

Illinois ESSER Funding Peer-to-Peer Series

Authors

Region 9 Comprehensive Center

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Summary

This document serves to assist ISBE in better understanding the needs of the field around ESSER funding.

States continue to identify ways to support their school communities during COVID-19. Federal funds were awarded as a means of support. During the summer of 2021, with the unprecedented influx of flexible federal funds, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) identified a need to assist local education agencies (LEAs) on the use of additional Elementary and Secondary Relief (ESSER) funds. In partnership with Illinois Association of School Business Officials (IASBO) and the Region 9 Comprehensive Center (R9CC), ISBE established a peer-to-peer superintendent conversation series on ESSER funding.

The priority areas for the series were determined by LEA leaders' responses to a needs-sensing survey that was disseminated across the state to obtain preferences and needs that would inform the conversations about ESSER funding. The topics of highest interest were as follows:

- District ESSER funding flexibility: What is allowable with ESSER funding?
- Making sustainable decisions with one-time-use funds: How to use funds for lasting impact.
- How to use ESSER funds: Effectively supporting operational expenditures, past and present.
- Blending, braiding, and coordinating the use of all federal funds: How to best leverage federal funds.

The R9CC collaborated with ISBE and IASBO to present three peer-to-peer webinars about the strategic use of ESSER funds for district superintendents and school business officials statewide. This report summarizes the content for the three sessions, the critical questions and discussion points participants generated during the sessions, and the sample quotes from some participants' session feedback responses. The report concludes by presenting possible next steps to meet the continuing need for supporting Illinois district leaders' use of ESSER funds.

Session 1

The first session dealt with the priority areas of allowable expenditures with ESSER funding and how to effectively support operations, with 82 Illinois leaders in attendance. The session began with an overview of ESSER funding by Robert Wolfe, ISBE Director of Finance, and a panel discussion with Dr. Michael Jacoby, IASBO Executive Director; and Dr. Jennifer Norrell, Aurora East USD 131 superintendent.

Participants could ask or submit questions during the session as they engaged with the featured speakers. The questions varied from specific procedural questions about ESSER applications to specific questions about priority areas, Evidence-Based Funding (EBF) funds, budgets, spending, stakeholders, and other general questions. The speakers responded directly to most questions and remaining questions were addressed in follow-up communications sent to session participants.

| Session 1 Participant Questions | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Application | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we predict detailed costs for things that are 3 years out for the application? • Can we get examples? How are others doing this? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What are your priority areas for ESSER funding, and how did you come to that decision? |
| Evidence-Based Funding (EBF) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will all EBF tiers receive the additional funding? • How will the ESSER \$300 million distribution via EBF impact the EBF calculations moving into the future? • Will the additional EBF funds be subject to the federal TRS rate if the funds are used for certified staff? • Will the \$40 million for special education co-ops be sent via the EBF funding channel? • Will the \$300 million being calculated through EBF be a separate grant application, or will it be included in with the ESSER III application? |
| Budget and spending | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what order or sequence are you thinking about spending your money? • If we spend ESSER I first, do you submit an amendment fitting your expenditures? • Will the ESSER \$300 million distribution be a one-time distribution? • Are there any specific guidelines regarding paying employee salaries with ESSER funds? More specifically, are there guidelines for salaries for nurses, custodians, teachers, or administrators? • Will this \$300 million be distributed in addition to the regular ESSER III monies, or are they part of the ESSER III allocations already awarded to districts? |
| Stakeholders | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you or will you engage stakeholders during the process? |
| Miscellaneous | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will there be any opportunities for competitive grants, and if so, will institutions of higher education be able to apply? • With all the extra time that teachers may work over the next 3 years, with added summer school, etc., districts are at risk of exceeding the 6% TRS year-over-year increase limit. Will there be waiver of that limit for the duration of this grant cycle, i.e., 2024? |

Session 2

The second conversation in the series focused on sustainable decisions with these one-time-use funds, with 148 district leaders participating. The session began with a presentation by attorney Sheara Krvaric of the Federal Education Group, PLLC, on sustaining ESSER spending. ISBE and IASBO provided strategies for participants to consider as they leveraged federal funds. Attorney Krvaric was part of a question-and-answer session with Robert Wolfe. Attendees were placed in breakout rooms to further the discussion of sustainability and their priority areas.

The participants engaged with the panelists after their featured presentations and their budget and spending questions, and general questions were captured and responded to either during or after the session concluded.

| Session 2 Participant Questions | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Budget and Spending | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can we get examples? How are others doing this? If we start some interventions for non–special education students with ESSER funds, can we sustain those services through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) CEIS? • Are there specific interventions that you can only use the IDEA CEIS funds for? • Can we utilize the IDEA CEIS funds if we are paying for interventions prior to ESSER through local funds, or will that still be considered supplanting? • What are the guidelines on using ESSER funds for building new spaces for social distancing? |
| Miscellaneous | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the district's role in handling nonpublic funds for our private schools in our district boundaries? |

Session 3

The final summer session centered on blending, braiding, and coordinating federal funds, with 108 district leaders participating. This in-depth session was presented by a team of ISBE staff members: Dr. Annie Brooks-Pearl, Executive Director of Regulatory Services; Oriana Wilson, Director of Programs; Denise Blaney, Director of Title Grants Administration; Joanne Clyde, Director of Multi-Lingual; and Barbara Moore, Director of Special Education. The session began with a clear definition of blending and braiding of funding and then moved into various scenarios of how school districts could successfully coordinate funds. After the presentation, a panel discussion was held with Susan Harkin, superintendent of District 300; Dr. David Hill, superintendent of District 93; Dr. Michael Jacoby; and the ISBE team that presented prior.

As with the previous sessions, participant questions were collected and either responded to during the session or in the session follow-up communications. Most questions were about continued communication through collaboration with school community members or between districts.

| Session 3 Participant Questions | |
|--|--|
| Communication and Collaboration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can we get examples? How are others doing this? If we start some interventions for non–special education students with ESSER funds, can we sustain those services through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Coordinated Early Intervening Services (CEIS)? • What advice would you give to your peers or what type of questions should be asked within a district to help break down silos and promote collaboration? • What are some effective ways—previously used or innovative ideas—to communicate with your parents and community stakeholders to help keep them informed and engaged during this marathon? • How can we collaborate across districts to ensure we are evaluating the effectiveness of programs and share what is working? |
| Miscellaneous | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When it comes to supplement not supplant (SNS)—where does being Title I neutral funding come in? |

As a result of the summer conversations, survey respondents requested additional sessions to continue to discuss specific ideas of how to strategically engage ESSER, federal funds to include IDEA and other non-Title funds to support effective and longer-term resource allocation, the blending and braiding of these funds, efficient and high impact one-time use for these funds and connecting needs and priorities based on student learning renewal during this time of COVID-19. The Region 9 Comprehensive Center will collaborate with ISBE and IASBO on the next phase of these efforts through the provision of a series of conversations centered on braiding and blending federal funds.

Summary of Session Feedback

After each session, participants were invited to complete a brief online session feedback form that consisted of scaled-response items and open-ended questions. Responses to repeated requests to complete the session feedback form did not yield a high response rate from the participants. Therefore, the responses noted in this report are not necessarily representative of all the district superintendents and school leaders that participated in the series. However, the concerns and action steps that were noted are useful for getting a sense of their continuing needs for support about the strategic use of ESSER funds and ways they can sustain the benefit

to students from the program activities and other resources these funds are currently allowing. There was a total of 31 responses for the open-ended question of, “What other information or support pertaining to using ESSER funding in ways that can positively impact student learning would be helpful to you or those you work with?” Session 1 had 14 responses, Session 2 had 6 responses, and Session 3 had 11 responses. After removing nonapplicable responses (N/A, None, Wonderful, etc.), 21 responses were analyzed and coded.

The scaled items on the feedback form were designed to obtain participants’ level of agreement with the quality and usefulness of survey content, presentations, and engagement activities. Generally, the participants who responded agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions met the objectives, were presented clearly, was relevant to their current work situations, and were of high quality.

There were two open-ended questions that participants could complete to (1) indicate additional ways they could be supported in using ESSER funds to enhance student learning and (2) indicate their plans to equitably expend funds to address student learning needs in their region. Representative responses to the question about additional information needs indicate potential areas for further engagement with these district leaders.

| <i>What other information or support pertaining to using, leveraging, or sustaining ESSER funding in ways that can positively impact student learning would be helpful to you or those you work with?</i> | |
|---|--|
| Examples and clarification on the topic of expenditures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“Need more specific uses of funding. If spending on [social and emotional learning], how are they doing that? ... I think schools just don’t know yet how they will spend it. They know broad categories.”</i> • <i>“Interacting with other districts in how they are leveraging these funds is very helpful.”</i> • <i>“Additional data and research-based examples.”</i> • <i>“Any innovative ideas.”</i> • <i>“Perhaps looking at an example of a situation of utilizing federal funds strategically to sustain initiatives that may come out of the learning loss initiatives or to support initiatives.”</i> |
| Understanding about allowability and use of expenditures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“...Continued guidance on allowable expenditures is most appreciated (actually, continued guidance on what isn’t allowable would be better so as not to get surprised).”</i> • <i>“More info and guidance from the Fed and State is truly appreciated. More I hear the more I understand!”</i> • <i>“Good discussion to hear the requirements and suggestions of the experts.”</i> |

| What other information or support pertaining to using, leveraging, or sustaining ESSER funding in ways that can positively impact student learning would be helpful to you or those you work with? | |
|--|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “We need to revisit the areas of how ESSER III funds can be used. For example, let’s do session one again in a few weeks and see how our thinking/brainstorming of uses has evolved.” |
| Budgeting | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Talking to peers about budget challenges and pitfalls. Talk with peers about getting ESSER budgets approved through ISBE. Having ISBE address challenges that we will face in implementing the budget. Actually addressing the challenge of having 2 large federal grants open at the same time along with all of the other federal grants during the 21/22 school year and beyond!!!!” |
| Evaluating Programs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Creative ideas for measurement of success.” |
| Sustaining ESSER-funded programs through blending and braiding | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How to select quality partners in the sustainability of programs using ESSER funds? The role of public partnerships (e.g., universities) to maintain greater sustainability of programming beyond ESSER—Sept. 2024.” • “Perhaps the ISBE staff showing unique ways that they see Districts are using their funds, blending and braiding. I loved the examples.” • “I would like to see some samples of other District’s applications to see how they are coordinating their funds. The ESSER III is a huge grant, and I know there are so many creative ways to spend the monies, but I just need some other innovative ways other Districts are utilizing their funds.” |

| What is one strategy or next step that you intend to take to support spending funds in equitable ways to address student learning issues in your region? | |
|--|--|
| Greater awareness of ESSER timelines | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Conscious of dates of obligation for each round of funding.” • “Using Esser funding in order 1,2,3. Esser 3 funding for learning loss, afterschool & summer school” |
| Need for the utilization of data | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Look to the data.” • “Targeted instruction and making decisions using data and research based instructional practices and curriculum purchases” |
| Collaborating with stakeholders around funding | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Have all of the info from stakeholder gathered, time to write the ESSER II grant in the next 2 weeks.” • “Community engagement” • “Meet with cabinet, learning administrators, union leaders, parent relationship liaison” • “Seek feedback regarding the best way to spend the funds on student learning.” • “Continue collaboration on the best use of the funds.” • “Gather as much information as possible and start to prioritize the use of funds.” • “Drill in with smaller group sessions specific to intense specific skill work.” |

| <p><i>What is one strategy or next step that you intend to take to support spending funds in equitable ways to address student learning issues in your region?</i></p> | |
|--|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“Communicate with our senior leadership team about leveraging all our dollars to work together, not just thinking of them as islands.”</i> • <i>“We will need a strategy on how to communicate the plan to the community.”</i> • <i>“Form planning committees to address student learning issues.”</i> • <i>“Work on a standing collaborating group to continue these dialogs long term.”</i> • <i>“Create an action planning group of research on what is working well, and what can be eliminated.”</i> • <i>“Needs assessment from all stakeholders and public forum follow up.”</i> |
| <p>Sustainability through blending and braiding funding</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“Blending with the other Title and IDEA programs for long term sustainability.”</i> • <i>“Making sure that we connect our spending/budgeting plan to our strategic plan and individual school improvement plans”</i> • <i>“Bring this presentation to our other educational leaders especially our federal funds director to strategically look at sustaining initiatives that may work.”</i> • <i>“We will be taking time to have a team discuss our options and best determine the use of the funds to allow for sustainability.”</i> • <i>“Look further into braiding and blending of funds.”</i> |
| <p>Other</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“We will be offering transportation to our afterschool programs to allow for all students to attend.”</i> • <i>“We are improving the quality of our 1:1 devices and are taking steps to improve air quality in all of our grade school classrooms”</i> • <i>“SEL and enhanced student supports geared toward building resiliency”</i> • <i>“We are going to have summer school as well as interventionists to assist students “</i> • <i>“Grow your own PEL” with PD/hire with ESSER funds to build our licensed staff capacity that can then be transitioned to district funds as retirements occur.”</i> • <i>“We are planning on hiring Interventionist to work with students, as well as providing After School during the year. Additionally, we are looking to extend the school day for the 2021-2022 school year.”</i> |

Along with the questions and comments that occurred during the session, these responses provide the starting point for formulating a needs-sensing survey that will help determine plans for the next series of conversations to support district leaders.

Key Takeaways

During each session, superintendents and district leaders heard from experts and state leaders who responded to questions and needs regarding ESSER funds and how they could be used to meet student learning needs in their region. The submitted questions and comments suggest that response to the series was generally positive with some indications of continued need for support as they move through the funding cycles with ESSER I, II, and III along with other federal and non-federal funding resources. Survey respondents expressed an interest in further support on ESSER-funding issues unique to their districts, as well as exemplars about how other districts are making use of or combining funds that will allow for sustainability of program activities or resources that lead to more equitable student learning. Participants engaged with featured speakers and with one another as time permitted during a breakout session to share their own processes, generate ideas, and think about problem areas surrounding sustaining, evaluating, or modifying programs that most benefit student learning. Participants indicated the need for additional collaboration about challenges and opportunities to maximize ESSER funds as well as methods, tools, and resources for tracking success of program activities that these funding streams support. Based on the end of session survey feedback, R9 CC in collaboration with ISBE and IASBO will build upon this series by creating a community of practice focused on braiding and blending federal funds beginning in the fall of 2021.

Resources

Illinois State Board of Education

[ISBE Grants Fiscal Procedure Handbook](#): The purpose of this document is to inform internal agency staff and external customers of the policies, procedures, and guidelines that govern all state and federal grants awarded from the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), to ensure sound accounting practices, and to provide consistency in the administration of grants. These procedures and guidelines do not supersede state statute, administrative rules, federal law, or regulations that may govern each specific program.

[Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief I webinar](#): The webinar is presented by ISBE to provide guidance for the ESSER I application process.

[Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief II webinar](#): The webinar is presented by ISBE to provide guidance for the ESSER II application process.

[The ISBE Blending and Braiding webinar](#): The Illinois State Board of Education has released a webinar for district- and school-level administrators. The webinar, titled “Leveraging Resources: Blending and Braiding Funds,” will assist districts in maximizing the use of the additional funds that districts have received. The webinar is specifically designed to help district administrative teams plan holistically, develop cohesive programs and services, and ensure sustainability through blending and braiding of federal, state, and local funds.

U.S. Department of Education: Office of Elementary and Secondary Education

- Guidance Documents and Frequently Asked Questions
- Use of Funds
- Released on May 26, 2021, this [Use of Funds FAQ document](#) is intended to answer Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about how funding under the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund, including the American Rescue Plan ESSER (ARP ESSER) program, and the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief (GEER) Fund may be used in response to the impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic on students in pre-K–12 education.
- Additional HVAC Use of Funds slides, shared during the June 17, 2021, office hour, are available [here](#).

- FAQs related to use of funds for COVID-19 Vaccinations and Testing can be found [here](#).
- Additional FAQs related to using American Rescue Plan and other pandemic relief funds to provide incentives to students to get the COVID-19 vaccination can be found [here](#).

National Comprehensive Center

- Effective Use of Fiscal Resources: <https://compcenternetwork.org/national-center/our-work/collection/6792>
- Find out how states and districts are allocating the unprecedented level of new federal resources, including aligning planned expenditures with other program funding. School finance experts provide guidance about meeting equity goals.

Federal Education Group, LLC Resources

- [Commonly Asked Questions about Allowable ESSER and GEER Activities](#) (Council of Chief State School Officers, February 2021)
- [Restart & Recovery: ESEA & COVID-19 State Strategies for Supporting Local Educational Agencies in Confronting the Effects of the Pandemic](#) (Council of Chief State School Officers, October 2020)

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