

Guide to K-12 STEM/STEAM Funding Sources

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ESSER Funding



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Get the Funding You Need for Teaching Innovation and Creative Thinking in K-12 Schools

Over the last year, the world has faced many local and global problems – the COVID-19 pandemic, inequality, and social injustice, climate change, and economic distress (Maxwell & Miller, 2020; Seale, 2020). Our shared memories of schools, desks in neat rows with the teacher at the front of the class instructing the standardized curriculum annual state testing, are being quickly replaced by uncertainty and new narratives of sudden and drastic change.

The CARES Act, CRRSA Act, and ARP Act provide vital support to States, school districts, and schools as they work to reopen schools safely, maximize in-person instructional time, and address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students, educators, and families.

These funds provide a chance not only to reopen schools, maximize in-person instruction and address the challenges created by COVID-19, but they also offer a real opportunity to innovate and fundamentally improve practices benefiting all students in times of sudden and dramatic change. Preparing them for a world facing not only great challenges but also a world filled with significant opportunities for those ready to think creatively and who are fearless in their resolve to invent and innovate their way forward.

“The CARES Act, CRRSA Act, and ARP Act provide vital support to States, school districts, and schools.”



Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER)

Understanding ESSER Funding

Your friends at Inventionland Education have created this handy guide to support your understanding of ESSER funding. It offers practical advice on how your school or district can use CARES Act Elementary & Secondary School Relief Funds (ESSER Funds) and American Rescue (EANS Funds) in school spaces.

This guide is intended to clarify allowable uses of funds and describe how these funds may be used to implement actionable strategies to meet the needs of students, families, and teachers. As school districts and schools work to return to safely sustaining in-person instruction, they will also have to address the educational inequities that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. They will also have to address students' social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs in the twenty-first century which will demand smart, balanced, and innovative responses to pressing challenges.

The United States Department of Education encourages states and local school districts and schools to use the funds described in this guide to safely reopen schools, maximize in-person instructional time for all

students, and provide opportunities to address the impacts of lost instructional time resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Generally, in determining whether an activity is an allowable use of funds, a State, school district or school must determine:

- Is the use of funds intended to prevent, prepare for, or respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, including its impact on the social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs of students?
- Does the use of funds fall under one of the authorized uses of ESSER or GEER funds?
- Is the use of funds permissible under the Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards.





Understanding ESSER Funding

Since March 2020, the federal government has passed three relief packages in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that includes unprecedented support for K–12 schools. This support is called ESSER, which is an acronym for Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief.

Emergency Relief (ESSER) program includes federal aid that flows to states to support schools and districts under Title I-A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Under ESSER, the U.S. Department of Education (USED) awarded grants to state education agencies so that they could provide emergency relief funds to local education agencies (school districts) to address COVID-19’s impact on elementary and secondary schools across the country.

The ESSER program has three funding streams because it is written in three different pieces of federal legislation. For each funding stream, districts have one year after the previous year to obligate their funds or finalize awards to contractual partners, like the team at Inventionland Education.

The combined legislation provides more than \$193 billion in aid to state education agencies (SEAs) which must sub-award 87.5 - 90% to school districts. In addition, an additional \$9.7 billion has been directed to governors to spend at their discretion and support private schools. The majority of relief funds will be disbursed based on the proportion of Title I funds a state or district received in the most recent fiscal year. Relief Funds and Title I Funds are otherwise unrelated.

SEAs and school districts may use the funds for any activity permitted under other federal education laws (think any activity allowed under ESEA, IDEA, AEFLA, Perkins, or McKinney-Vento Title VIIB). Funds can be used for pre-award costs dating back to March 13, 2020.



Glossary of Acronyms and Initialisms

- ARP: American Rescue Plan
- CARES: Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security
- CRRSA: Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations
- ESEA: Elementary and Secondary Education Act

CARES Act	ESSER I	13.2 billion	Obligate funds by 9/30/2022
CRRSA Act	ESSER II	54 billion	Obligate funds by 9/30/2023
ARP Act	ESSER III	126 billion	Obligate funds by 9/30/2024

- ESEA: Elementary and Secondary Education Act
- To obligate funds: Finalize awards to contractual partner(s).
- ESSER: Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief
- IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

Legislation for ESSER I funding was passed in March 2020. Legislation for ESSER II funding was passed in December 2020. Legislation for ESSER III funding was passed in March 2021.

Who Gets What from the ESSER Fund?

Congress has allocated how the ESSER funds are to be divided. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, the government is applying the ESSER fund via the same proportional system that is used for states reception of funds "under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Title I-A."

Of the school emergency relief funds, 10% may be earmarked for emergency needs that arise due to COVID-19 response as determined by the state. However, "States must distribute at least 90% of funds to local education agencies (LEAs) based on their proportional share of ESEA Title I-A funds."

"You can spend ESSER funds on various supports for your students, educators, and families."

Spending ESSER Funds

Once ESSER funds are obligated or assigned, they can be used for costs dating back to March 13, 2020, the date when many schools and districts closed their doors due to the pandemic. Depending on which ESSER stream your district is using, you can spend ESSER funds on various supports for your students, educators, and families.

At least twenty percent of American Rescue Plan funds must be used to address learning loss through evidence-based interventions that respond to students' academic, social, and emotional needs.

The legislative intent of funds is to benefit all public schools and students regardless of school type, funding is allowable for any public school.

Only ESSER I requires equitable services to nonpublic schools (private schools are provided support through GEER the allocation to governors in ESSER II and the American Rescue Plan).

Money from each plan must be tracked separately by State Education Agencies and local districts.



How do students benefit from ESSER funding?

The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund that the CARES Act created, was augmented with ESSER II and ESSER III and will continue to help schools provide for their students.

Implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, ESSER funding is intended to address students' academic, social, and emotional needs—particularly for underrepresented student subgroups, which include:

- Racial and ethnic minorities
- Low-income families
- English learners
- Migrant students
- Students experiencing homelessness
- Students with disabilities
- Foster children and youth
- LGBTQ+, gender non-conforming, and non-binary students

With ESSER III, the government added "...not less than 20% of its total ARP ESSER allocation to address learning loss through the implementation of evidence-based interventions, such as summer learning or summer enrichment, extended day, comprehensive after-school programs, or extended school year programs and ensure that such interventions respond to students' academic, social, and emotional needs and address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on underrepresented

student groups." The other 80% was available to be used for the same uses as noted in ESSER and ESSER II.

"Every Person Is Born With the Potential to Be Brilliant."

George Davison, Founder and CEO, Inventionland

How Are the ESSER Funds Distributed?

There are a few channels that the ESSER funds go through before they get to an elementary and secondary school. Please note that charter schools are eligible for emergency relief funds as well.

The first step in the process is for the funds to be transferred to state educational agencies (SEAs). The SEAs from each state, as well as Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia, "apply" directly to the Department of Education for ESSER Funds.

The SEA is the agency primarily responsible for the state supervision of public elementary schools and secondary schools.

Charter schools are eligible to receive school emergency relief funding as well. Those charter schools that are part of a local education agency (LEA) may receive subgrants from ESSER just like other elementary and secondary schools. As noted, "A charter school that is not a local school district or LEA may not receive a formula subgrant, but it may receive support under ESSER through the LEA of which it is a part."





The SEAs then award subgrants to local educational agencies, which represent school districts.

If there are any ESSER funds that have not been awarded within the one-year deadline, the SEA's are required to return the money to the U.S. Department of Education as noted in the CARES Act.

While the LEAs have flexibility in how they allocate the funds to those that are part of its school district, the U.S. Department of Education encourages targeting activities supporting remote learning for every student, particularly those students who are disadvantaged or are at-risk students.

ESSER formula funds are available to every school in the district, regardless of its Title I, Part A status. In addition, Title I, Part A requirements are not relevant to funding from ESSER.

Despite the relatively free reign in spending ESSER, ESSER II, and ESSER III funds, the U.S. Department of Education is monitoring how the money is being spent. The funds may also be audited to ensure the money was spent in a suitable manner.

The emergency relief funds are to be tracked, and "LEAs are required to complete and submit CARES Act Performance Reports throughout the project period."

The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund that was part of the ARP included further stipulations on how funding was to be used. Within 30 days of receiving receive funds via ESSER, local school districts must publicize (on its website) their plan "for the safe return to in-person instruction and continuity of services ..." Before going public with the plan on returning to in-person learning, districts must seek public comment for their proposed plan.



What Is a Sub-Recipient of an ESSER Fund?

Besides LEAs who represent school districts, ESSER, ESSER II, and ESSER III funds are available to sub-recipients. This includes, "A wide range of entities, including local districts and organizations serving students and families, that may be a "sub-recipient" of funds from the SEA Reserve," according to the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Allocation of the ESSER fund to sub-recipients also has a deadline. Within one year of receiving the funds allocated to their state, the SEA must award LEAs ESSER formula subgrants. Like other recipients, funding from ESSER is available for obligation by sub-recipients through September 30, 2022.

Are Private Schools Eligible to Receive ESSER Funds?

The CARES Act does allow ESSER funds to be allocated to private schools. However, the CARES Act makes a distinction between for-profit and not-for-profit private schools. Regarding not-for-profit private schools, the rules state, as noted by the American Federation for Children, that they are eligible for equitable ESSER Funds "even if a non-public school has not previously participated in federal education programs, such as Title I, Part A or Title VIII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)."

On the other hand, the CARES Act states that for-profit private schools are not eligible to receive equitable services.

To clarify, equitable services is defined by the US Department of Education as providing "federal education aid has been directed in an equitable way toward helping all children in need, regardless of the type of school they attend. Private school students are eligible for a proportionate share of education funding for many federal education programs – the funds are used for services provided to private school students and teachers."

Not-for-profit private schools secure ESSER funds reaching to their LEAs and informing them of their interest in participating in the program.

- They then meet with the LEA and "Provide a needs assessment that describes what you will be seeking support for to assist teachers and students with remote learning, as well as what needs to be done to prepare your school for all students and teachers to return to a safe environment."
- They should also have enrollment information because the LEA uses the data to determine a school's proportional share.



School districts across the country are striving to provide a safe and healthy learning experience for their students. As each elementary and secondary school determined their needs, the costs were astronomical. The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund that the CARES Act created and was augmented with ESSER II and ESSER III has and will continue to help schools provide for their students. By understanding the details of the ESSER Fund, schools can feel confident they will be able to get the available assistance.

What can ESSER funds be used for?

ESSER funds are highly flexible and are designed to help address local relief, prevention and preparation, and recovery efforts relative to responding to COVID-19.

The supplement and not supplant requirements do not apply to LEA (local education agency/school district) use of ESSER funds. In normal times, districts can only use federal grants to pay for anything they would not already provide out of their state and local budgets. Lifting this requirement gives them much more flexibility in how they use their funds.

Districts can spend ESSER money within any of the following categories, depending on local needs:

Any activity allowed under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Title I-A, Title I-C (Migrant Education), Title I-D (Neglected and Delinquent Students), Title II-A, Title III-A

(English Language Learners), Title IV-A, Title IV-B 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Title V-B REAP (SRSA and RLIS), Title VI-A (Indian Education), Title VII (Impact Aid)

Innovation Curriculum & Courseware

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Each of these grants is limited by strict rules regarding how the funds can be spent. However, since districts will have already developed their own programs based on eligibility for each of these grants, increased allocations will help them expand the services they provide for students under each of the above categories.





CARES Act (ESSER I) Sec. 18003(d) (p. 285) states that LEAs may use funds for:

Any activity allowed under the following federal education acts:

- Special Education: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
- Career and Technical Education: Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins Act)
- Homeless Education: McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Act
- Adult Education and Family Literacy Act
- Native Hawaiian Education Act and the Alaska Native Educational Equity, Support, and Assistance Act
- COVID-19-related relief, prevention, and recovery efforts; summary. For the full text, go to ESSER II Fact Sheet or ESSER III Fact Sheet.
- Developing, implementing, and coordinating of preparedness and response efforts to prevent, prepare for, and respond to coronavirus.

Professional Development



Confident teachers foster confidence in students. Our professional learning programs are designed to give teachers the tools they need to empower both students and them. From single and multi-day intensive professional development courses to half-day workshops, teachers can earn state teacher continuing education credits, and even become trainers for their district and state ESA.

Innovation Labs® Design Services

Inspire student creativity and engagement when you transform classrooms into imaginative, stimulating spaces with our award-winning Innovation Labs® Design Services.

With a full line of Innovation Labs, schools can choose from various design elements to turn spaces into immersive educational environments. From treehouses to pirate ships, we help you reinvent your space to foster creativity and teamwork and can work directly with your staff using the area to design it accordingly.

- Providing school leaders with the resources to address the needs of individual schools, low-income students, children with disabilities, English learners, racial and ethnic minorities, students experiencing homelessness, and foster care youth.
- Training and supplies for staff to minimize the spread of infectious diseases.
- Planning for and coordinating during long-term closures.
- Purchasing educational technology (including hardware, software, and connectivity).
- Providing mental health services and supports.
- Planning and implementing activities related to summer learning and supplemental after-school programs.

- CRRSA Act (ESSER II), Sec. 313(c) (p. 749) states the same LEA allowable uses of ESSER I, with the following additional uses. ARP (ESSER III) funds follow the same guidelines.
- Addressing learning loss among students.
- Providing information and assistance to parents and families on how they can effectively support students, including in a distance learning environment.
- Other activities that are necessary to maintain the operation of and continuity of services in local educational agencies and continuing to employ existing staff of the local educational agency.

Unallowable uses of ESSER funds:

- Funds generally cannot be used for bonuses, merit pay, or similar expenditures, unless they are related to disruptions or closures resulting from COVID-19.
- Subsidizing or offsetting executive salaries and benefits of individuals who are not employees of the SEA or LEAs.
- Expenditures related to state or local teacher or faculty unions or associations.

What if your district is not eligible for Title I funds?

Non-Title I LEAs (local education agencies — public or not-for-profit charter schools) can apply to their state education agencies for a portion of the ESSER funding. They have to follow the same guidelines as Title I districts. Private schools may not apply directly to the state for funding but must consult with their local public school districts to request funds for equitable services.

Can CARES Act/ESSER money be used for technology?

Absolutely. Schools have relied on technology to get them through the pandemic. Within the legislation guidelines, districts are expected to use the funds based on their individual needs. Many have hired additional teachers, instructional coaches, instructional assistants, counselors, nurses, custodians, and other staff to support students and their teachers. Investments in software provide districts with the tools they need to manage human capital – all the people who will help students successfully navigate the new normal.

Districts are competing with each other and even other states to find and hire the best employees. Increased recruiting and hiring lead to a greater need for software to keep up with professional growth and employee evaluation. Tracking hours worked and making sure substitutes are available to cover teacher absences manually is no longer cost-effective in today's tech-based world. Districts are using their ESSER funds for efficient software so they can stay focused on addressing learning loss, not paperwork.



A student information system that integrates with special education and other intervention programs can go a long way toward tracking student progress. Schools are also finding that they need to find efficient ways to track student health, both to mitigate coronavirus transmission and to address increased mental and behavioral health concerns.



And then there is instructional technology — a whole new world for some teachers and school administrators who may have considered it supplemental to instruction in the past. Revamping education that now relies almost entirely on technology requires investment in hardware, software, staff training, and connectivity to meet the needs of all students. While the global pandemic has been a costly disaster for the entire world, perhaps the funding available to schools in response to it will turn out to be an opportunity for learning in new ways we have never considered before.

Stimulus Funding Resources: Dig Deeper

- CARES Act for Schools: Five things school and district leaders need to know
- CARES Act Flexibilities: Waivers from requirements to help schools
- State Education Agency Plan: Requirements for SEAs to access ESSER III funds under the American Rescue Plan (ARP)
- Most Districts Spend Money on Technology: What school leaders need to know about funding in tough budget times
- Using CARES Act Funding to Support the Whole Child: Real-world examples
- What COVID-19 Funding Means for K-12 Schools: Details about all three COVID-19 relief bills
- GEER I & II: More details about the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund

- Rethinking K-12 Education (REM): The details
- ESSER Fund FAQs: U.S. Department of Education
- ESSER Funding: Fund tracker
- Federal Stimulus Funding: Examples of what funds could be used for in K-12 districts

Other Resources and References:

- ARP ESSER:
<https://oese.ed.gov/offices/american-rescue-plan/american-rescue-plan-elementary-and-secondary-school-emergency-relief/>
- CARES Act and CRRSA Act ESSER:
<https://oese.ed.gov/offices/education-stabilization-fund/elementary-secondary-school-emergency-relief-fund/>
- CARES Act and CRRSA Act GEER:
<https://oese.ed.gov/offices/education-stabilization-fund/governors-emergency-education-relief-fund/>

End Note:

The team at Inventionland Education will work on your behalf to answer any question remaining about using ESSER I, II, III to support your students. If we are unable to answer your question or you want to seek an independent authority, you can e-mail ESSERF@ed.gov for questions related to ESSER or GEERF@ed.gov for questions related to GEER.

