



FALL 2021

TENDING GARDENS

and

PUTTING OUT FIRES

How school districts can reorganize their ESSER plans to do both



In most K-12 school districts across the country, the beginning of the 2021-22 school year has been different — in some ways, wildly different — from what school and district leaders expected and were planning for. Many spent the spring and summer sowing the seeds of their ESSER plans, allocating federal investments to high-impact strategies designed to bear fruit for years to come. Carefully chosen with a **“Do Now, Build Toward” approach**, these strategies were identified to address critical student needs now by selecting some doable starting points *and* designing changes with a sustainable long-term vision in mind.

But for the third straight school year, too many educators and administrators have had to pivot from fire to fire. Navigating the Delta variant and COVID contact tracing. Quarantining staff and students. Heated debates about masks and vaccinations. Accurately assessing where students are, both academically and socially-emotionally. Unprecedented exhaustion and trauma among young people and adults alike. These fires have been pulling education leaders away from their core mission of teaching and learning and driving ever-increasing feelings of burnout. In many cases, they have felt forced to leave behind the tending of their young seeds.

Even the most planful districts have struggled to get their COVID-recovery work moving, let alone efforts to redesign existing policies and structures so all students can learn and thrive. **Expectations for bolstering professional learning, curriculum, social-emotional supports, and other strategies that seemed like low lifts three months ago now feel both ambitious and out of reach.** And even the most equity-minded leaders are grappling with how to allocate more resources to the places with the greatest needs when funding may be boosted, but staff are already stretched to their limits and *everyone* is in need.

The good news is that there is a path forward. Through our work with dozens of district partners we’ve seen both the exponential challenges facing districts right now and the range of effective solutions leaders are employing to tend to their gardens while also responding thoughtfully to the fires igniting in front of them.

For those trying to balance doing both, we offer five actions:

#1

Prioritize your plan.

If battling fires takes 80 percent of your district’s capacity and resources, for example, that doesn’t mean just doing 20 percent of everything necessary to tend the garden. Instead, identify the 20 percent of things you know you can do now and see those through to **100 percent completion** — planting the seeds that will catalyze your garden’s growth in the coming years.

One district recently examined everything currently on the plates of their school principals and used that information to make decisions about what was truly possible for them to accomplish and how the district’s leadership team can better support them. The findings from that exercise informed their new priorities.

An equity lens helps guide that prioritization. For example, many leaders are grappling with limited staffing resources to adequately execute planned strategies and respond to students’ needs. In these



instances, resource decision-making can be influenced by which jobs across the system remain vacant — vacancies that too often disproportionately impact the schools that serve students with the greatest needs. The district's least-experienced teachers typically cluster in these schools, too. To help prioritize equity, some leaders are rethinking vacancies to accommodate teacher-leader roles in these schools or adding incentives for experienced teachers to transfer to these schools.

#2

Deliberately protect the resources you need — people, time, and money — for the strategies you decide to pursue.

Some districts have focused **staffing assignments** by carving out specific and protected responsibilities within roles, with someone explicitly responsible for long-term workstreams. In fact, some districts have created “ESSER chief” roles to shepherd planning and progress monitoring on their long-term strategies. Others have assigned planning efforts to relevant departments, hiring project managers to move specific efforts forward.

We’ve seen other districts focus on **meeting time**. The full cabinet of one of our district partners now meets twice weekly: once on short-term fires and once on long-term strategy development. This practice could extend to how principals or other district leaders set their own schedules or how network chiefs build agendas for principals’ continuous improvement. These tactics can also help teams avoid being sidetracked by unexpected firefighting during time set aside for strategy planning.

#3

Create accountability for implementing and improving your narrowed set of priorities.

District ESSER strategy teams are creating **continuous improvement cycles** that allow them to work together to answer the questions, “Are we doing what we planned to do, and is it working?” while informing real-time adjustments to drive both equity and improvement.

In one district, monthly network principal meetings are being leveraged to drive continuous improvement efforts for their priority strategies. Another district has created a departmental dashboard that includes a 1-5 measure of risk for compliance, deliverables, and expenditures, as well as leading indicators for student outcomes. However they choose to approach this work, creating ongoing transparency of their ESSER spending progress will be critical to gaining the support needed to do it well and maintain the extra spending where it’s working.

Consider the metrics that should be included for regular review by leaders at the school and district levels to ensure the actions they take are advancing their work. How is new spending being allocated to the students with the greatest needs? What new threats are introduced by our efforts to respond to unexpected fires?



One district is thinking about how to more rigorously monitor and discuss increased disciplinary incidences connected with the disruptions and trauma young people are carrying with them into school. In this moment when all students are affected, it might seem hard politically to put **extra focus on extinguishing the fire of inequity**. But because COVID doubled down on pre-pandemic inequities, for the young people impacted most, equity is both something that needs long-term strategic attention and a five-alarm inferno requiring immediate response.

#4

Address the fires in ways that can advance your efforts to build toward sustainable recovery and redesign strategies in your original plans.

Spending deliberately on putting out fires can also help **clear the way for implementing aspects of tending your garden**.

For example, investing creatively in the operational logistics of COVID-related health and safety response — such as hiring temporary school coordinators or reassigning nurses or district staff to manage COVID contact tracing, reporting, and communications — can free up principals to spend more time focused on teaching and learning. Restructuring school schedules to devote more time to student connection and social-emotional support can help establish the foundational conditions necessary for other efforts to succeed. In addition, focusing on substitute-teacher quality, quantity, and stability — by redirecting budget allocations from strategies that were deprioritized to efforts like doubling the daily pay rate, offering even more to retired teachers, providing bonuses to those who commit to being available five days a week, placing a permanent substitute in every school, or assigning central office staff for cycles of substitute duty — can help with both morale and creating a culture of support, as well as mitigate staffing instability.

#5

Create the space and systems that allow for mindfulness, wellness checks, and other supports for those doing the work.

We are all human beings who have been facing unprecedented pressures, both at work and at home. The stress, fear, and change over the past year and a half have diminished everyone's capacity, meaning the expectations we have for ourselves and one another need to be **rooted in grace**.

Investing in reoriented schedules and structures can offer educators additional professional development days or time each day for personal health and wellness. One district, for example, has added 10 minutes to every principal meeting agenda to practice mindfulness. And in another, increased common planning time is helping save teachers' time, reduce their workloads, and foster stronger relationships. Many



districts are training teachers on trauma-sensitive practices, in addition to mindfulness exercises, which can also help.

Overwhelming amounts of stress and change have diminished everyone's capacity to handle the workload. Now is the time to be intentional about flexibility, adaptability, and [creating the conditions](#) that allow everyone to continue pushing forward while maintaining healthy boundaries and interactions.

This school year has started unlike any other. But with careful consideration of how they plan to manage both the urgent, unexpected challenges that arise as well as critical pieces of their ESSER plans, districts across the country can lay the groundwork for accelerated school recovery and sustainable redesign to benefit students and educators alike.