

Statement by Cindy Marten
Deputy Secretary of Education
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Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education and
Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Investment
“Examining the Implementation of COVID-19 Education Funds”

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Chair Sablan, Chair Wilson, Ranking Member Owen, Ranking Member Murphy, and Chair Scott and Ranking Member Foxx and distinguished Members of the Subcommittees:

Thank you for the opportunity to share the Department of Education’s (the Department’s) critical work putting Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds to work supporting our schools and students as they recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has both shone a light on and exacerbated the existing challenges in our education system. Since the beginning of the Administration, President Biden and the Department have had a clear objective: getting students back in school, in-person full time and "building back better" to inspire our nation’s educators to turn the pandemic’s lessons into a more equitable experience for all students.

There are many lessons learned and best practices derived from the innovation and ingenuity that teachers, school leaders, school staff, districts, and states implemented at the height of the pandemic including ensuring connectivity – from increased access to Wi-Fi and broadband, to meeting parents on their schedules and communicating in their preferred languages. We know, though, that students learn and develop best, socially, emotionally, and academically, at school. Early in the Administration, we built an infrastructure to support states and districts in tackling this goal. And we continue to develop and refine resources, guidance, and support mechanisms to meet the needs of students and educators around the country.

Our commitment extends beyond simple reopening. We continue to invest and support localities in: keeping schools open and uninterrupted in an effort to provide continuous high-quality education; addressing the impact of lost instructional time, especially on the students most impacted by the pandemic; reintegrating students into the social and emotional experiences that come from being with peer groups and in-person instruction; and reinvigorating the love of learning for so many students, and passion for so many educators, that had been missing.

We have more work to do, but the progress made is evident when we compare where students and districts are now to where they were on January 20th.

In January 2021, only 46 percent of schools were open for fully in-person person instruction; today, that number is 99 percent, representing 99 percent of all students. Using layered prevention strategies and with support from the Department's guidance and funding, schools can minimize, plan for, and contain outbreaks, ensuring minimal disruption to learning and in school experiences for all students.

Reopening Support from the U.S. Department of Education

Funding

We want to thank Members for investing critical resources under the CARES Act as well as the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2021. The Department is focused on the effective use of these funds as well as the vital \$122 billion American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER) fund investment in education recovery provided by Congress. Just thirteen days after President Biden signed the American Rescue Plan Act, we disseminated \$81 billion to states in the first release of this critical funding and now over 95% of the fully allocated \$122 billion has been disbursed to support safe reopening, COVID prevention, accelerated learning efforts, and addressing the social, emotional and mental health needs of students, particularly those most impacted by the pandemic.

To address the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on historically disadvantaged communities the Department also distributed \$800 million in American Rescue Plan (ARP) funding to help states and school districts identify students who are experiencing homelessness and provide wraparound services to support their full participation in school activities. The Department also released more than \$3 billion under the ARP Act to support children with disabilities, helping more than 7.9 million infants, toddlers, and students with disabilities across the country.

The Department has been diligently working with state education agencies (SEAs) since March 2021 to support states in allocating ARP ESSER funds to local education agencies (LEAs) in a timely manner and approve state-based plans. All state plans must:

- Address the state’s current status and needs in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Address the state’s plans for safely reopening schools and sustaining their safe in-person operations;
- Planning and coordination on the use of ARP ESSER funds;
- Make clear how the state will maximize state-level funds to support students;
- Support LEAs in planning for and meeting students’ needs;
- Include strategies to support the educator workforce; and
- Provide clear metrics for monitoring and measuring progress.

SEAs were required to consult with diverse and representative stakeholders in formulating their ARP ESSER State plans, including families, students, school and district administrators, teachers, principals, school leaders, other educators, and school staff. Additionally, each state had to provide several important assurances, including civil rights protections, transparency, and compliance with ARP ESSER statutory requirements such as uses of funds, maintenance of effort, and maintenance of equity. **All 52 ARP ESSER State plans have been submitted to the Department, and we have approved 46 plans as of early November.**

States and school districts have until September 30, 2022, to obligate their ESSER I funds; until September 30, 2023, to obligate ESSER II funds; and until September 30, 2024, to obligate ARP ESSER funds. These timelines reflect both the urgency of addressing health and safety and

meeting students' heightened needs resulting from the pandemic, and the recognition that the pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the social, emotional, mental health, and academic well-being of the nation's students that will take years to address. The flexibility of these timelines will promote effective long-term planning, minimize damaging funding "cliffs," and ensure schools overcome the inevitable bumps on the way to a stronger, more sustainable and more equitable educational system.

For updates on spend-downs and updated information on ESSER and other Federal Pandemic Recovery fund spending, we regularly update the [Department's Education Stabilization Fund Transparency Portal](#), which is available to the public. The Department will continue to improve and update this portal to effectively serve the needs of the public, SEAs, Congress, and others in providing clarity and transparency around emergency fund spending.

The Department will continue to work with all recipients of emergency funding including Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA), and American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds to ensure that funds are used expeditiously and effectively to address the tremendous education needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. We recognize that circumstances will continue to evolve over time, and SEAs and LEAs have the flexibility to continue to adapt their strategies based on students' social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs. We also continue to monitor spending patterns closely, work with grantees to identify any impediments to the effective use of funds, respond to specific questions regarding allowable uses of funds, and make available comprehensive technical assistance through regular updates of FAQ documents; publication of the COVID-19 handbook volumes designed to support grantees in optimizing the use of federal funds to address the wide-ranging needs of students, families, teachers, leaders, schools, school districts, and postsecondary institutions; and webinars on topical issues that are top of mind for SEAs and LEAs such as the impact of lost instructional time, labor shortages, and facilities upgrades. In addition, annual reporting provides important transparency about how resources across all of the emergency funding sources are being used to support students and respond to the pandemic.

COVID-19 Prevention Strategies

Science-based guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reinforces the importance of layered prevention strategies that can keep our children safe and our schools safely open. Federal pandemic recovery funds are available to continue to support states and localities in their efforts to target and layer strategies that are effective and implementable in their communities, and we at the Department remain prepared to provide any needed support.

Vaccines: Vaccines remain the leading strategy to keep children safe and get us safely through the pandemic. Across the country, 60 percent of all students 12-17 have received their first shot, and as of the middle of last week, just under 1 million children aged 5-11 received their first vaccine dose. With the vaccine now recommended for all students older than five, it will be more critical than ever to ensure easy and equitable access to these life-saving vaccines and allow us to build on the extraordinary progress we've made over the last 10 months. We know many parents are trying to decide what is right for their child and their family, and we're working to provide families and educators with the information everyone needs to feel comfortable since the vaccine is the best way to keep children safe.

The Administration made vaccination for school and childcare staff a high priority, requesting in our first 100 days that all states classify teachers as essential personnel, and making them eligible for vaccination in March. This resulted in 80 percent of all school staff having received at least one shot by March of this year, a huge step forward in building the confidence and safety environment needed to get teachers back in the classroom. Today, more than 90 percent of educators are fully vaccinated, providing not only peace of mind to individuals but important leadership to communities about the safety and efficacy of vaccines within broader efforts to get and keep schools open and students safe.

On-site vaccination clinics at schools and in local community centers have proven effective, trusted, and efficient resources for students and families looking to be vaccinated in quick and convenient locations and have contributed to the successful vaccination rates among 12–18-year-olds. These strategies have helped to keep schools open, athletic teams on the field and the court,

and students in the classroom. With the recent authorization of vaccinations for children ages 5-11-year-olds, we will support the Administration's efforts to provide convenient, easily accessible and equitable access to the vaccine and schools are an important part of that strategy. Upon CDC recommendations, the COVID-19 vaccine for 5-11-year-olds started to become available at pediatrician and family practitioners' offices, children's hospitals, school-based clinics, and pharmacies. Secretary Cardona and Secretary Becerra sent a joint Dear Colleague letter to district and school leaders; together, we're encouraging schools to help provide access to the vaccine and encourage families to get their shot. Specifically, we're asking schools to (1) host clinics -- we created a toolkit to help them establish clinics and can match them with pharmacies to administer shots, (2) hold conversations with families and the community about the safety and efficacy of the vaccine, and (3) distribute information to families about the vaccine. Schools recognize the important role they play in keeping kids safe and healthy and are moving quickly to set up clinics.

Masking: The CDC recommends that schools require universal and correct masking for students, staff and others in kindergarten through grade 12. In a recent [analysis](#) from the CDC of about 3,000 public school districts, counties without school mask requirements experienced larger increases in pediatric COVID-19 case rates after the start of school than counties that adopted school mask requirements. Another [analysis](#) from the CDC of schools in Maricopa and Pima counties in Arizona, which together account for 75 percent of Arizona's population, shows that the odds of a school-associated COVID-19 outbreak were 3.5 times higher in schools with no mask requirement than in those with a mask requirement implemented when school started. It is clear that masks work and are an important part of layered mitigation strategies to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in schools.

COVID-19 Screening: Testing is another highly recommended mitigation practice in K-12 school settings. We continue to support LEAs and States that are interested in implementing testing systems as part of their approach. ARP ESSER funds may be used to support costs associated with testing and creating education campaigns around testing and outcomes. The Department is also working closely with HHS, which has released \$10 billion in discretionary spending to support schools in implementing COVID-19 surveillance testing.

Ventilation: Clean air is essential for living and learning, and effective ventilation is an important part of COVID-19 prevention. We know that even before the pandemic, some schools had, and some continue to struggle with, poor indoor air quality. With the help of ARP funds, many school and district leaders worked to address this issue as they reopened schools and sustained safe operations for in-person learning over the course of the last year. The Department works in coordination with the Department of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency, among others to ensure technical assistance reflects the most sustainable methods to improve indoor air quality and held a joint webinar with these agencies to ensure education leaders could access expertise and resources across the Federal Government. Some of the strategies allowable under ARP spending guidelines and being implemented in schools around the country include:

- Inspection, testing, and maintenance of current ventilation systems and approaches;
- Purchasing portable air filtration units, such as HEPA air filters, MERV-13 (or higher) filters for HVAC system and ACs, and conventional fans;
- Repairing windows and/or doors so that they can open to let fresh air in;
- Purchasing equipment to run outdoor classes;
- Servicing or upgrading HVAC systems consistent with industry standards;
- Purchasing carbon dioxide (CO₂) monitors, air flow capture hoods, and anemometers for custodians and building personnel to assess ventilation;
- Paying for increased heating/cooling costs due to increased use of heating/cooling systems; and
- Other spending that supports inspection, testing, maintenance, repair, replacement, and upgrade projects to improve the indoor air quality in school facilities.

Evidence-Based Interventions

One of the most important elements of the ARP Act is the requirement that states invest at least 25 percent of their overall ARP ESSER funds, totaling nearly \$30.5 billion, to address the impact of lost instructional time through evidence-based interventions. This set-aside consists of the requirements that states invest at least 5 percent of their ESSER funds to address the impact of lost instructional time, at least 1 percent for summer learning and enrichment, and at least 1

percent for comprehensive afterschool programs, and that LEAs invest at least 20 percent of their allocation to address the impact of lost instructional time.

All of these resources must be used for interventions that:

- Are evidence-based;
- Address students' social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs; and
- Target the students most impacted by the pandemic.

We are seeing examples across the country of these critical evidence-based investments. For instance:

- One such evidence-based investment is Connecticut's Learner Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP). Through this initiative, the State deployed a wave of social workers into 15 of the neediest districts in the State to reach families struggling with absenteeism and to support enrollment. LEAP will support enrollment and work with families to transition back to school in the fall.
- Another evidence-based investment is New Mexico's Public Education Department's joint internship in Tribal, county, or municipal governments and local municipalities to reengage youth for the 2021-22 school year using \$6 million in ARP ESSER funding. The program specifically targets teen students who are struggling to re-engage with school due to the pandemic. This program is designed to support economic recovery and the social and emotional resilience of youth, and to re-engage students to return to school.
- Detroit is using ARP dollars to expand their Detroit Parent Teacher Home Project. In this evidence-based investment, teachers engage caregivers of students who were chronically absent or late to build a bridge for the students to return to school. Last year, teachers conducted 5,567 such visits.
- North Carolina is seeking to address the impact of lost instructional time through evidence-based investments such as \$30 million for high-impact tutoring statewide, \$19 million for updated assessment tools and new testing platforms, and \$35 million for a competitive grant program for summer school and after-school extensions.

- Another evidence-based investment made possible by ARP funding is the Kentucky Department of Education’s use of ARP ESSER funds to offer professional development in literacy instruction for educators and staff and increase access to instructional resources. The state education agency has also provided guidance and offered technical assistance to implement accelerated learning summer programs last summer with integrated social-emotional learning, high-intensity tutoring, and vacation academies.
- The Virginia Department of Education’s evidence-based investment will use some of its ARP ESSER to help districts support students by reducing class size, hiring tutors and paraprofessionals, providing literacy and numeracy kits to families, purchasing instructional resources, and providing professional development to teachers.
- The New York City Department of Education announced plans to hire 500 social workers this year and has already hired more than 90 percent of them. City officials say this evidence-based investment will infuse new mental health support staff — including school psychologists — to ensure every school has at least one full-time social worker or mental health clinician.
- Another example of an evidence-based investment is Dayton, Ohio’s use of ARP ESSER funds to hire two times as many teachers in classrooms for grades 1-3 and pursue other interventions such as math specialists for grades 4-6 to help students catch up more quickly.

Stakeholder Engagement and Education

The Department believes that the best investment decisions will be made when the individuals most impacted by funding decisions are at the table. That is why we required that all state and LEA ESSER use of funds plans specifically include robust, diverse, and representative stakeholder engagement, including with families.

In addition, through ongoing stakeholder engagement, including listening sessions, the Department has identified effective strategies and provided multiple resources that highlight evidence-based practices to support safe school reopening as well as students’ social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs that the ARP can fund, including the:

- [COVID-19 Handbook Volume 1: A Roadmap to Reopening Safely and Meeting All Student Needs;](#)
- [COVID-19 Handbook, Volume 2: Roadmap to Reopening Safely and Meeting All Students' Needs;](#)
- [COVID-19 Handbook, Volume 3: Strategies for Safe Operation and Addressing the Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education Students, Faculty, and Staff;](#)
- [Strategies for Using American Rescue Plan Funding to Address the Impact of Lost Instructional Time;](#)
- [Frequently Asked Questions: Using American Rescue Plan Funding to Support Full-Service Community Schools & Related Strategies;](#)
- [Safer Schools and Campuses Best Practices Clearinghouse;](#)
- And [other guidance](#).

Most recently the Department released guidance on [Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health](#). This guidance examines real world challenges that schools, LEAs, and SEAs have experienced as they reopen. The guidance additionally provides corresponding recommendations for each identified challenge including rising mental health needs and disparities among children and student groups, perceived stigma as a barrier to access, ineffective implementation of practices, fragmented delivery systems, policy and funding gaps, gaps in professional development, and lack of access to usable data.

We also worked with the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) to host **community conversations with pediatricians on vaccines**. The PTA called on its 22,000-member PTAs and community leaders to host conversations in their communities about getting vaccinated at Back-to-School meetings as communities returned to school. The National PTA also partnered with the American Academy of Pediatrics to deploy local pediatricians to join these meetings, so parents could have their questions answered by doctors who know how to treat their children. With the vaccine now recommended for 5-11-year-olds, Secretary Cardona and Secretary Becerra recently issued a joint Dear Colleague letter to school leaders asking them to continue hosting these conversations for parents and caregivers so they can ask questions, learn more and feel comfortable getting their children vaccinated.

The Department conducted **outreach to Governors and State Chiefs** to support education, awareness, and outreach efforts to parents and school communities and offered resources and support to stand up school-based vaccination clinics.

The Return to School Roadmap, released by the Department on August 2, 2021, includes three “Landmark” priorities that schools, districts, and communities are encouraged to focus on to ensure all students are set up for success in the 2021-2022 school year. These include: (1) prioritizing the health and safety of students, staff, and educators; (2) building school communities and supporting students’ social, emotional, and mental health; and (3) accelerating academic achievement.

During the Return to School Road Trip to support the Roadmap, I had a chance to speak to a variety of school administrators, teachers, parents, superintendents, and early learning specialists across Wisconsin and Michigan. There, we found patterns amongst education leaders: the need to institutionalize the gains made via ARP and other funding; the need for social, emotional, and mental health support for students and teachers alike; the need to curb learning loss; and the need for long-term equity planning. The bright spots and gains from the last year were also evident during this tour: COVID gave teachers an opportunity to connect with students and families in a way they never had before and to engage with students by name and need. The Department is committed to continuing these conversations and supporting teachers, administrators, and education leaders as they innovate and implement creative solutions to meet the needs of all students.

Build Back Better

ARP has helped us reopen schools and institutionalize evidence-based, creative, and innovative approaches to learning and student and teacher engagement. Fundamentally, the Department is a service agency, and we are using ESSER funds to serve our constituents: our students, families, and educators. Students are getting what they need, when they need it, and in ways that help them thrive in the classroom and in their lives. Educators are able to teach and lead from a place of opportunity and innovation, rather than one of scarcity.

Sustainability and investment create opportunities to build a truly equitable, accessible, and high-quality education system in every ZIP code, so that students of every race, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, income, disability status, age, or background is seen, valued, and set up for success.

Conclusion

To fully recover from the pandemic effectively and to build on the hope and promise of American education we must listen to educators, localities, and states and meet their needs for the long term. We know that if we follow the science and implement CDC guidelines, we can provide safe and healthy learning environments for students and educators and keep schools safely open. We will continue to support states and districts in these efforts through recovery and beyond.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the Department's K-12 priorities, accomplishments to date, and commitment to a long-term vision that effectively serves all students and our economy.

I look forward to answering your questions.