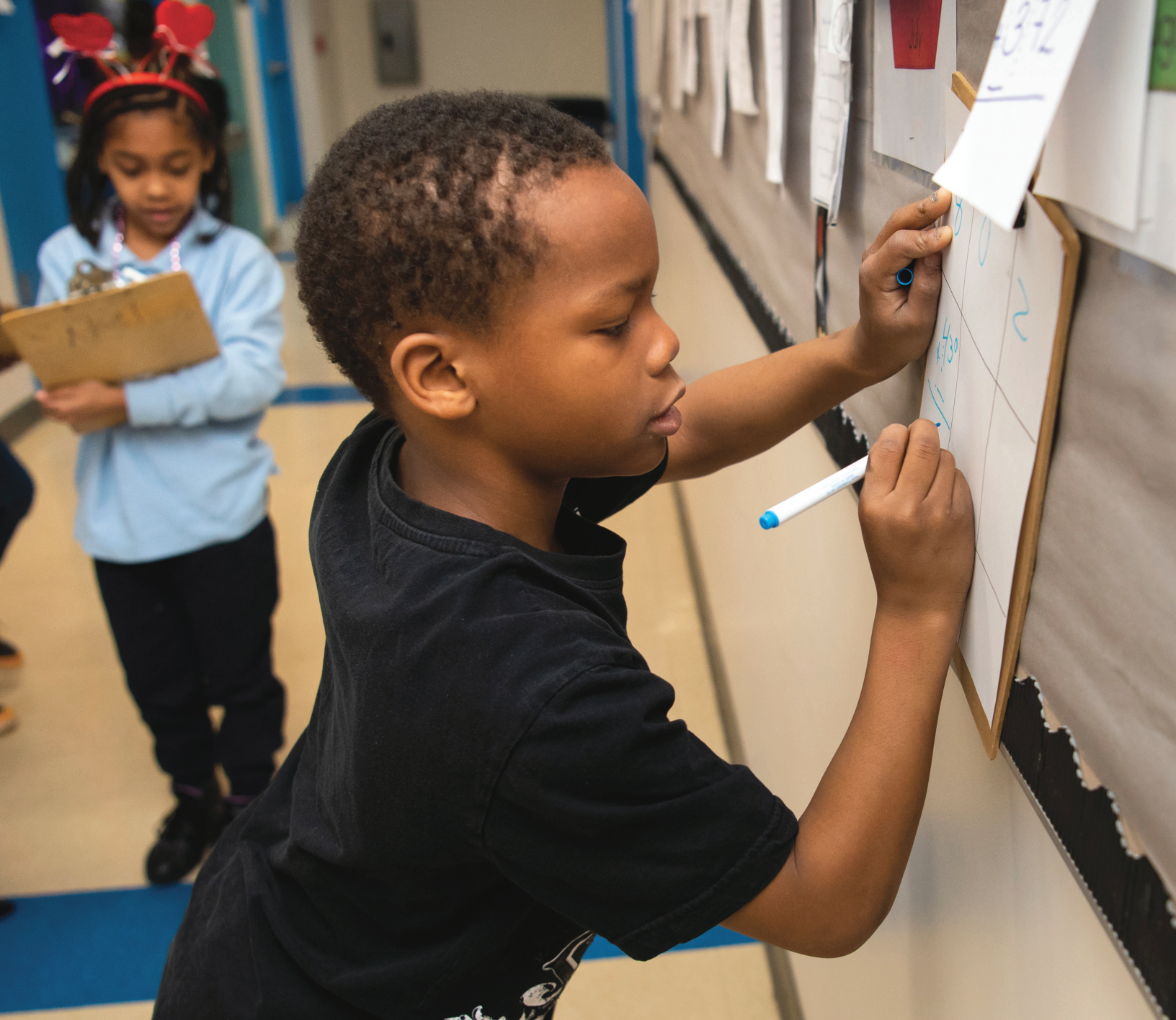




A Work in Progress:

**How Covid Aid Is Helping Schools Recover and the
Need for Sustained Federal Support**

June 2023





A Work in Progress:

How Covid Aid Is Helping Schools Recover and the Need for Sustained Federal Support

“We are grateful for the federal emergency aid that has helped and is continuing to help our students, but America’s recovery will take years. Educators can’t do it alone. We need a long-term commitment from the federal government that is in line with the vast challenge remaining before us.”

– Pedro Martinez
Chiefs for Change Board Chair
Chicago Public Schools CEO

This brief contains information on federal Covid aid for K-12 schools distributed through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund. The brief explains how more federal support in key areas could help ensure systems are able to sustain impactful recovery work after the pandemic aid winds down. Specifically, the brief outlines recommendations related to Title I and state assessments as well as efforts to: promote student wellbeing, create reliable and affordable postsecondary pathways, study the effects of the pandemic on student learning, and support students with disabilities.

In addition, the document spotlights important work underway in Chiefs for Change members’ systems. The featured approaches are helping students now and, if continued and expanded, have the potential to create lasting positive change within individual systems and beyond.

About Chiefs for Change

Chiefs for Change is a bipartisan network of diverse school superintendents and state education leaders. The network supports members and provides technical assistance; advocates for the adoption of effective policies and practices; and develops the next generation of bold, student-focused superintendents.

Students and Schools Need More Federal Support

The superintendents and state education leaders who are members of Chiefs for Change say K-12 systems need significant and sustained federal support to help children fully recover from the far-reaching impacts of the Covid pandemic.

In response to the worst public health crisis in recent memory, the federal government provided an unprecedented amount of emergency aid for K-12 education: approximately \$190 billion. This aid was included as part of three packages through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund.

“So much has happened in the past three plus years, but school systems have been there through it all for our families,” said Chiefs for Change Board Chair and Chicago Public Schools CEO Pedro Martinez. “In the early days of the pandemic, we rapidly transitioned to remote learning, wanting to do everything possible to keep children from falling behind even when they couldn’t be in the classroom. Then, we continually adjusted to the evolving conditions—the outbreaks and spikes in our communities. As education leaders, many of us used a major portion of our Covid aid on public health and to purchase the equipment and supplies that the CDC said would help stop the spread.

“Now, we are deep in the recovery work, and we are seeing the extent of how Covid affected our children and what will be required to help them heal and go on to thrive. We are making the right investments in this work, but progress will take time, and everyone who cares about children and the future of our country must be dedicated to seeing that through.”

Martinez and other chiefs say adults need to understand how living through the pandemic during key developmental periods has affected our nation’s students.

After the health crisis subsided, leaders implemented intensive interventions—such as high-impact tutoring, extended learning time, and new student wellbeing services, to name a few. Many schools never had the resources to support these sorts of efforts before, and members of Chiefs for Change say they are seeing positive effects. But federal deadlines for obligating and spending

Covid Aid Supports Programs and Resources to Accelerate Learning

- High-quality instructional materials
- Longer school day and year
- High-dosage tutoring
- Full-day summer learning and enrichment programs
- Pre-K bridge programs
- Dual and concurrent enrollment opportunities

Covid Aid Supports Educators

- Retention bonuses
- Stipends for teachers who work beyond their regular schedule
- Professional learning and mentoring programs
- Teacher development days
- Assessments that give systems information on how kids are doing
- Work-based learning pathways to help prospective teachers get their degrees

Covid Aid Supports Student Wellbeing

- School-based mental health and wellness facilitators
- Partnerships to deliver telehealth services
- More counselors and social workers
- New forms of behavioral training
- Expanded counseling services in the evening

the funds are on the horizon, and some systems do not have the money in their regular budgets to cover the costs of positions and programs currently paid for with emergency aid. This means that interventions that are making a difference for students—and that educators say children still need—will be cut. Such cuts could undermine the recovery and prevent countless students from ever getting on track in their learning and going on to thrive in life.

In suburban Portland, Oregon, Beaverton School District, for example, will reduce and reallocate 25 ESSER-funded positions before the start of the new school year. It will do the same for 85 additional licensed positions in the subsequent year. Superintendent Gustavo Balderas is finishing his first year with the district. He says the previous administration used ESSER dollars to hire more teachers, social workers, and nurses, given students' urgent needs. The extra staff is making a difference, but the district is also experiencing enrollment declines—which mean it will receive less in state and local per-pupil funding that could, potentially, have been applied to help pay for these positions. As a result, Balderas says he will be forced to cut \$10.5 million that was previously covered by ESSER.

“We have been slowly eliminating the roles,” Balderas said. “It is painful because these team members are still needed in our district, but we simply can’t afford them.”

Meanwhile, in Shreveport, Louisiana, Superintendent T. Lamar Goree says “preparing for life after ESSER” is a top priority heading into the new school year. Without a new funding source, he says Caddo Parish Public Schools will be forced to cut some or all of the 50 additional math teachers the district hired using ESSER funds as it double blocked math instruction for children in grades 6-8. The extra teachers and more time in math has led to student

achievement gains, but Caddo Parish doesn't have the money to sustain the intensive math model after ESSER aid runs out.

Other members of Chiefs for Change are also considering eliminating, reducing, or making changes to programs paid for by ESSER after that funding ends. These programs are especially important for the children who were most negatively affected by the pandemic—those who were already behind in their learning before the school shutdowns and years of disruptions. Though recovery is underway, it is a process. If effective programs are cut when ESSER ends, some of the nation's most vulnerable students may never catch up, at great cost to those children, their communities, and our nation as a whole.

“Opportunity gaps grew wider than ever during Covid,” said Martinez. “Families who started with less, now have even less than they did before—and we must understand what that means for our schools. As a nation, we have to face the needs that exist. There are no quick fixes. We are grateful for the federal emergency aid that has helped and is continuing to help our students, but America's recovery will take years. Educators can't do it alone. We need a long-term commitment from the federal government that is in line with the vast challenge remaining before us.”



ESSER Fund: Three Packages of Emergency Aid for K-12 Schools

The Covid-19 pandemic arrived in the United States in spring 2020, forcing [a near-total shutdown](#) of schools and other public spaces nationwide. Chiefs for Change and partners aggressively [advocated](#) for significant federal relief aid to help K-12 systems respond to the crisis. As a result, the federal government approved an unprecedented \$190 billion in emergency funds for K-12. The money was included as part of three packages.

The first package, the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act*, was approved in March 2020. CARES allotted \$13.2 billion for the ESSER Fund established to support K-12 systems, with an additional \$3 billion for education to be used at governors' discretion. The CARES program, also known as ESSER I, was an important first step. Fifty-five million children were out of school at the time, and families struggled to cope with the wide-ranging impacts of the pandemic. Funds could be used for, among other things: personal protective equipment such as masks and sanitizers; improved air filtration; Covid testing; devices and home internet for students; staff and critical services; and efforts to

safely reopen campuses. Resources under ESSER I were available to obligate until September 30, 2022.

The second package, the *Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act*, known as ESSER II, was signed into law in late 2020 and provided an additional \$54.3 billion for the ESSER Fund. At the time, many school districts had not returned to in-person learning—or, were offering a hybrid model where students continued to receive remote instruction while attending some face-to-face classes on a limited basis. ESSER II aid is available to obligate until September 30, 2023.

The third package, the *American Rescue Plan (ARP)* was signed into law in March 2021, shortly before the CDC eased recommendations for social distancing in classrooms and vaccines became available for more children. At that time, Chiefs for Change continued to emphasize the urgent need to get all students safely back into the classroom for uninterrupted, in-person learning, five days per week.



The ARP, known as ESSER III, provided additional funding, specifically another \$122 billion, that is available to obligate until September 30, 2024. Unlike with ESSER I and II, states must spend a portion of ESSER III funds on evidence-based interventions to address learning loss as well as summer enrichment activities and after-school programs designed to mitigate the pandemic's disproportionate impact on students of color, those from low income-families, English language learners, and students with disabilities.

In turn, districts that receive subgrants from the state must reserve at least 20 percent of their ESSER III grants

to address learning loss. Beyond that, districts have wide discretion to fund programs and initiatives authorized under the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, the *Adult Education and Family Literacy Act*, and the *Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act*.

All districts receiving ESSER III aid had to develop and seek public comment on a plan for the “safe return to in-person instruction and continuity of services.”



From Initial Response to Early Recovery

Shortly after schools shut down, three students in Phoenix, Arizona, huddled under a blanket and leaned against the wall of a school in their neighborhood. It wasn't even their campus, but they needed to use the building's Wi-Fi to do their schoolwork. Without an internet connection at home, this was the best they could do. "It was heartbreaking," Phoenix Union Superintendent Chad Gestson, a member of the Chiefs for Change Board of Directors, [told](#) a local news crew at the time.

A similar story would end up playing out in communities across the country. Students without home internet were forced to go to the parking lots of closed public places—such as fast food restaurants and libraries—to get online so they could complete assignments, access health information, and find available community services.

This lack of devices and home internet was just one major issue as districts shifted to remote learning and public life ground to a halt. Students also struggled with food insecurity, financial hardship, the effects of isolation and stress, and, in many cases, unsafe homes. But schools have long been the heart of their communities. When buildings were closed, families naturally looked to their schools for help and a measure of stability. Districts shifted operations

to meet immediate needs, setting up grab-and-go meal distribution sites so students didn't go hungry—providing two, and sometimes three, meals a day. Some K-12 systems offered emergency child care for essential health workers at campuses near hospitals. Others assembled teams to check on children at their homes, or to call students each day to make sure they were doing OK.

When buildings were closed, families naturally looked to their schools for help and a measure of stability.

School staff delivered important updates on public health and connected people to social services and local resources. A number of districts worked with their counselors to establish hotlines and offered online workshops and virtual support hours to help families manage stress and assist their children in coping with the crisis. Districts also launched community resource hubs for people experiencing Covid-related financial hardships. These sites provided information on where to



get assistance with health insurance and testing; infant formula and diapers; utilities and rent; and toiletries, groceries, and cleaning supplies.

Though schools did their best to connect with students remotely, children need face-to-face learning and the supports they get at school. Prolonged closures were taking a toll. Chiefs for Change called on the federal government to provide clear recommendations—driven by facts and based on a holistic assessment of risks—to help schools safely reopen their doors.

Some schools began to resume in-person classes. Those that did often set up massive Covid testing programs and, later, community vaccination efforts. Systems reconfigured classrooms and redesigned the school day to accommodate social distancing. They upgraded their ventilation systems; overhauled their transportation, food service, and custodial operations; suspended or changed extracurricular activities; developed new school staffing and coverage plans; and more. Federal Covid aid was essential.

The pandemic wore on. By spring 2022, most schools had reopened, but they continued to grapple with serious and ongoing disruptions: Covid surges in the community, significantly more students and staff struggling with mental health challenges, and children who had fallen behind or not progressed in their learning. There were many students

who became disengaged from their schools during the lockdowns and didn't come back. Some campuses had to manage persistent, daily staffing shortages.

Systems faced important decisions about how to use their ESSER funds to address these and other challenges. A key part of the decision-making process involved gathering input from families and members of the community on what they wanted to see in their schools. Many leaders held town hall meetings and invited people to share their thoughts. Others issued surveys asking families to rank proposed recovery initiatives in order of importance; created online forums and tools to communicate ideas and receive feedback; or went door to door in neighborhoods where many people did not have access to the internet.

Based on community priorities and an assessment of the needs in their systems, members of Chiefs for Change have used Covid aid on resources and programs to help students get on track in their learning. These include high-quality instructional materials; one-on-one or small-group tutoring; and extended learning opportunities such as through a longer school day or year, summer programming, or enrichment activities. Covid aid has also allowed some districts to hire more staff, leading to smaller classes, and has funded professional learning to help teachers excel in their work.





In the area of student wellbeing, systems have used their Covid aid to bring on more counselors and social workers. They have created new positions for health and wellness facilitators that connect children and families to services in the community and have expanded counseling through telehealth and local partnerships. Additionally, they have integrated practices into the school day that promote wellbeing and positive behavior.

These are but some of the ways that K-12 systems are spending their ESSER funds. All systems are required to track and publicly report how they use the aid. Updates are frequently shared at board meetings, through the local media, and at public events. In addition, some districts created online dashboards that are updated regularly with information on how the funds are being used and how much money is available for future priority investments. To provide accountability, some platforms explain how investments are tied to the strategic plan, how initiatives are evaluated over time, and when outcomes will be shared with the community.

Back in Phoenix, Superintendent Gestson and his team moved well beyond the initial response of passing out computers and hotspots. With federal Covid aid and investment from the local community, Phoenix Union launched a collaboration with partners to develop a long-term plan for free, city-wide broadband. The effort began with a small proof of concept.

Now, partners are rolling out a system that taps into the district's own computer network and will blanket all of Phoenix with free Wi-Fi—ensuring all students are able to access the wealth of information they need to succeed in today's modern world.



Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

Covid may be largely gone from the headlines, but the crisis upended our society—exacerbating gaps and affecting students in ways that, in some cases, cannot be quickly remedied. K-12 systems need continued federal aid to address extensive challenges and sustain what’s working.

“Now is not the time to retreat,” emphasized Martinez, the Chiefs for Change board chair and Chicago Public Schools CEO. “Lawmakers in Washington need to look at our children. Look at what they need. Educators are going to keep working to help students recover, but it’s a process.

“Covid took a toll on kids—and it also reinforced that the old system didn’t work well enough for the vast majority of children. Many people, including federal leaders, have called on schools to seize this opportunity to redesign teaching and learning for the future. We are finding ways to do that: There are models and programs that are making a difference across our membership at Chiefs for Change, some of which are highlighted in this report. With additional support from the federal government, we can continue to invest in these promising initiatives—to study and refine them, and ultimately expand them to benefit more students. We are asking for committed federal partnership.”

Chiefs for Change calls on federal policymakers to back the measures described below, which would support stronger educational opportunities and help ensure all students get what they need.

Elementary and Secondary Education Act

Title I, Part A: Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Educational Agencies

The network supports a budget of at least \$25 billion in fiscal year (FY) 2024 for Title I, Part A, which provides financial assistance to districts and schools with high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure all children meet challenging state academic standards. Chiefs for Change also believes that additional Title I funds should be used to incentivize states to distribute their own education dollars more equitably.

Title I, Part B: Grants for State Assessments

Chiefs for Change calls on policymakers to provide \$490 million in FY 2024 for Title I, Part B: Grants for State Assessments, with \$112 million dedicated to competitive grants to support states in developing innovative assessments that reflect changes in educational delivery systems and advances in psychometrics, and that are informed by input from educators, parents, and students. This dedicated funding for innovative assessments would be \$91 million above the FY 2023 enacted level.

Pandemic disruptions have made it all the more important for educators and families to know what children are learning and how well their schools are preparing them to succeed in life. The federal government should support efforts to develop innovative accountability systems with assessments aligned to high-quality curricula that incentivize educators to ensure students build deep knowledge and critical thinking skills. Assessments should allow students to demonstrate their understanding of the actual texts and concepts they have studied; should provide new measures of early childhood learning; and should encompass data on graduates’ postsecondary outcomes.

Title II, Part A: Supporting Effective Instruction State Grants

Schools continue to face major challenges in recruiting and retaining staff and in ensuring educators are prepared to meet student needs. Congress should at least maintain the current funding of \$2.19 billion for Title II, Part A, which supports state and local efforts to improve the quality and effectiveness of teaching and school leadership, including through high-quality professional development; recruitment and retention efforts; initiatives to create and strengthen alternative pathways to certification; and the development of educator career ladders.

Title IV, Part A: Student Support and Academic Enrichment Program (SSAE)

Policymakers should fund the SSAE program at at least \$2 billion for FY 2024. The program helps provide a safe and healthy school environment, supports the provision of a well-rounded education for all students, and helps integrate technology into the classroom.

Education Sciences Reform Act

Section 174: Research, Development, and Dissemination

The Congress should appropriate \$298 million in FY 2024 for the Institute of Education Sciences' research, development, and the dissemination of research findings. These funds should include support to study the effects of the pandemic on student learning and the impact of federal relief funds already spent.

Educational Technical Assistance Act

Section 208: State Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS)

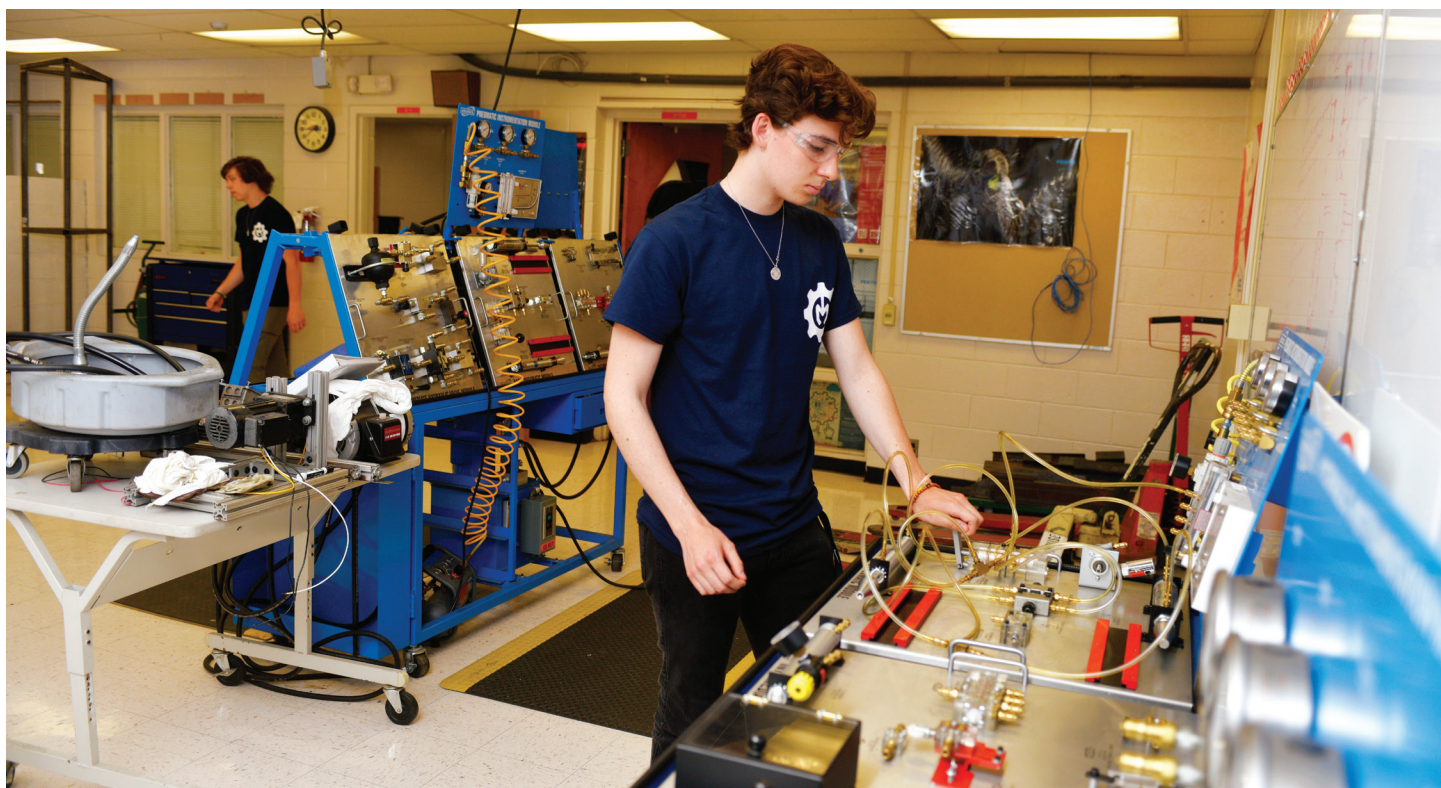
SLDS help states collect, link, and use valuable K-12, postsecondary, and workforce data to improve education outcomes for students. Chiefs for Change calls on the federal government to increase funding for SLDS to \$66 million in FY 2024, as these data systems are more important than ever in informing the future of education. This targeted funding would help modernize state data systems so state and district leaders can address current and evolving information needs.

Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006, as amended by the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V)

Perkins V provides investments in career and technical education (CTE) programs in all 50 states and territories. Our members support investments in high-quality CTE aligned with in-demand careers. Chiefs for Change supports increases for Perkins V, including at least \$1.5 billion in FY 2024 for state grants. The network also asks that national programs be funded at at least \$215 million to modernize and expand CTE opportunities for students.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Chiefs for Change urges policymakers to fully fund the IDEA program to support special education students, programs, and personnel. When the IDEA passed in 1975, the federal government adopted an objective of paying 40 percent of the average per-pupil expenditure for special education. That goal has never been met, and current funding is at just 15.7 percent. Schools need the resources to equitably provide a good education for all students.



Member Spotlights

This section features stories about important work underway in members' systems.

- **From Low Performing to Bright Spot:** How ESSER Helped Turn Around a School in Boulder Valley
- **Proficiency Gains:** How Stimulus-Funded Tutoring Is Making a Difference in D.C.
- **A Heart Coach at Every Campus:** How Henry County Schools Uses ESSER For a New Model to Support Student Wellbeing
- **Staying Focused:** How ESSER Is Advancing Strategic Work on High-Quality Curriculum and Instruction in Aldine ISD
- **Maryland Leads:** How the State Is Incentivizing Evidence-Based Initiatives in School Districts

With ongoing federal partnership, chiefs could more easily continue, replicate, and scale these and other approaches that are making a meaningful difference—potentially helping more students recover, and recover more quickly.



From Low Performing to Bright Spot:

How ESSER Helped Turn Around a School in Boulder Valley

When Rob Anderson was hired as superintendent of Boulder Valley School District in Colorado, Alicia Sanchez Elementary in Lafayette was one of the first schools he visited in the district. “It was ranked as one of the lowest-performing schools in the entire state,” he recalled. “I saw something that was very clear to me: The needs of the individual kids exceeded the bandwidth of the teachers trying to serve them. You had well-intentioned, talented teachers who were just overwhelmed. I knew immediately the problem was a lack of resources.”

That was in 2018—and Anderson recognized that, in order for teachers to do their best work and for students to improve, he would need to make changes.

“When I looked at the way our district, at the time, was allocating dollars, we were treating everyone the same—and the needs at a school like Alicia Sanchez are much different than the needs we have in some of the schools within our community,” he said. “Boulder Valley as a whole is what you would consider a well-off district when you look

at the averages, but we still have schools that need additional support.”

The district has affluent neighborhoods; it also has places where generational poverty is sometimes overlooked, where needs are compounded by the region’s high cost of living. The area around Alicia Sanchez is one such community. Approximately 71 percent of the school’s students are children of color, and roughly 75 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. In addition, 41 percent of students are English language learners, and 20 percent receive special education services.

While Anderson made some initial changes after his first year to better support Alicia Sanchez students, he says the federal Covid relief aid allowed him to get at the root problem.

“When the pandemic hit and when those ESSER dollars were released, that was the opportunity we saw to not only fix the resource issues at Alicia Sanchez Elementary School but across our system. Certainly,



Alicia Sanchez benefited the most from those resources, but the ESSER dollars allowed us to take that idea to scale here in Boulder Valley.”

Acting on what he heard from teachers about the resources they said they needed, Anderson and his team created a weighted and differentiated funding formula for distributing \$8 million over three years, or \$2.67 million per year, in ESSER dollars. The formula has three categories.

- First, every school now gets—on top of its regular budget—an extra \$50 for every child it has who is growing up in poverty, is receiving special education, or is an emerging bilingual student.
- Second, for schools that have higher concentrations of these students with more needs, the district increased the allotment to an additional \$100 per student.
- Lastly, the new formula gives schools with the highest concentration of students with the greatest needs an additional \$500 per student.

“When the pandemic hit and when those ESSER dollars were released, that was the opportunity we saw to not only fix the resource issues at Alicia Sanchez Elementary School but across our system.”

— Rob Anderson
Boulder Valley School District Superintendent

With the increased funds, Alicia Sanchez, a school that fits in that last category, has hired more staff, meaning teachers have smaller classes, students have more behavioral supports, and English language learners work with specialists who augment teaching in the classroom. These resources—combined with consistent, high expectations for all students; data-driven instruction; and lessons tied to state standards—have led to exponential growth. On the

state accountability rankings, Alicia Sanchez went from the lowest tier (turnaround) to the highest (performance)—all during the pandemic.

“I couldn’t be more proud of the teachers, the administration, the community, the kids,” Anderson said. “The teachers we’re celebrating now have, in many cases, been here for some time. It’s just that with the new funding formula, they finally have the resources to support their students’ needs.

“Alicia Sanchez went from our lowest-performing campus to one of just 21 schools to [receive](#) the Governor’s Bright Spot Award. This school community has always been capable, we just had to identify and remove the fundamental barrier to progress.”

Anderson says ESSER provided the seed money for the district to switch to a weighted and differentiated funding approach. Without the Covid aid, he says he never would have been able to provide the additional resources for those schools with the greatest needs. The recovery dollars also allowed the schools to plan for the future, thinking longer term, not just year to year. This meant they could implement programs without the fear of funding running out after 12 months. In addition, the district set aside money in its general fund to sustain the weighted and differentiated approach for another two years after ESSER runs out. Boulder Valley will evaluate the impact after the third year to ensure the investment is creating the types of learning environments and outcomes the district wants.

“Federal leaders should pay attention to how this influx of resources has allowed school districts to do their very best work. Leaders should talk to kids, talk to families—see the experience that kids are getting in school as a result of the funding. The story of Alicia Sanchez shows that when you hire the right people, when you listen to them and you give them what they need—what may seem impossible to some is really very possible. And I believe what happened at Alicia Sanchez can happen anywhere.”

Proficiency Gains:

How Stimulus-Funded Tutoring Is Making a Difference in D.C.

In Washington, D.C., education leaders realized that for students to recover academically after Covid, a number of them would need structured, personalized support. That's why the District invested \$35 million in federal stimulus funding, including ESSER, to provide high-impact tutoring (HIT) for at least 10,000 students disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

"The relationships that students build with tutors in the HIT programming shape their learning experiences for life," State Superintendent Christina Grant, a member of the Chiefs for Change Board of Directors, said in a [news release](#). "It's important that all students in D.C. have the confidence to learn and grow academically, and we know that having more tutors in our schools will ensure that our most vulnerable students are better supported."

While some schools designed their HIT programs for sessions to take place outside the school day, others built their sessions into the regular academic schedule. Tutors meet with students individually or in a small group of children who have similar needs. Students are

matched with the same tutor over time, which helps cultivate trusting relationships where children feel comfortable speaking up when they don't understand a concept, and where tutors are able to develop a strong sense of their students' individual learning styles. Using assessment data, tutors determine where students are in their learning, identify areas in which they need more help, and reinforce specific concepts from the curriculum.

"We know that having more tutors in our schools will ensure that our most vulnerable students are better supported."

– Christina Grant
District of Columbia State Superintendent

Research has shown that, when done well, tutoring can significantly boost student achievement. A study by the University of Chicago of one tutoring model, Saga



Education, found that it helped kids [learn](#) as much as an extra two-and-a-half-years of math in one academic year. Saga is one of the organizations that D.C. partners with to provide HIT.

D.C. Public Schools Chancellor Lewis Ferebee, also a member of the Chiefs for Change Board of Directors, said early results show that HIT is making a difference for his students: On formative assessments in math, 57 percent of students moved up a grade level in proficiency. The same was true for 54 percent of kids in reading.

“We believe this is the best approach to provide differentiated services and help our students cover more ground,” Ferebee said. “We have ongoing monitoring and are tracking progress to ensure the model is providing support in a way that actually accelerates learning and gets students where they need to be in school.”

“We have ongoing monitoring and are tracking progress to ensure the model is providing support in a way that actually accelerates learning and gets students where they need to be in school.”

– Lewis Ferebee
District of Columbia Public Schools Chancellor

The District has partnered with a research institution that is collecting data, providing feedback, and studying the HIT initiative. As of this writing, leaders are exploring strategies to sustain the work after federal Covid aid runs out.

A Heart Coach at Every Campus:

How Henry County Schools Uses ESSER For a New Model to Support Student Wellbeing

As Henry County Schools in Georgia emerged from the extraordinary disruptions of the pandemic and returned to more stable routines, Superintendent Mary Elizabeth Davis prepared for the most urgent concerns. Lagging social development combined with the pressing need to ensure kids were on track in their learning prompted Davis to orient her district's strategy around two core priorities: accelerating students' learning and supporting their overall wellbeing. She challenged her team to create a plan that provides access to the most advanced coursework possible for every child in an environment where students feel like "they belong, are valued, and are right where they should be." Out of that work, the district launched HenryCares, which stands for a "Caring Adult Responding Every day."

As part of HenryCares, school leaders established a "Care" team at every campus. These teams, composed of staff members such as the attendance clerk, a nurse or clinic aid, school leaders, and the school

counselor or social worker, meet on a weekly basis to review information collected each day that may help to identify struggling students. The data—which include, for example, absences, tardies, and slipping grades—can provide insight into disruptions or difficulties that are impacting individual students' lives and help educators intervene quickly before problems get worse.

"As a country we should come together and identify the impact of having dedicated personnel in every school who serve as resource facilitators for young people and their families."

— Mary Elizabeth Davis
Henry County Schools Superintendent



The Care team works with a mental health and wellness facilitator who connects students and their families with needed services and resources. These could include organizations that provide housing assistance and help with rent as well as access to medical care, food, and clothing.

Using \$15 million over three years in federal Covid relief aid, the district created a position at each campus for this mental health and wellness facilitator, often known as a “heart coach.” The heart coaches analyze information from the Care team along with responses from confidential surveys that are periodically issued to students. The surveys ask questions like: “How are you today? Do you have a caring adult who you could talk to if you need to in your school?” With this data, heart coaches can develop and refine school-wide plans for addressing concerns that kids themselves say they have.

“What we see is that schoolhouses are the service providers in communities,” Davis said. “I believe as a country we should come together and identify the impact of having dedicated personnel in every school who serve as resource facilitators for young people and their families.”

To that end, Chiefs for Change and a research partner plan to study the impact of ESSER-funded student wellbeing investments. The study will report on the initiative in Henry County and efforts in a handful of other systems.

“For my evaluation as superintendent, our board looks at how student performance is tied to kids having a caring adult at school who they can connect with every day,” Davis said. “And I provide data as a part of my evaluation—that’s how serious we are that this is not left to chance.”

Staying Focused:

How ESSER Is Advancing Strategic Work on High-Quality Curriculum and Instruction in Aldine ISD

New to the Aldine Independent School District in Houston, Superintendent LaTonya Goffney remembers sitting with the Texas education commissioner in 2019 going over the district's scores on the Nation's Report Card. "You could hear a pin drop," Goffney recalled. The results for fourth grade showed that only 16 percent of Black students and roughly 21 percent of Hispanic students were reading on grade level. White students were not doing much better. Then the conversation turned to eighth grade. "I was hopeful that it might be better," Goffney said. "But it was the same. Fewer than 20 percent of our Black students could read in eighth grade!"

Goffney, who is a member of the Chiefs for Change Board of Directors, grasped the urgency.

She immediately began studying data from across the system and used it to inform a new strategic plan for the district of more than 60,000 students, roughly 90 percent of whom are economically disadvantaged.

The plan focused on aggressively addressing the most pressing issues. Goffney's team was in the initial phase of implementation when Covid hit. The district pivoted, standing up remote instruction and launching efforts to meet students' essential needs with food distribution sites, home visits, and more.

Yet all the while, Goffney remained simultaneously committed to the work of the strategic plan. Throughout the pandemic, her team continued to develop instructional frameworks for a range of core subject areas grounded in research on how students learn. These frameworks are designed to build knowledge and help students develop the foundational skills to solve problems and become critical thinkers, analytical readers, skillful writers, and effective communicators. Each of the frameworks outlines what is expected of students, teachers, coaches/instructional specialists, and administrators.



Aldine also worked with a partner to review the district's materials and programs. The team evaluated whether resources were aligned to the frameworks and provided recommendations on what to keep and what to replace. Then Aldine overhauled its curricula to ensure materials tied directly to the frameworks. Lessons are now rigorous and highly structured.

“We’re not responsible for how students come to us. But we are responsible for how they leave us—and ZIP code is no excuse for destiny.”

– LaTonya Goffney
Aldine Independent School District Superintendent

When the federal government approved significant aid for schools through the ESSER fund, Goffney seized the opportunity to deepen the strategic work already underway. The district used the largest share of its federal Covid aid—70 percent, or \$97.2 million—on strategic staffing, teacher supports, and adaptable instruction. Sixty-six million dollars funded models that create smaller class sizes. Resources also provide training for teachers in how to use high-quality instructional materials and monitor student progress. In English language arts, for example, teachers learn techniques to help students build knowledge by reading, writing, and speaking about literary and informational grade-level texts. Meanwhile, in math, training emphasizes a strategic progression of concepts

rather than the teaching of skills in isolation, so children master concepts and then become fluent in procedures and applications.

In addition, Aldine used \$30 million in ESSER funding for an educator retention incentive. Funding also allowed the district to carve out time and flexibility in teachers' schedules so they can provide strategic acceleration support and intervention to students who need extra help.

Goffney's sustained focus on revamping the curriculum and implementing measures to better support teachers is paying off. Since she arrived, Aldine has doubled the number of campuses that received an A or B rating from the Texas Education Agency. Academic growth in grades tested at the elementary level and in eighth grade outpaced state averages across most subjects. And in the elementary grades, student reading scores have almost recovered to pre-Covid levels.

Under Goffney's leadership, the district has shown that progress is possible even in trying times. Educators responded to the needs of the moment, but also refused to abandon the strategic work they believe will help their students improve. With ESSER, in fact, they increased their investment in those priority areas. This sharp focus and commitment is making a difference for children.

“We’re not responsible for how students come to us,” Goffney said. “But we are responsible for how they leave us—and ZIP code is no excuse for destiny.”

Maryland Leads:

How the State Is Incentivizing Evidence-Based Initiatives in School Districts

The State of Maryland [received](#) more than \$3 billion in ESSER funding for its K-12 schools. The money is spread across five school years and is intended to benefit Maryland's more than 860,000 children. According to state calculations, the aggregate amount of ESSER funding is less than \$500 per student, for each tranche of funding, over the course of the funding term. This is substantially less than the approximately \$8,000 per student that is the state's share of student aid each year.

"The pandemic emphasized what we already know to be true—we have a lot of work to do to ensure that every Maryland student, regardless of race, income, or background, has access to high-quality educational opportunities that lead to excellent outcomes," Maryland State Superintendent of Schools and Chiefs for Change board member Mohammed Choudhury said in a [news release](#).

Although ongoing federal aid will be necessary in Maryland, Choudhury views ESSER as a way to help kickstart the change needed to build school systems

of the future. Under his leadership, the Maryland State Department of Education created Maryland Leads. This grant program uses more than \$150 million in ESSER funding to support efforts in all 24 Maryland school districts. The efforts are intended to address learning loss, accelerate learning and narrow opportunity and achievement gaps, and provide more targeted support to historically underserved students and their communities.

"Maryland Leads empowers districts to scale evidence-based programs that can drive results."

– Mohammed Choudhury
Maryland State Superintendent of Schools

Maryland Leads is centered around seven high-leverage strategies: Grow Your Own staff; staff support and retention; the science of reading; high-quality school-day tutoring; reimagining the use of



time; innovative school models; and transforming neighborhoods through excellent community schools.

“Maryland Leads empowers districts to scale evidence-based programs that can drive results, particularly for children who need the most support and who were most disproportionately affected by the pandemic,” Choudhury [said](#). “We identify concrete, actionable focus areas; exemplar program models; related research; and the funds and partnership necessary to implement those strategies immediately. There is no time to lose.”

The largest [grant awards](#) support Grow Your Own staffing programs and curriculum and professional development grounded in the science of reading. The Maryland Department of Education reports that new Grow Your Own initiatives—which include year-long paid teacher residency programs, opportunities for teaching assistants to become teachers, and efforts

to diversify the teaching corps—have the potential to generate more than 300 new teachers and 100 new paraprofessionals. These activities are also projected to support more than 400 conditionally certified teachers in passing licensure exams and to build sustainable talent pipelines for years to come.

Furthermore, the department says that science of reading programs will train all K-3 teachers, principals, special education teachers, and literacy specialists in instruction in this area. Districts also commit to adopt and scale high-quality, content-rich, culturally relevant materials based on what we know about how children learn and to ensure regular progress monitoring in K-3 with a universal screener.

The \$150 million in ESSER funding is being supplemented by more than \$25 million in local funding to help sustain Maryland Leads grant programs and activities.