



# Using Federal COVID-19 Relief Funds to Support Student Transitions from High School to Higher Education

## Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on college enrollment. According to a [report](#) by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, fall 2020 college enrollment rates dropped by 7% overall, with the greatest declines among students from low-income high schools and high-minority high schools—down 11% and 10%, respectively.<sup>1</sup> These worrying enrollment trends will likely continue for at least another year. As of April 30, 2021, [completion rates of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid \(FAFSA\)](#) for the class of 2021 had declined by 6% nationally compared to last academic year, with sharper drops in Title I-eligible high schools (8%) and high-minority high schools (10%). Even prior to the pandemic, certain groups of high schoolers, including [students from low-income families](#) and [Black and Hispanic students](#), were attending colleges at far lower rates than their peers.

Fortunately, **Congress has provided nearly \$180 billion for K–12 education to states and school districts through three coronavirus relief packages, which can—and should—be used to re-engage high school students, ensure they are on track to graduate, and close the widening gaps in higher education enrollment.** These federal relief dollars can provide support to high school students in transitioning to college; thus, we encourage education leaders to use this opportunity not only to mitigate COVID-19’s educational impacts, but also to build stronger systems for supporting successful postsecondary transitions beyond the pandemic—particularly for students living in poverty, Black and Latino students, Native students, students with disabilities, students learning English, students experiencing homelessness, students in the foster care system, students who are incarcerated, and undocumented students. Buoyed by the unprecedented level of federal funding,

K–12 leaders can meet this moment by building high school experiences that are meaningful and engaging for students and by ensuring all students have the knowledge and support to navigate from high school to higher education.

## Overview of Coronavirus Relief Funding

### Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act

Signed into law in March 2020, the [Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security \(CARES\) Act](#) created the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER Fund), which allocated **\$13.2 billion** (ESSER I) to state K–12 educational agencies (SEAs) to help schools respond to the unprecedented disruptions and increased student needs caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The amount each state received was based on its relative share of fiscal year (FY) 2019 Title I, Part A, funding. Within one year of receiving funds, states must award at least 90% of their ESSER I funds to school districts (i.e., local educational agencies, or LEAs), where the amount each district receives also is based on its share of FY2019 Title I, Part A, funding. States and districts must obligate their ESSER I funds by **September 30, 2022**, and spend the funds by **January 28, 2023**.<sup>2</sup>

### Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act

The [Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations \(CRRSA\) Act](#), enacted in December 2020, provided an additional **\$54.3 billion** for K–12 education through ESSER II. Similar to ESSER I, ESSER II allocations to states and districts were based on their relative share of Title I, Part A, funding in FY2020, and SEAs must subgrant at least 90% of their funds to LEAs within one year of receiving their allocations from



## Addressing Learning Loss with ARP ESSER Funds

The ARP Act directs states and districts to use a portion of their relief funds to combat “learning loss” through the implementation of evidence-based interventions, such as extended-day or extended-school year programs, summer enrichment, high-quality, high-dosage tutoring, or strategies to support students’ transition from high school to college (such as dual enrollment and early college programs), as described in this document.

Although the ARP Act uses the term “learning loss,” some **advocates**, **researchers**, **practitioners**, and **educators** prefer to describe these strategies as combatting “unfinished learning” or “interrupted learning” in recognition that (1) the root cause of these issue is students missing out on academic content and learning time they would have typically received, and (2) education leaders can make systematic decisions, including how resources are allocated and spent, to address students’ needs and accelerate their learning and progress. Throughout this document, we use the term “learning loss” only when referring to the specific provisions to set aside funds in the ARP Act.

Data have shown students from historically underserved populations were acutely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including bearing the brunt of lost instructional time due to **school building closures** and lack of **access to remote learning**. For example, **McKinsey** estimated that students could miss a staggering amount of content—especially in math—with students, on average, likely to lose five to nine months of learning by the end of the 2020–21 school year. The picture is even more alarming for students of color, who could lose up to a year or more of math content. Likewise, using data for over four million students, **NWEA** reported declines in students’ math achievement in fall 2020 compared to students in the same grade the year prior. In addition, while overall reading achievement in fall 2020 was similar, on average, to fall 2019, declines in reading were concentrated disproportionately among Hispanic and Black students. Worse, NWEA found that lower-performing students, students of color, and students from low-income backgrounds were far more likely to be missing from the fall 2020 data— which means these estimates likely underestimated the impacts of the pandemic on student learning for these groups.

Data like these are why Congress required states and districts to ensure set-aside funds from the ARP Act are used to respond to students’ academic, social, and emotional needs, and in particular, “address the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus” on students of color, students from low-income families, English learners, students experiencing homelessness, students in foster care, and students with disabilities.

the U.S. Department of Education (ED). States and districts have until **September 30, 2023**, to obligate ESSER II funds and must spend the funds by **January 28, 2024**.

ESSER I and II funds can be used for the same purposes.<sup>3</sup> In general, the allowable uses of ESSER funds are extremely broad and flexible, including activities specific to the pandemic (such as coordinating with public health departments and implementing strategies to maintain school operations and continuity of services), as well as any activity authorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century (Perkins V) Act, and Adult Education and Family Literacy Act. States and districts can learn more about how they may spend ESSER funds in the U.S. Department of Education’s [frequently asked questions \(FAQs\)](#).

### American Rescue Plan Act

Signed by President Biden in March 2021, the **American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act** provides an additional **\$122 billion** through ARP ESSER to states and school districts. However, ARP ESSER differs from ESSER I and II in several notable ways, including the following:

- 1. More timely awards to districts.** SEAs must, to the extent practicable, make funds available to LEAs within 60 days of receiving their allocations from ED, instead of having one year to distribute funds to school districts.
- 2. Reserved funding for specific purposes.** States must set aside **5%** of their ARP ESSER funds, and LEAs must

reserve at least **20%** of their ARP ESSER allocations to address “learning loss” by implementing evidence-based interventions (see sidebar, “Addressing Learning Loss with ARP ESSER Funds”). States, but not LEAs, must also set aside **1%** of their ARP ESSER awards for evidence-based comprehensive afterschool programs and **1%** for evidence-based summer learning and enrichment programs. Remaining ARP ESSER funds can be used for the same activities as ESSER I and ESSER II funds.<sup>4</sup>

ED has already **distributed** two-thirds of ARP ESSER funds to SEAs. An SEA will be eligible to receive the final third upon approval of its **state plan** for the use of ARP Act funds (due to ED June 7, 2021). States and districts must obligate their ARP ESSER funds by **September 30, 2024**, and spend the funds by **January 28, 2025**.

K–12 leaders can find more **resources** and information on ARP ESSER from the U.S. Department of Education at: <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/american-rescue-plan/american-rescue-plan-elementary-and-secondary-school-emergency-relief/>.

### Strategies to Support the Transition from High School to Higher Education

The sharp declines in **college enrollment** and **FAFSA completion**—coupled with increases in the number of high school students **chronically absent** and **failing courses** amid fears of surging dropout rates—reveal the urgent need to prioritize high school students in districts’ pandemic recovery efforts. While the challenges faced by historically underserved

## ED COVID-19 Handbook, Volume 2

The U.S. Department of Education's **COVID-19 Handbook, Volume 2** encourages districts and schools to implement evidence-based, practitioner-informed strategies to meet students' social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs—including those focused on pathways for high school students to succeed in higher education. The handbook (pp.19–20) states:

*COVID-19 has also **impacted** the number of students matriculating from high school to postsecondary education. There are a number of strategies that high schools can implement to support the successful transition:*

- *Leverage data and technology to facilitate **enhanced college advising, summer bridge programs**, assistance to students and families in navigating the **financial aid process**, and other activities with a track record of improving postsecondary access and success. Districts should emphasize outreach and engagement efforts toward first-generation college students, which can be conducted in partnership with community-based organizations.*
- *Support **dual enrollment** and **early college high schools**, which studies show increase postsecondary preparation and enrollment. These programs can serve as effective mechanisms at exposing high school students to college course-taking, providing a college reengagement strategy for students who are at risk of not continuing to postsecondary education upon high school graduation. **Research** suggests these dual or concurrent enrollment experiences must be well-designed with scaffolded supports to ensure equitable experiences and outcomes for all students.*
- *Provide college and career pathways that integrate rigorous academic coursework, career and technical education, work-based learning, and support services. Evidence from multiple approaches to college and career pathways, such as **Career Academies, Linked Learning**, and **P-Tech**, demonstrates they increase preparation for postsecondary education among other outcomes. **Work-based learning** can enhance student engagement which is especially important during the COVID-19 recovery as many students have been disengaged from learning.*
- ***Support students** in completing their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®) form which is the first step students and families can take in accessing federal dollars for postsecondary education. In addition to federal student aid, submitting the FAFSA form also can unlock opportunities for aid from some states, postsecondary institutions, and private organizations.*

students were concerning before the pandemic, COVID-19 exacerbated these challenges, and created new ones, for students as they navigate between high school and higher education. **States and districts can address these challenges by using the increase in federal funds to create and strengthen programs, systems, and strategies for supporting this critical transition point.**

ED reinforced this message in guidance to states and districts. Its "**COVID-19 Handbook, Volume 2: Roadmap to Reopening Safely and Meeting All Students' Needs**" provides information on how districts and schools can use ESSER funds to address the effects of COVID-19 on students. In the handbook, ED explicitly encourages states and school districts to spend ESSER funds on programs that support the transition from high school to higher education (see sidebar, "ED COVID-19 Handbook, Volume 2").

States and districts should consider closely strategies for supporting students' transitions to higher education (discussed below) when making decisions about spending their ESSER funds. This includes activities to (1) develop and improve college access; (2) promote participation in dual enrollment and early college high schools; (3) implement college and career pathways, and (4) redesign high schools.

**Because costs associated with these activities are allowable uses of funds under other federal laws, like ESEA, they are also allowable uses of ESSER funds.** Moreover, based on their track

record of success in improving student outcomes, SEAs and LEAs should use ARP ESSER funds reserved to address "learning loss" to implement these activities.

### Activities to Improve College Access and Success

**Research** shows that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to attend college or more often choose a college that is less selective than their academic credentials allow. To support these students in finding a college that is a good fit, high schools can adopt **enhanced college advising**, which is a set of strategies to help students from low-income families and first-generation college-goers (1) overcome logistical difficulties throughout the college application process, (2) reduce financial hurdles, and (3) raise their expectations regarding college choice. In addition, school districts can partner with higher education institutions and/or community-based organizations to develop **summer bridge programs**, which equip students with academic skills and social resources for postsecondary success.

When spending ESSER funds, LEAs should consider using evidence-based strategies, such as leveraging technology and linking K–12 and postsecondary data to facilitate

- enhanced college and career advising;
- summer bridge programs and other supports to prevent "**summer melt**" between high school graduation and college enrollment;

- assistance to students and families in navigating the financial aid process; and
- other activities with a track record of improving postsecondary access and success for students, especially those most affected by the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

**Evidence base:** Research shows that enhanced college advising can increase the number and selectivity of colleges to which disadvantaged students apply. In addition, according to the [National College Attainment Network](#), FAFSA completion is one of the best predictors of whether a high school senior will go on to college. Therefore, helping students [navigate the process](#) to reduce financial hurdles can be critical to their access to postsecondary education. Furthermore, summer bridge programs can have a [positive impact](#) on students' first college-level course completion in math and writing.

### Dual and Concurrent Enrollment Programs and Early College High Schools

School districts should invest in programs that expose high school students, especially those underserved, to postsecondary coursework and support them in navigating college while they are still in high school. For example, [dual or concurrent enrollment programs](#) are partnerships between school districts and higher education institutions that allow high school students to enroll in college courses and earn transferable college credit. [Early College High School programs](#) offer students opportunities to earn an associate's degree, or up to two years of college credit, toward a bachelor's degree during high school at no or low cost to the students.

**Evidence base:** Dual or concurrent enrollment and early college high schools are proven mechanisms for increasing postsecondary preparation and enrollment as shown in a number of research studies, including a [What Works Clearinghouse Intervention report](#) from the Institute of Education Sciences and a long-running [American Institutes for Research study](#) on early college high schools. These approaches effectively improve both student access and success in college, particularly for students from low-income families and students who are under-represented in higher education. In addition to these national studies, recent state-specific studies in [Colorado](#), [Kentucky](#), [Massachusetts](#), [Texas](#), and [North Carolina](#) demonstrate significant, positive effects of dual or concurrent enrollment and early college high school programs for students in those states. Further [research](#) suggests that dual or concurrent enrollment experiences must be well designed with scaffolded supports to ensure equitable experiences and outcomes for all students.

When spending ESSER funds, LEAs should consider

- expanding dual or concurrent enrollment programs and early college high schools, particularly those that serve students from low-income families and students of color who are often under-represented in these programs;
- investing in college in high school programs to address gaps in learning among high school students who may respond positively to the college learning environment; and
- using dual or concurrent enrollment as part of a credit-recovery strategy, including for students who may have struggled with virtual courses.

The College in High School Alliance's "[The Role of College in High School Programs in Student Recovery from COVID-19: COVID-19 Funding Guidance](#)" offers additional recommendations on using ESSER funds to support expanded access to dual enrollment and early college high schools.

### College and Career Pathways

[College and career pathways](#) are a combination of coursework, assessments, projects, and/or workplace experiences that help students make a clear connection to college and career opportunities. [Work-based learning](#) is often one of many options (or requirements) students have to complete a college and career graduation pathway, thereby enhancing classroom learning by directly connecting students to a workplace experience or internship.

When spending ESSER funds, LEAs should consider

- developing or expanding college and career pathways, particularly those that serve students from low-income families and students under-represented in higher education;
- supporting all facets of college and career pathways, including [work-based learning opportunities that incorporate paid internships during the summer](#) and/or school year and career advising programs to help students set goals and chart a path through postsecondary education to the workforce; and

**Evidence base:** College and career pathways integrate rigorous academic coursework and often including dual or concurrent enrollment courses, career and technical education, [work-based learning](#), and support services. Evidence from multiple approaches to college and career pathways, such as [Career Academies](#), [Linked Learning](#) and [P-Tech](#), demonstrates that these strategies increase students' preparation for postsecondary education and help them develop the knowledge and skills employers seek for the future, among other positive outcomes.

- investing in pathways to increase engagement and addressing gaps in learning among high school students who are likely to respond positively to career-themed instruction.

- providing students with productive instructional strategies, opportunities for social and emotional development, and **systems of support**.

## High School Redesign

Common features of high schools that have been redesigned include **early warning systems**, opportunities for students to earn college credit, college and career pathways, and structures to facilitate strong relationships between students and adults, distributed leadership, and teacher teaming.

When spending ESSER funds, LEAs should consider

- applying evidence-based strategies to redesign high schools that are based in the **science of learning and development**;
- adopting or expanding innovative approaches to credit recovery and acceleration, such as integrated courses that enable students to meet multiple graduation credit-hour requirements in a single course; and

**Evidence base:** **Research** shows that early warning systems are an effective way to identify students who are off track from high school graduation and tailor interventions to their specific needs. Early warning systems use data on attendance, behavior, and course performance to meet students' needs in "real time." Rather than implementing generalized support for large numbers of students, early warning systems allow educators to adapt interventions that address the academic, social, and emotional needs of individual students and ensure they are on track toward high school graduation and **postsecondary education**.

## Conclusion

As the COVID-19 pandemic has made it more challenging for high school students to successfully navigate the transition to college, school districts now have an opportunity to invest federal relief funds, along with other funding sources, in designing and implementing programs to improve students' college access and success. When spending ESSER funds, including the 20% set-aside of ARP ESSER funds dedicated to addressing "learning loss," we strongly recommend that school districts consider implementing programs with a proven track record of improving postsecondary access and success for students, especially for those most affected by the pandemic. Such efforts will not only address the immediate needs of students in the Classes of 2021 and 2022 who are transitioning to postsecondary education amidst unprecedented educational disruptions, but they also will strengthen these systems for future cohorts of students as states and districts recover from the pandemic.

## Endnotes

- 1 The National Student Clearinghouse defines a "low-income high school" as a high school where at least 50% of the student population is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. A "high-minority high school" is defined as a high school where at least 40% of the student population are Black or Hispanic.
- 2 The Tydings Amendment stipulates that any funds appropriated for an applicable program that are not obligated and expended by the recipient educational agencies and institutions before the end of the fiscal year remain available for obligation and expenditure for one additional fiscal year. All timelines mentioned in this section include the additional 12 months under the Tydings Amendment. Further, although funds must be obligated by the end of the performance period (September 30), states and districts have 120 calendar days to liquidate ESSER funds.
- 3 CRRSA explicitly notes some allowable uses of ESSER funds, such as addressing "learning loss," reopening school buildings, and upgrading school facilities and ventilation systems, that were not mentioned by name in the CARES Act. However, ESSER funds provided under the CARES Act also can be used to support these activities.
- 4 Throughout this document, uses of ESSER funds from the three coronavirus relief packages are discussed collectively, unless specified.
- 5 In its **FAQs** on using ESSER funds, ED encourages LEAs to consider using ESSER funds to pay college application fees for students from low-income families; support the salaries of additional guidance counselors who can assist students with the college process and financial aid; implement summer bridge programs to facilitate transitions to higher education and other pathways; and provide transition services for high school seniors with an Individualized Education Program. ED further clarifies that districts may use funds to support students who graduated in either the Classes of 2020 or 2021 and who have not yet successfully transitioned to college or careers (i.e., through college or career counseling, support in applying for college or job training programs, and related services).



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Support for the development of this publication was provided by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and Joyce Foundation.

Photos by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for **American Education: Images of Teachers and Students in Action**