once weren't seen as a necessity but that stakeholders now recognize as critical.

Understanding how the money was spent is a first step in understanding whether districts will eventually realize a return on their investment. Unfortunately, drawing a straight line between expenditures districts made and their impact on student outcomes is nearly impossible. But shining a light on what we know about ESSER spending is important, especially if it reveals investments that made even a small difference in the quality of students' educational experience.

The following report gives an overview of the most common ESSER expenditures to date and assesses the factors that might influence whether district ESSER investments will make a difference for students. It also provides recommendations for how stakeholders should evaluate the ESSER experiment once it officially ends.

Unfortunately, drawing a straight line between expenditures districts made and their impact on student outcomes is nearly impossible.

Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic brought normalcy to a halt in 2020, questions swirled around what would happen to schools. How long would they be closed? If schools reopened, how would we keep children safe? When it became clear that most schools would not open for months, the question became: How will children learn? Between 2020 and 2021, most Massachusetts students experienced schooling from home, whether via Zoom or another district platform, or in a small group or pod setting.

Learning from home presented great difficulties for students, parents, and teachers. With few exceptions, schools weren't ready to pivot to online teaching, and parents weren't prepared to become teachers. In the best cases, students experienced only a few weeks of uncertainty until schools were able to come online. Even then some students could not participate, most often due to lack of technology or an internet connection at home.

As officials addressed the greatest public health crisis in a century, they also considered how to support American schoolchildren. That support came in the form of unprecedented federal investments in the nation's public schools.

Congress directed federal relief for schools to states and districts in three legislative acts, via the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund. In the span of two years, total ESSER funds amounted to almost \$192 billion.¹ Each successive allocation addressed different educational needs and an escalating understanding of the near- and long-term challenges the pandemic posed to schools and students.

- ESSER I focused heavily on helping families access the technology and materials they would need for online learning.
- ESSER II included a category to help states and districts administer high-quality assessments to measure student progress.
- ESSER III required districts to set aside 5 percent of funds to engage in evidence-based activities to stem learning loss.²

ESSER Fund Allowable Use by Act³

ESSER I (CARES Act)*	ESSER II (CRSSA Act)**	ESSER III (ARP Act)***
Training to address changes to instruction	High-quality assessments	Everything under I & II
Access to high-quality instruction	High-quality literacy initiatives	Reserves 5% for evidence-based activities tied to learning loss
Address supplemental learning needs	Evidence-based activities	1% set aside to implement summer enrichment programs
Addressing needs of students at risk	Parental support	.05% set aside for administrative costs
Addressing needs of low-income, foster, and homeless students	Distance learning	
Summer learning	Addressing learning loss	
Purchasing of educational technology to support student achievement and interaction	High-impact activities	

* Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act

** Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act

*** American Rescue Plan Act

ESSER funds flowed from the federal government to state education agencies (SEAs), which distributed the bulk of the federal aid to school districts. The law gives districts great flexibility in how they spend ESSER funds, with mechanisms for state and federal governments to hold districts accountable.

ESSER requires districts to submit plans to SEAs detailing how they will spend the money, in accordance with federal guidelines and regulations. If a state agency deems a district’s plans aren’t compliant, they can request revisions. States also collect and publish, usually on a state agency website, financial reports from districts, detailing how and when funds were expended. The federal Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) has the authority to review state and district ESSER plans, and the federal Single Audit Act also requires that “any government entity, including a school district, that spends more than \$750,000 in one year will be audited.”⁴

Under the law, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) can audit any district that falls into this category, as most do.⁵ As of June 2023, the GAO had audited two states and a handful of school districts. As districts continue to spend ESSER funds down, more scrutiny is likely.⁶

As of the summer of 2023, roughly three years after school districts received their first round of ESSER funds, many districts had yet to spend much of the last tranche of federal funding. Moreover, while the public has general information on how districts have spent their money to date, it has been difficult to ascertain the details of how the money was spent.

The law gives districts great flexibility in how they spend ESSER funds, with mechanisms for state and federal governments to hold districts accountable.

For example, a school district may report that funds were spent on “classroom technology,” but it is difficult to know what type(s) of technology this entails, or even which students benefited. For some stakeholders, only one thing about ESSER funding is clear: The hundreds of billions of dollars the federal government provided to American schools have not (to date) stemmed the enormous loss of student learning the pandemic caused.

Massachusetts’ students, who continually rank tops in the nation despite decreases in proficiency in recent years, are no exception. The most recent results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests, from 2022, showed an eight-percentage point decrease in the number of students ranked proficient or above in fourth grade math. In eighth grade math, the number of students who ranked proficient or above declined by 12 percentage points, from 47 percent to 35 percent. Massachusetts’ average score decline in eighth grade math was one on the largest in the nation.⁷

	Grade 4: At or Above Proficient		Grade 8: At or Above Proficient	
	Math	Reading	Math	Reading
2015	54%	50%	51%	46%
2017	53%	51%	50%	49%
2019	50%	45%	47%	45%
2022	42%	43%	35%	40%

The Nation’s Report Card: [Massachusetts Overview MA \(nationsreportcard.gov\)](https://nationsreportcard.gov/massachusetts-overview-ma/)

Should ESSER funding have prevented this, or would the Bay State’s decline have been even worse without the enormous influx of federal funding? Researchers may never be able to definitively answer that question. Instead, we can generally assess how the Commonwealth and its districts spent ESSER funds and attempt to understand whether that spending aligned with students’ needs.

It is important to assess ESSER spending now, because the federal government requires districts to spend all remaining ESSER funds by September 2024. This means some districts will face what economists call a fiscal cliff in the coming year⁸—a period in which they exhaust funds that they could once rely on, especially for extras like special programming or support staff. Districts that spent wisely—using ESSER funds as they were intended, for COVID recovery efforts and non-recurring expenses—may fare better than those that did not.

It is important to assess ESSER spending now, because the federal government requires districts to spend all remaining ESSER funds by September 2024. This means some districts will face what economists call a fiscal cliff in the coming year.

ESSER Funding In Massachusetts

Between the three tranches of federal money, Massachusetts received a total of \$2.9 billion. The federal government required states to send 90 percent of their ESSER funds directly to districts, and district allocations were determined using the same formula that determines federal Title I allocations.⁹

Title I is a federal program that provides aid to low-income districts and the children they serve. Under ESSER, districts with the highest concentrations of student poverty received the most funding. The third and final round of ESSER funding, which came under the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act in 2021, provided the most money, and the Commonwealth’s bigger, more densely populated communities received the largest allocations.

ESSER Allocations By Program

ESSER I (CARES)	ESSER II (CRRSA)	ESSER III (ARP)
\$214.9 Million	\$814.9 Million	\$1.8 Billion

Federal Coronavirus Relief Programs - Federal Grant Programs (mass.edu)

Especially in the beginning of the pandemic, when the first round of ESSER funding was distributed under the CARES Act, school districts in Massachusetts were thinking about the basics. Many students didn't have reliable access to food at home, let alone the internet, and districts weren't equipped in 2020 to send every child home with a laptop. Even in the wealthiest areas of the state, where students were more reliably connected, schools had to make sure teachers could get online. What remote teaching would look like was something that wouldn't be clear until weeks or months into the crisis.

Because policymakers, schools, and parents had never experienced anything like large-scale, long-term remote schooling before, ESSER spending looked different with each new tranche of federal money. Districts concentrated the first round on providing emergency technology solutions and building remote learning capacity. The second round of funding was distributed and spent with an eye to safe school reopenings. The third and final round of funding, which districts must spend down in the 2023–24 school year, is allocated mainly to efforts to mitigate learning loss.

But what types of goods, services, and programs have districts invested in to do these things? This is a difficult question to answer in detail because of the way federal money flows to districts. As with federal Title I funding, Congress allocated ESSER money to states, and states allocated the funding to districts based on a formula provided by the federal government.

The U.S. Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) provides clear guidelines for how states are to report spending through the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act (FFATA).¹⁰ However, each state's understanding of how districts have spent their money is delayed, because districts don't have to report actual spending until they have spent their money and file with the state for reimbursement.¹¹

State agencies have a general understanding of how districts intend to spend their money because the federal government required states to collect district plans for ESSER spending before allocating funds. But those plans could be broad; they were mainly a tool for demonstrating that districts intended to spend ESSER funding on goods, services, and programs that comply with ESSER regulations. For example, Boston Public Schools' (BPS) ESSER II draft spending plan,¹² which included federally required input from various community stakeholders, including parents, outlined the following as some potential investments:

- Grade 9 guidance counselors
- Bilingual learner literacy supports
- Before- and after-school care
- College and career readiness
- Instructional equity recovery
- Renew and expand libraries

BPS's plan is typical because districts couldn't know exactly what investments students would need in real time; rather, they could propose spending within required guidelines and attempt to ensure that spending reflected the needs and desires of students and the broader community.

Now that the first two rounds of ESSER funding have been spent, some stakeholders have aggregated information on what that spending looked like. The EdImpact Consortium,¹³ a collaboration between The Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, the CERES Institute for Children & Youth at Boston University Wheelock College, Education Resource Strategies (ERS), and Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE) has collected data on the most common categories of ESSER spending and the rates and which districts have expended funds within each category.

Those categories are:¹⁴

- **Time & Attention:** Investments include smaller class sizes, intensive tutoring, academic intervention, specialized online coursework, and additional teaching staff for high-priority subjects.
- **Empowering, Adaptable Instruction:** Investments include quality curriculum, flexible student support, assessments, and teacher professional learning (including coaching).

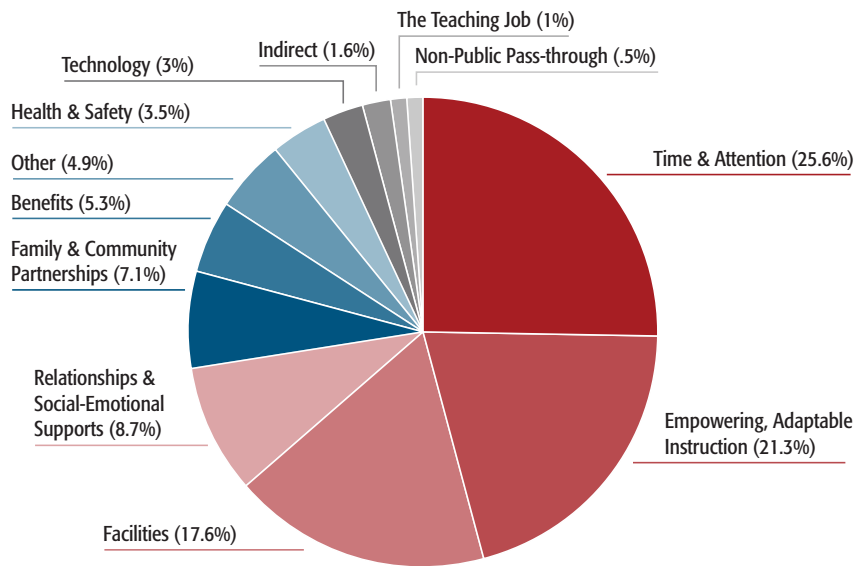
Because policymakers, schools, and parents had never experienced anything like large-scale, long-term remote schooling before, ESSER spending looked different with each new tranche of federal money.

- **Relationships & Social-Emotional Supports:** Investments include social emotional assessments, staff training focused on relationships and student wellbeing, counseling staff, and partnerships with community mental health organizations.
- **Family & Community Partnerships:** Investments include out-of-school programming, family communication, and in-school partnerships focused on accelerating learning and student wellbeing.
- **The Teaching Job:** Investments include efforts to boost teacher compensation, recruitment, retention, and job satisfaction.

EdImpact finds that when ESSER I, II, and III spending (thus far) is combined, Massachusetts districts concentrated spending in the Time and Attention and Empowering, Adaptable Instruction categories. In the Time and Attention category, most funds went to summer learning and tutoring services for students. In the Empowering, Adaptable Instruction category, most funds went to adapting or purchasing new curricula and professional development for teachers.

Chart 1 below shows the average spending per district for all three tranches of ESSER spending. These figures are based on selected, representative school districts across Massachusetts, including Boston, Worcester, Springfield, and other major urban areas.

Chart 1 — Combined Average Spending of ESSER I, II, and III Funds, by Major Spending Area



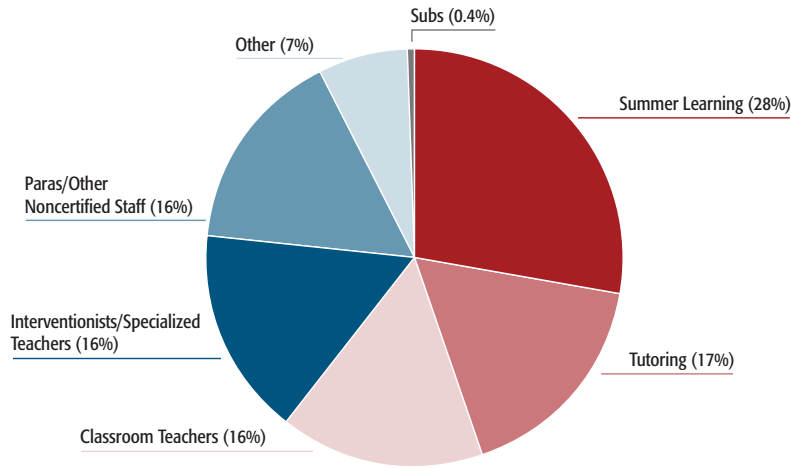
Note: Figures based on a representative sample of Massachusetts school districts; data from The Rennie Center, compiled at edimpactconsortium.org

Districts dedicated the least amount of ESSER funding (roughly 1 percent) to the Teaching Job category. Most funds in that category went to stipends for teachers who took on additional leadership opportunities and bonuses to help recruit and retain teachers. It is notable that the third-largest category of spending across districts was relationships and social-emotional supports, with the overwhelming amount of funds in that category dedicated to the broad but important category of student mental health.¹⁵

It is notable that the third-largest category of spending across districts was relationships and social-emotional supports, with the overwhelming amount of funds in that category dedicated to the broad but important category of student mental health.

The 'Time & Attention' category from Chart 1 accounts for more than a quarter of all ESSER spending. Chart 2 below breaks down that category by specific spending area, with summer learning leading the way.

Chart 2 — A Closer Look at ESSER: Spending by Specific Area in 'Time & Attention' Category

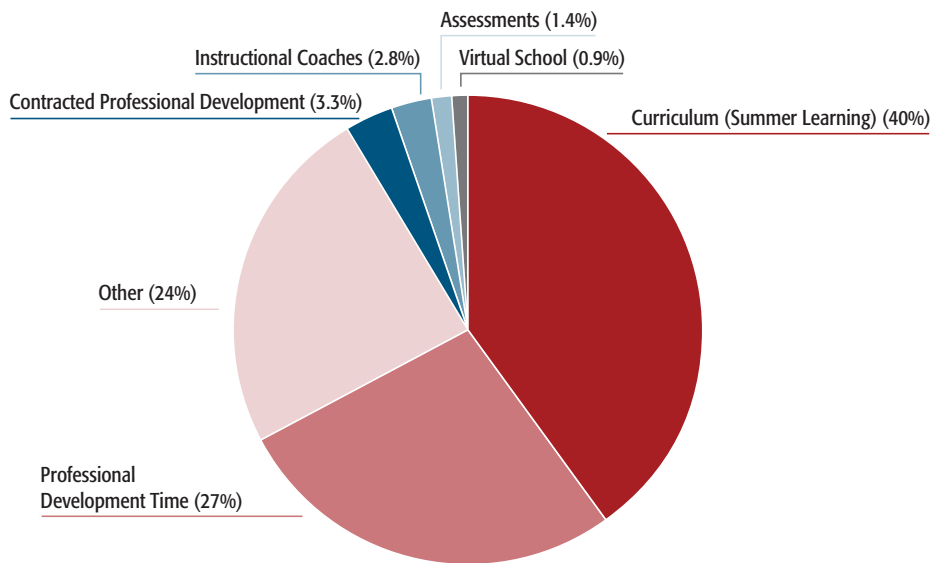


Note: Figures based on a representative sample of Massachusetts school districts; data from The Rennie Center, compiled at edim pactconsortium.org. Figures may not sum to 100% because of rounding.

Nearly a quarter of total ESSER spending was devoted to the 'Empowering, Adaptable Instruction' category. Once again, summer learning was the largest single category, with 40% of funding in that category going to its curriculum.

Nearly a quarter of total ESSER spending was devoted to the 'Empowering, Adaptable Instruction' category. Once again, summer learning was the largest single category, with 40% of funding in that category going to its curriculum.

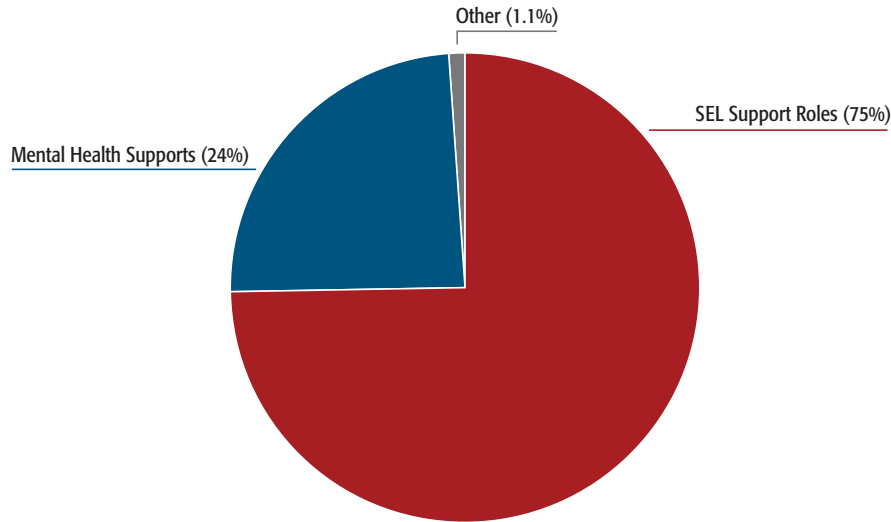
Chart 3 — A Closer Look at ESSER: Spending by Specific Area in 'Empowering, Adaptable Instruction' Category



Note: Figures based on a representative sample of Massachusetts school districts; data from The Rennie Center, compiled at edim pactconsortium.org. Figures may not sum to 100% because of rounding.

The third-largest category of non-facilities ESSER spending was in the ‘Relationships and Social-Emotional Supports’ category, accounting for 8.7% of the total ESSER I, II, and III spending. The funds within that category were allocated as shown in Chart 4 below.

Chart 4 — A Closer Look at ESSER: Spending by Specific Area in the ‘Relationships and Social-Emotional Supports’ Category



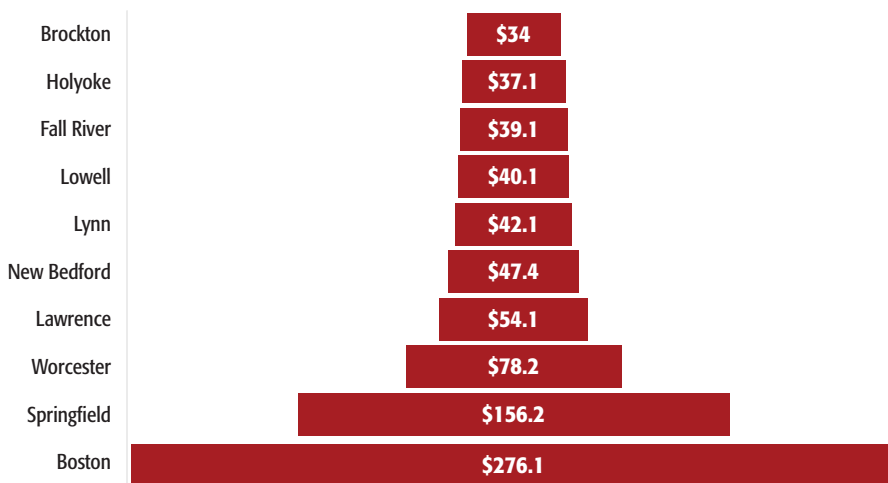
Note: Figures based on a representative sample of Massachusetts school districts; data from The Rennie Center, compiled at [edimpactconsortium.org](https://www.edimpactconsortium.org). Figures may not sum to 100% because of rounding.

These data could shift in the coming year as some districts race to spend their remaining ESSER funds in accordance with the federal government’s summer 2024 deadline. To date, many large Massachusetts districts have been slow to commit and report their final round of ESSER spending, which could mean shifts in programming and student services in the coming year.

In July 2023, the *Boston Globe* reported that the Commonwealth’s five largest recipients of federal funds have been “slow to put the money to use.” Upon publication of the *Globe* article, New Bedford had spent less than 20 percent of its ARP (ESSER III) allocation.

To date, many large Massachusetts districts have been slow to commit and report their final round of ESSER spending, which could mean shifts in programming and student services in the coming year.

Chart 5 — ARP (ESSER III) Allocations, Top 10 Districts in Massachusetts (in millions of dollars)



Source: <https://www.edimpactconsortium.org/faq-on-esser>

EdImpact's descriptive buckets of ESSER spending paint a general picture of how Massachusetts districts, on average, have used ESSER funds to respond to and recover from the pandemic, but they can't describe to stakeholders what students, teachers, and families experienced as the result of this spending.

Anecdotal data show that, with ESSER II and ARP funding especially, districts made big bets on summer learning, tutoring, and classroom and curricular supports.

For example, Chelsea's public schools offered summer literacy programs for young students and math for middle schoolers. The district also used the extra funds to experiment with virtual programming during nontraditional hours. An initiative called Twilight School allowed older students to take classes during the evening in recognition that many in the community choose to work during the day to support their families. The Framingham and Fall River public schools also allocated funds to summer learning, offering tutoring to students, combined with a mix of academic and social supports.¹⁶

So far, the Boston Public Schools have directed the bulk of their \$435 million to curriculum, summer learning, and facilities improvements. These initiatives entailed large investments in personnel, with the most recent data showing an additional 1,429 personnel hired at a cost of more than \$82.5 million. Most of those personnel were "support staff," such as para-educators and teachers' assistants, though EdImpact categorizes most of the hires as "other," a disconcerting categorization in a district known for its large, often cumbersome central office.¹⁷

Although not reflected in the data above, some districts used ESSER funds to invest heavily in much-needed facilities improvements. Prior to school reopenings in 2021, many districts had to upgrade or install new ventilation systems or redesign classrooms and community spaces to keep students farther apart.

But some schools saw the federal funding as an opportunity to make other capital improvements that they otherwise wouldn't have been able to afford, at least in the near term. Atlantis Charter School in Fall River spent most of its federal relief funding on an entirely new building designed to enable more individual and small-group instruction."¹⁸

With a 2024 deadline looming for districts to spend the last of their ESSER funds, stakeholders are only beginning to understand where the money has gone. How the choices districts have made will impact students remains to be seen. Recent student outcomes as measured by the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) are highly discouraging and confirm the worst fears of parents and educators alike: Pandemic-induced school closures had enormous negative impacts on student learning. In the coming years, stakeholders must try to understand whether and how the ESSER-funded interventions districts chose will do anything to help students recover lost learning.

The Challenge of Assessing ESSER Impacts and a Looming Fiscal Cliff

Several factors will influence ESSER's impact on students, including the quality of district interventions and programming, the extent to which students take advantage of offerings, and whether interventions that help can be sustained in the long term once districts have spent down federal funds.

For example, Massachusetts school districts made large investments in tutoring and extended learning time (mostly through summer programming) but it is difficult to know whether the type of tutoring districts are offering is evidence-based or effective.

Some studies¹⁹ show that, done right, "high-dosage"²⁰ tutoring can have an impact on student

With a 2024 deadline looming for districts to spend the last of their ESSER funds, stakeholders are only beginning to understand where the money has gone. How the choices districts have made will impact students remains to be seen.

outcomes, especially in math. But high-dosage tutoring is a time-intensive, costly endeavor that requires trained tutors to work closely with teachers to deliver tutoring content aligned to the school curriculum in a one-to-one or small-group setting. When it works, high-dosage tutoring is consistent, not a one-off session to remediate student learning.

In the context of recovering pandemic-induced learning loss, districts should have invested in evidence-based approaches like high-dosage tutoring and diligently assessing the impacts of the intervention on individuals or groups of kids. There is little evidence that this is happening. This critique applies to most ESSER investments, from the professional development teachers receive to the curricula schools have chosen to purchase or update. In the large bucket of ESSER spending that includes investments in curriculum, it is difficult to know whether districts are investing in high-quality instructional materials. The Commonwealth encourages and incentivizes districts to adopt high-quality instructional materials but provides little oversight of the materials districts use unless a district is underperforming.

Even where the most common ESSER interventions, like tutoring and extended learning, are available, students and families may not take advantage of them. Summer or after-school programming poses challenges for some families. Even if programming is free, parents may lack transportation if it is offered during working hours or requires additional time to access.

Mental health supports are another example of services that families and students may not take advantage of, especially if they aren't integrated into the school day. Assessing these barriers to access for social-emotional and mental health supports is critical, as schools across Massachusetts and the country are reporting a dramatic increase in antisocial behavior, depression among students, and mental health challenges.²¹

Another factor influencing whether ESSER-funded initiatives will have a positive impact on students is the extent to which districts will be able to sustain effective initiatives once ESSER money goes away.

In 2020, when the first round of ESSER funding became available, advocates warned that districts should shy away from investments in recurring expenses,²² which include things like teaching positions or expensive school transportation solutions that incur ongoing costs. Examples of nonrecurring expenses include one-time facilities upgrades or investments in new technologies or curricular materials that will be used for an extended period. Data on general ESSER spending in Massachusetts suggest that many districts made investments that could be considered nonrecurring, except for investments in additional staff, even nonteaching staff.

Boston's addition of over 1,400 additional staff, for example, could mean that the district will be forced to lay off large numbers of people once it has spent down its ESSER funds. Falmouth may be in the same situation. It dedicated all its ESSER funding "to temporary staff, finance, and operations."²³

Districts spent on staffing with the best of intentions, using ESSER funds to surround teachers with more paraprofessionals—support staff who can provide more personalized instruction for students or needed social-emotional supports. But if districts cannot afford to maintain those staff on their general operating budgets once ESSER funds expire, students and teachers will feel the impact.

Marguerite Roza describes this exodus as one of the potential impacts of the impending ESSER fiscal cliff. She predicts that the pain may be more acute in districts that were slow to spend money when it was first allocated and will therefore ramp up spending in the coming year:

"Districts need to [plan now](#) so students don't face chaos at the start of the 2024 school year with classrooms and teachers shuffled, programs abruptly dropped, demoralized staff, and leaders focusing on nothing but budget woes. Past experience tells us that [deep cuts are often inequitable and impact our neediest students the hardest](#)."²⁴

In the context of recovering pandemic-induced learning loss, districts should have invested in evidence-based approaches like high-dosage tutoring and diligently assessing the impacts of the intervention on individuals or groups of kids. There is little evidence that this is happening.

Compounding the pain of not having these staff in schools past 2024 is the risk that a lack of support could exacerbate teacher retention problems. Research suggests that teachers value classroom support personnel as much as or more than increases in salary. They value it so much that classroom support can influence whether a teacher decides to stay in the profession.²⁵

Districts that failed to invest wisely may suffer the most in the coming months, but the end of ESSER funding infusions will impact educational stakeholders across Massachusetts. Districts will soon confront the reality of school budgets without extras from the federal government at the same time they have to contend with large-scale student learning loss, a shortage of staff in key subject areas,²⁶ and daunting student mental and social-emotional health challenges.

One saving grace could be the Student Opportunity Act, which the Commonwealth authorized in 2019. The additional \$1.3 billion the law has provided to districts in the last three years could mitigate the financial strain some would otherwise feel.²⁷

In addition to this cushion, the state may want to buoy districts by sustaining the supports it has offered since the pandemic—such as free access to high-quality instructional materials²⁸—but districts should also assess and double down on what works for students while paying close attention to the lessons of school closures.

What Districts Can Do Next

There are things districts can do to facilitate a smoother transition to budgeting without the boon of ESSER funding and to begin to address the massive learning loss students across Massachusetts have experienced. Some of these strategies address near-term needs, but almost all of them embody ideas and practices that districts should either incorporate or recommit to for the long term.

Focus remaining funds on evidence-based strategies

With one year left to spend down ARP funds—and MCAS and NAEP evidence shining a light on learning gaps—districts should commit remaining funds to support evidence-based strategies to address learning loss and support high-quality instruction.

Shifting to instructional materials and teacher professional development rooted in the science of learning, providing evidence-based tutoring approaches in math, and reconfiguring staffing structures within existing budgets to surround teachers with trained support staff are all examples of approaches that work.

Even if districts haven't adopted these and other research-supported strategies to date, they should consider shifting course as a means for addressing school closure-induced learning loss.

Double down on assessment and accountability

Districts should support the implementation of evidence-based programming with high-quality formative assessments and an approach to accountability that helps students and teachers close learning gaps.

Even supplementary programming, like summer and after-school learning or individualized tutoring should incorporate an approach to assessment that allows stakeholders to assess the extent to which each investment they've made has been implemented effectively and the magnitude of its impact on student outcomes.

Moreover, now is the time for the Commonwealth to ensure that MCAS remains a tool for supportive accountability, shining a light on districts that need state assistance and helping parents understand the extent to which their children's school supports their individual learning.

Districts will soon confront the reality of school budgets without extras from the federal government at the same time they have to contend with large-scale student learning loss, a shortage of staff in key subject areas, and daunting student mental and social-emotional health challenges.

Be transparent about what worked and what didn't

As districts emerge from the ESSER era, they should carefully evaluate the data they have and be transparent about initiatives that worked (or didn't) and the extent of their impact.

Districts should share this information with teachers, parents, the state, and one another, all in the spirit of learning and improving student outcomes. District-reporting of ESSER investments at a granular level and accompanying assessments of the efficacy of those investments provide an opportunity for learning that could inform state and local investments in the future.

Importantly, districts should use an understanding of interventions that work to create budgets that center student needs and the investments that meet them in the post-ESSER era.

Prepare for and invest in the future

With ESSER funding, districts had an unprecedented opportunity to invest in resources they couldn't otherwise afford. If student outcomes data suggest that an intervention was successful, districts and states should work together to sustain those interventions once ESSER funding expires.

The state and philanthropy have an important role to play in ensuring that lessons learned during the pandemic don't go to waste. This includes continuing to make investments in high-quality virtual learning and the infrastructure and professional development necessary to support it should the Commonwealth experience another period of prolonged school closures.

District-reporting of ESSER investments at a granular level and accompanying assessments of the efficacy of those investments provide an opportunity for learning that could inform state and local investments in the future.

Endnotes

- 1 Kinley, Michelle, "Understanding ESSER I, II, and III Disbursements," [misbo.com](https://www.misbo.com), May 18, 2021.
- 2 [Fact Sheet: Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund II Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2021, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.](#)
- 3 Kinley, *ibid.*
- 4 Lieberman, Mark, "How to Prepare for ESSER Spending Scrutiny: Advice from a Veteran Auditor," [Education Week](#), July 18, 2022.
- 5 "Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund," "[Frequently Asked Questions About the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund](#)," Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.
- 6 Lieberman, Mark, "Auditors Are on the Hunt for ESSER Fraud: Five Things to Know," [Education Week](#), July 20, 2023.
- 7 [The Nation's Report Card: 2022 Mathematics State Snapshot Report: Massachusetts Grade 8.](#)
- 8 Roza, Marguerite, "The Stakes Are Only Getting Higher for Pandemic School-Aid Spending," [Forbes.com](#), February 7, 2023.
- 9 Institute for Education Sciences, "[NCES Blog](#)," "National Center for Education Statistics," "A Look At How Title I Funds Are Allocated In the U.S.," May 8, 2019.
- 10 [Final_ESSERII_Factsheet_1.5.21.pdf \(ed.gov\).](#)
- 11 [Analysis: What Are Districts Using Their Federal Relief Money for? How Fast Are They Spending It? How Much Is Left? New Interactive Database Has Answers – The 74 \(the74million.org\).](#)
- 12 [2021 Federal Relief Funding / 07.09.2021 - Draft Plan \(ESSER II Funds\) \(bostonpublicschools.org\)](#), 30–31.
- 13 EdImpact Research Consortium, "Analyzing the Impact of Covid Recovery Funds in Massachusetts Education," "ESSER Funds Breakdown by Power Strategy," Source: The Rennie Center, [Data Dashboard | EdImpact Consortium](#).
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Hilliard, John, "Mass School Officials Eye Summer As A Chance to Help Students Hard Hit by the Pandemic," *The Boston Globe*, March 14, 2021, [Mass. school officials eye summer as a chance to help students hard hit by pandemic](#) - The Boston Globe.
- 17 [EdImpact Research Consortium](#), "'Boston," "Planned Investments by Total Cost."
- 18 Huffaker, Christopher, "How Have Massachusetts School Districts Spent Their \$2.5 Billion in Federal Covid Funds? Mostly, They Still Haven't," the [Boston Globe](#), July 10, 2022.
- 19 Jonathan Guryan, Jonathan et al. "[Not Too Late: Improving Academic Outcomes Among Adolescents](#)," *American Economic Review*, Vol. 113 (3), 738–765.
- 20 High-dosage tutoring is described as "intensive tutoring that occurs one-to-one or in very small groups on a sustained, daily basis, during the school day, to help all students accelerate their learning in an individualized manner; an intentional use of additional time with a specific focus on building prerequisite knowledge and skills while simultaneously integrating new learning that is part of the grade-level curriculum." See: District of Columbia, Office of the State Superintendent of Education, "[High-Dosage Tutoring: A Proven Strategy to Accelerate Student Learning](#)."
- 21 [National Center for Education Statistics \(NCES\), Roughly Half of Public Schools Report That They Can Effectively Provide Mental Health Services to All Students in Need, May 31, 2022.](#)
- 22 Roza, Marguerite, "How to Spend ESSER Funds to Help Students While Avoiding a Fiscal Cliff," [Edunomics Lab](#), Georgetown University, April 27, 2021.
- 23 Huffaker, *ibid.*
- 24 Roza, Marguerite, [Forbes.com](#), *ibid.*
- 25 National School Boards Association, "[Teacher Retention, a Growing Problem](#)," October 1, 2019.
- 26 Drysdale Sam, "[Mass Adjusts Licensing Rules Amidst Teacher Shortage](#)," State House News Service, via WBUR, June 28, 2023.
- 27 Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "[Student Opportunity Act, Overview](#);" see also Mass. gov, [press release](#): "Healey Driscoll Administration Fully Funds Student Opportunity Act, Proposes Historic Investments in Local Aid, Feb. 23, 2023.
- 28 Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "[Curriculum Matters: Instructional Materials and Professional Development](#)."

About the Authors

Cara Stillings Candal is a Senior Fellow at Pioneer Institute. She has an extensive background in national and international education policy and teacher development, and she is the author/editor of numerous articles and several books about school university partnerships, charter schools, and other structural innovations in education.

Mission

Pioneer Institute develops and communicates dynamic ideas that advance prosperity and a vibrant civic life in Massachusetts and beyond.

Vision

Success for Pioneer is when the citizens of our state and nation prosper and our society thrives because we enjoy world-class options in education, healthcare, transportation, and economic opportunity, and when our government is limited, accountable, and transparent.

Values

Pioneer believes that America is at its best when our citizenry is well-educated, committed to liberty, personal responsibility, and free enterprise, and both willing and able to test their beliefs based on facts and the free exchange of ideas.

