

WHITE PAPER

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5 Ways to Maximize the Value of Remaining ESSER Funding

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Five Ways to Maximize the Value of Remaining ESSER Funding

With billions of dollars in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding that must be spent soon, school systems have a unique opportunity to make strategic investments in programs that will improve student achievement and meet the needs of an increasingly diverse set of learners.

However, the deadline for using this funding is quickly approaching. School district leaders need to decide in the next few months how they'll leverage their remaining money to get the biggest learning return on their investment.

Congress allocated nearly \$190 billion in emergency relief aid to help K-12 schools recover from the devastating effects of the pandemic. School districts have until Sept. 30, 2024, to spend the rest of their ESSER money or they'll lose it.

Through July 31, 2023, schools have spent just over \$113 billion in ESSER funds, or only three-fifths of the money allotted. Districts have another \$76 billion to spend before the money disappears.¹

To meet the needs of students who were most affected by the pandemic, leaders will need to invest this money wisely in learning strategies that have been proven to be effective. Here are five key priorities to consider as you determine how to use the remaining ESSER funds to make the biggest impact in your school or district.

Congress allocated nearly **\$190 billion** in emergency relief aid to help K-12 schools recover from the devastating effects of the pandemic. School districts have **until Sept. 30, 2024, to spend** the rest of their ESSER money or they'll lose it.



1. Accelerate learning and close persistent achievement gaps

Why this matters: According to a July 2023 report from NWEA® (formerly the Northwest Evaluation Association), students still haven't made up for lost learning during the pandemic. Using data from NWEA's Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment, the report says the average student will need the equivalent of 4.1 months of additional schooling to catch up to pre-COVID levels in reading and 4.5 months of additional schooling in math.²

Not only are many students still behind in their learning, but the gap between high-achieving and underserved students has grown larger. While the pandemic affected learning across all demographic groups, students who were already struggling fell even further behind their peers.

The pandemic has also widened long-standing achievement gaps among various racial groups. For instance, although 25 percent of fourth graders overall failed to meet even the “basic” level of math proficiency on the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), there were significant gaps between the average scores of Asian (10 percent) and White (14 percent) students and those of other subgroups, such as Hispanic (36 percent), Native American (41 percent), and Black (45 percent) students.³

Similar gaps existed in fourth grade reading, where 19 percent of Asian students and 27 percent of White students failed to meet basic proficiency, compared with 50 percent of Hispanic students, 56 percent of Black students, and 57 percent of Native American students.⁴

How Stride Learning Solutions can help: School districts nationwide are using high-impact, teacher-led tutoring programs to accelerate students' reading and math skills and close persistent learning gaps, and research has linked this practice with improved academic achievement.⁵ **Stride Tutoring** connects students and their families with state-certified tutors for personalized and flexible online learning sessions designed to meet these goals.

Students can book recurring sessions with their favorite tutors, building lasting relationships that empower their success. Teachers can also schedule individual or group tutoring sessions for their students who need extra support. “High-dosage tutoring works best when it’s a natural extension of the classroom,” said Jennifer Moore, General Manager of Stride Tutoring.



94% found their remote teacher to be knowledgeable;
82% felt appreciated for having two caring adults—a remote teacher and a classroom facilitator

Student survey - Baltimore City Public Schools

2. Solve teacher shortages with virtual instruction

Why this matters: As school systems aim to recover lost learning and elevate the achievement of all students, but especially those who have fallen the furthest behind, many districts are doing so while also facing significant staffing shortages.

New research suggests that the teacher shortages many districts have experienced since COVID have only gotten worse in many states—and they weren’t just an aberration of the pandemic. Instead, they seem to be part of a troubling trend: Teachers are leaving the classroom at higher rates, and the pool of candidates available to replace them isn’t large enough.

Researchers counted more than 36,500 teaching vacancies in 37 states and D.C. for the 2021-22 school year. In August 2023, they published updated data finding that teacher shortages had grown by 35 percent among that group in a single year, to more than 49,000 vacancies for the 2022-23 school year.⁶

Even in states that saw a drop in vacancies, there are concerns about who is filling those teaching jobs. In response to the pandemic, many states lowered their teaching requirements, and schools increasingly relied on instructors with fewer qualifications.

Dire teacher shortages have continued into the 2023-24 school year, with the president of the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools calling the problem a “catastrophe.”⁷ Despite the challenge, it’s imperative that K-12 leaders connect students with highly qualified instructors to ensure their continued academic progress.

How Stride Learning Solutions can help: Districts can use emergency funding to enlist the help of experienced, state-certified remote instructors from partners like Stride Learning Solutions to ensure that learning continues uninterrupted.

Stride Learning Solutions state- and content-certified teachers can help schools deliver high-quality instruction in subjects where they might lack a qualified, full-time educator. This instruction can be fully asynchronous, in which students are learning in an optimized online format using best instructional practices. It can be fully synchronous, in which students are physically present in the classroom and the instructor teaches from a remote location. Or, it can be some combination of the two.

To ensure the success of remote instructional services, Stride Learning Solutions partners its remote teachers with a district-provided classroom facilitator. The facilitator can be a classroom aide, a paraprofessional, or another support staffer. While the remote teacher provides experienced, high-quality instruction, the facilitator helps build relationships with students, manages the learning environment, and supports student engagement.

This model has been proven to be effective in filling troublesome teaching gaps and ensuring high-quality learning experiences for everyone. For instance, Stride Learning Solutions deployed 46 experienced teachers to work remotely in Baltimore City Public Schools, a school district in the city of Baltimore, Maryland. A survey of the students taught by Stride Learning Solutions teachers found that 95 percent felt respected and challenged; 94 percent found their remote teacher to be knowledgeable; 82 percent felt appreciated for having two caring adults—a remote teacher and a classroom facilitator—available to them; and 80 percent said they were satisfied with the instruction they received.

3. Deliver highly flexible, personalized learning options for students

Why this matters: Although the shift to remote learning during the pandemic was disruptive for many students, others found that they actually thrived in an online environment.

When implemented well, online and hybrid learning can add tremendous value to students' educational experience. They give students more options for engaging with instruction, and they allow for a more highly personalized learning experience. Learning online might be a more convenient choice for students who live far away from school, as well as for students who don't feel safe attending school in person or those who require a more flexible learning schedule.

After experiencing the benefits of online and hybrid learning firsthand during the pandemic, many students now expect to have a choice in how they'll attend class. In fact, nearly a third of high school students say they'd like to retain a virtual learning component as part of their post-pandemic education.⁸

What's more, online learning helps school systems expand the range of courses available to students. It gives students choice and agency over not only how they learn, but also what they learn. This agency can be a key factor in engaging students more deeply in their education and motivating them to succeed.

In surveys conducted in late 2022 and early 2023, 14 percent of students characterized themselves as unmotivated in school—and 38 percent said the pandemic had made them less motivated to do their best work.⁹ However, research has found that students who have agency in their learning are happier in school and more likely to achieve success.¹⁰



The quality of instruction that students receive online depends on educators' capacity to teach effectively with technology.

How Stride Learning Solutions can help: School districts can use their remaining ESSER funding to expand the range of courses available to students and give them choices in how they learn with flexible online and blended learning solutions from that allow for a more personalized educational experience.

For instance, districts can license the Stride Learning Solutions robust digital library, curriculum, and learning platform to teach online and hybrid courses for themselves. Or, they can give students the option to learn from certified instructors for part or all of their school experience through full-time or supplemental online instruction.

Stride Learning Solutions digital courses cover a wide range of subjects, allowing schools to offer courses that might otherwise be unavailable to students. From remedial and foundational courses to Advanced Placement and career and technical education, students can have access to diverse educational opportunities.

4. Empower teachers with advanced training in technology

Why this matters: As the pandemic demonstrated, the ability to move instruction online is critical for maintaining the continuity of education in the event of another emergency that closes school facilities. Yet, as many families learned during COVID, the quality of instruction that students receive online depends on educators' capacity to teach effectively with technology.

School district leaders might consider using some of their remaining pandemic relief aid to prepare for another potential shift to remote instruction by ensuring their teachers are well versed in online teaching and learning best practices.

How Stride Learning Solutions can help: Stride Learning Solutions can provide [professional learning services](#) to help teachers and administrators build engaging and highly effective online and blended learning environments.

Training for administrators covers topics such as planning, implementing, and supporting teaching and learning in an online classroom. Training for teachers includes guidance on how to create online lessons, use digital tools, personalize the learning for students, keep engagement high in an online environment, build an effective learning culture, and more.

5. Extend early education programs to more children

Why this matters: While research confirms the importance of early education in getting children ready for kindergarten,¹¹ many children continue to miss out on the benefits of preschool education. In fact, data from the National Center for Education Statistics shows that enrollment of three- and four-year-olds in early childhood education programs still lags behind pre-pandemic rates.¹²

How Stride Learning Solutions can help: Stride offers a tailored curriculum for children ages 3-5 that's designed to make early learning both accessible and enriching. The program aims to spark a lifelong love of learning among children, while leveling the playing field and helping districts extend early education to more families.

A Unique Opportunity

With billions of dollars in emergency funds remaining to be spent by Sept. 30, 2024, school districts are well positioned to help every student succeed. But school district leaders must decide how to spend this money strategically.

Investing in solutions to close achievement gaps, address staffing shortages, give students more agency, train teachers in the use of technology for instruction, and extend early education to more children can enhance learning outcomes and ensure a significant educational return.

To learn how Stride Learning Solutions can help school districts maximize their use of ESSER funding, contact us today: **844.638.3533** | StrideLS.com

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Since 2000, Stride Learning Solutions has been a leader in strategic solutions to solve district challenges. Stride Learning Solutions' flexible online and blended learning options boost modern instruction and promote lifelong student success. With an innovative platform, comprehensive digital courseware, adaptable technology, and extensive support, Stride Learning Solutions is equipped to help your school or district empower a brighter future for learners.

To learn more, visit stridelearning.com/learning-solutions.

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