



ESSER PLANS IN ACTION

*A Closer Look at Spending in Four
Massachusetts Districts*

DECEMBER 2022

Since 2019, the Massachusetts education system has undergone a number of major funding shifts, requiring districts and schools to develop innovative and new approaches to spending. The purpose of this report is to understand how districts have been planning to allocate a series of pandemic-era grants to advance student learning through and beyond COVID-19. First, the report provides an overview of these substantial changes in school funding by way of state and federal legislation. Then, it examines spending trends among school districts across Massachusetts to see what investments they are prioritizing in order to strengthen education systems post-pandemic.

The passage of the Student Opportunity Act (SOA) in November 2019 promised substantial new funding for districts statewide, particularly supporting students in Gateway Cities. The bill is the most significant update to the Massachusetts education funding system since the Education Reform Act of 1993, with districts statewide expecting to receive a total increase of \$1.5 billion dollars over the course of seven years. Among other reforms, it updated the state's Chapter 70 education funding formula, aiming to remedy inequities in the resources available to districts serving higher proportions of low-income students, English language learners, and students with disabilities. In the long term, this legislation would infuse more money into the state's public education system, increasing opportunities, access, and resources for historically marginalized groups. Districts had to submit 3-year plans to state officials highlighting how they would use SOA funds on evidence-based strategies to close opportunity gaps for underserved students. However, mere months later, the spread of COVID-19 brought the world to a halt.

The coronavirus pandemic upended all plans for the future. Every level of government had to urgently refocus time, energy, money, and policy to address the public health crisis. Students faced a number of jarring—and sometimes traumatic—changes as they found themselves unable to go to school in person, limiting their access to critical wraparound services and their community of friends and teachers. Recognizing the importance of an influx of resources to meet urgent learning and health needs, Congress passed a series of measures designed to provide emergency relief funds that would address the impact of COVID-19 on elementary and secondary schools across the country. This funding has come to districts in the form of three separate grants over the course of the pandemic, with the most recent one (ESSER III) passing as part of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) in March 2021.

To support districts in making well-informed decisions about ESSER spending, the EdImpact Research Consortium formed in late 2021 as a collaboration between the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, the CERES Institute for Children & Youth at Boston University Wheelock College, Education Resource Strategies (ERS), and the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE). EdImpact works to analyze the impact of COVID-19 recovery funds as well as to support evidence-based spending. One facet of this project is a Data Dashboard that tracks how ESSER funds are being spent across districts in Massachusetts and identifies top areas of expenditure across communities, from instructional salaries to facility maintenance. The graphics below show a sample of the data available on the EdImpact Data Dashboard and highlight findings from four districts—Holyoke, New Bedford, Revere, and Worcester—featured in this report.

ESSER I, II, & III Combined Funding Received

- Time & Attention
- Empowering, Adaptable Instruction
- Family & Community Partnerships
- Relationships & Social-Emotional Supports
- The Teaching Job
- Benefits
- Health & Safety
- Indirect
- Other
- Private Schools

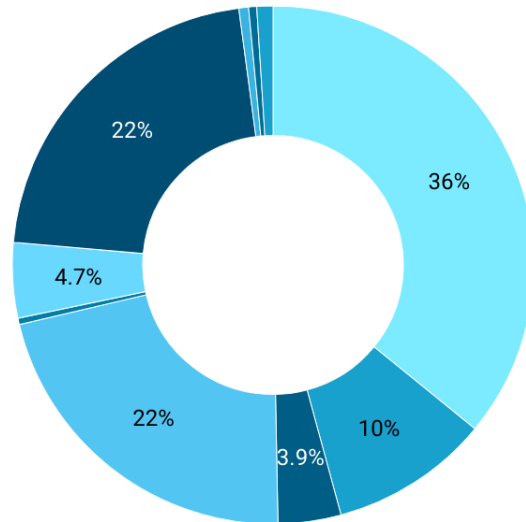


Chart: The Rennie Center • Created with Datawrapper

Holyoke Public Schools plans to spend the most on these five specific initiatives: Classroom teachers (15%), Air quality upgrades (12%), Health & Safety (9%), Interventionists / Specialized Teachers (9%), SEL support roles (8%)

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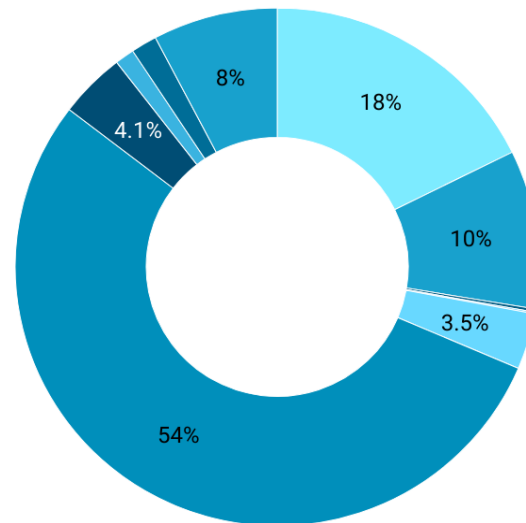


Chart: The Rennie Center • Created with Datawrapper

New Bedford Public Schools plans to spend the most on these five specific initiatives: Other maintenance and repairs (51%), Curriculum (8%), Technology (8%), Classroom teachers (8%), Tutoring (6%)

ESSER I, II, & III Combined Funding Received

- Time & Attention
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- The Teaching Job
- Benefits
- Facilities
- Health & Safety
- Other
- Technology

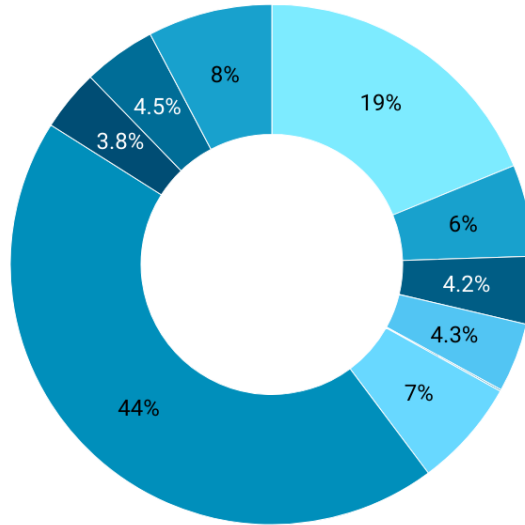


Chart: The Rennie Center • Created with Datawrapper

Revere Public Schools plans to spend the most on these five specific initiatives: Other facilities (39%), Classroom teachers (12%), Technology (8%), Benefits (7%), Air quality upgrades (4%)

ESSER I, II, & III Combined Funding Received

- Time & Attention
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- Benefits
- Facilities
- Health & Safety
- Indirect
- Other
- Private Schools
- Technology

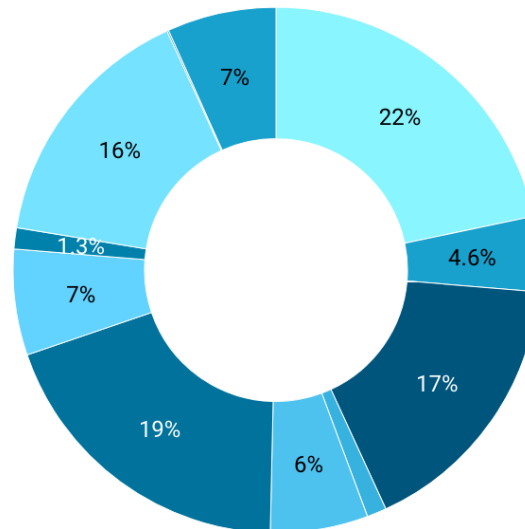


Chart: The Rennie Center • Created with Datawrapper

Worcester Public Schools plans to spend the most on these five specific initiatives: Air quality upgrades (19%), Out of school programming (16%), Interventionists / Specialized Teachers (16%), Transportation (15%), Technology (7%)

This report accompanies the Data Dashboard to provide a deeper understanding of the state of ESSER spending. To gather this information, the Rennie Center began with an analysis of ESSER spending plans from the ten Massachusetts districts with the highest ESSER grants. This review supported the development of a research protocol that would allow us to dig into the successes and challenges districts have faced in the process of allocating and spending ESSER funding. The data analysis and research protocol then guided virtual interviews that took place with staff from Holyoke Public Schools, New Bedford Public Schools, Revere Public Schools, and Worcester Public Schools. Information presented in this case study reflects findings from the Rennie Center's data review and interviews.

We found that, despite some reports of districts with large amounts of unspent funds, the districts represented in this report are largely on track with their spending. Additionally, press coverage of ESSER spending in districts has largely overlooked the obstacles that districts are facing, such as time pressures and fluctuations in community COVID rates that led to uncertainty over emerging needs. Districts have also expressed a reluctance to spend all their money at once in order to avoid a spending cliff once the ESSER grants end, though this sentiment varies by district depending on the amount of money that has been (and will be) made available to them through the SOA. To unpack these trends further, the sections below explore these four districts' journeys to address students' lost learning time, the ways they have chosen to use their grant money, and some of the most expensive items in their ESSER plans.

Academic Supports

The American Rescue Plan Act requires districts to spend 20% of their ESSER III grant on addressing learning loss, and the districts we spoke to have developed a variety of ways to do so.

For instance, Revere sought to address the need for additional time and high-quality instruction, investing in summer programming and credit recovery programming to expand students' opportunities for learning. They also invested in new curricula in math and literacy, vetted through the state's Curriculum Ratings for Teachers (CURATE) process. Recently, Revere teachers have started using the Illustrative Math and Center for Collaborative Classroom curricula for Kindergarten through 5th grade students. The district also dedicated money for AP teacher training as well as stipends and contracts for professional development to address subjects such as deeper learning, competency-based learning, and restorative practices.

Worcester has also been using their funds to expand and enhance their curriculum, though not inside classrooms. The district is developing and improving their out-of-school time (OST) programming to be more robust and geared towards acceleration. Facing educator burnout and decreased student engagement, the district has been partnering with local community-based organizations (CBOs) to supplement their existing summer and afterschool programs. With the help of these CBOs, they hope to provide a wide menu of recreational and academic options for

students to engage in, particularly those identified as most in need of learning acceleration. They are preparing for their next session of OST learning in January.

New Bedford plans to invest in a series of building renovations that they hope will lead to more effective instruction long-term. It became imperative to the district to update their 1970s-era buildings (with features like classrooms with collapsible walls) and transform them into modular spaces that are conducive to effective learning. ESSER funding and district strategic planning have allowed the district to line up a series of upcoming facilities projects. While the money has not been spent yet, once their roughly 20 pending projects begin to move forward, the money allocated for renovations will go quickly. Leaders anticipate that developing modular learning spaces will allow the district to make some long-lasting changes, including bringing a K-6 model to some of their elementary schools.

Holyoke has identified increased staffing as critical to addressing unfinished learning and supporting the academic and social-emotional development of their students. Due to the Student Opportunity Act, Holyoke has projected an average of 5% increase in revenue a year, so they have used ESSER money to make certain district roles permanent without the fear of a spending cliff that will require future staff reductions. The district has prioritized hiring and retaining more English and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, counselors and social-emotional learning supports, reading and math interventionists, and expert teachers to serve as teacher coaches by providing training and professional development to Holyoke teachers.

Addressing the disruption in learning that students experienced amid the COVID-19 pandemic has required patience, flexibility, and a renewed understanding of what each student needs. Districts are doing what they can to provide students with physically and emotionally safe spaces where they can engage with high-quality curriculum (and continue their holistic development) both inside and outside the classroom.

Recurring vs. Non-Recurring Expenditures

Out of these conversations with districts, two major schools of thought emerged on what districts believe the purpose of ESSER funding is: to invest in areas that will require recurring funds or to address immediate needs created by COVID-19 with non-recurring funds.

Holyoke and Worcester engaged in what they both referred to as “pre-spending” or “pre-funding” their Student Opportunity Act funding. Knowing that their SOA funds are slated to increase annually, districts started using some of their ESSER money in advance of SOA funds to hire or retain staff in critical roles. Because spending had been stagnant for so long, Holyoke reported having staffing needs they wanted to fulfill but were not able to previously. The district was able to use ESSER grants to accelerate spending and build toward the workforce they hope to have five years down the road, investing in school staff roles to create more dynamic teams equipped to address various student needs. And as Worcester moved towards welcoming students back into schools, they quickly identified student needs for more wraparound coordinators, social

emotional supports, and secondary classroom teachers based on their enrollment trends. The district also noted that according to their foundation budget, or what the state has determined to be the minimum amount each district should spend to provide students with a quality education, they had been underspending in non-special education teacher and paraprofessional roles, so their ESSER funds have gone towards closing that gap as well. The district found that moving these from ESSER-funded positions to SOA-funded positions will make those and other critical hires sustainable over the long term.

At the same time, New Bedford and Revere found using a sizable amount of their one-time ESSER funds for non-recurring items to be the better fit for district spending. The bulk of their spending has gone towards the development and maintenance of district facilities, albeit for a variety of purposes. As described in greater detail below, New Bedford has put plans into motion to develop a school-based health center, while Revere has set aside much of their funding to rehabilitate and revitalize a building in town to be repurposed as an early childhood space. Both of these spaces are intended to be sustainable and long-term fixtures within each district, fulfilling community needs that had gone unfulfilled until the disbursement of ESSER funds began.

Staff from the districts we spoke to cited either pre-spending SOA funds to expand district roles or using ESSER funds on one-time purchases as among the biggest successes they have experienced in their COVID recovery process. So although they may be different, both approaches to ESSER spending can yield positive results for districts when used purposefully.

Big Ticket Items

While districts have allocated their ESSER funds for a myriad of purposes and may have differing opinions on how to use the funding, they find alignment in their biggest investments in the name of developing, maintaining, and enhancing resources for students. To accomplish this, districts have been setting aside a large sum of their grants for line items like transportation, facilities, and curriculum materials.

Worcester Public Schools has worked with private bus companies to transport students to school for decades, but in a move to centralize transportation within the district—thereby reducing delays and improving communication with families—the district has purchased and now manages their own bus fleet. This move will make Worcester’s school buses the only ones in the state with the safety measures of collision mitigation, lane assistance and speed control. While the funds have not been spent yet (and won’t be until the district receives the entire fleet), the district has set aside \$16.5 million dollars for 165 new buses that are still being delivered. Meanwhile, the money the district has saved by taking transportation in-house has in part gone towards increasing bus driver pay rates.

Revere has prekindergarten enrollment numbers of about 300 children, with an annual enrollment for the full-day kindergarten program being about double that. As a result, district leaders determined there were not enough preK seats for Revere children in-district and began

developing plans for expanding preK spaces. The school system is contributing \$7 million of ESSER funding to rehabilitating a building in order to develop a dedicated early childhood space that will accommodate more children and provide new seats in early education classrooms. (The building as a whole is slated to serve a range of purposes, from start-up office spaces to community spaces.) This money has yet to be spent, but the community development plans are already underway, with district officials speaking to stakeholders to solicit their input on the design of the space.

Similar to Revere, New Bedford has used a sizable portion of their ESSER funding to develop a building, but their plans are for a school-based health center. Recognizing a disparity in health care services available throughout New Bedford, the district saw their role in the community as not just providing educational resources for students and their families, but also contributing other services such as health care. With ESSER III funding providing financial resources and a partnership with the Greater New Bedford Health Center offering technical support, the district is positioned to develop a school-based health center at New Bedford High School as part of a public health effort that will increase wraparound services for the wellbeing of students and their families. New Bedford has planned to spend \$3 million dollars to accomplish their goal of getting students and families re-engaged with the health system through a school-based model.

Conclusion

ESSER and SOA funding have infused significant new resources into Massachusetts schools. Nevertheless, “deep inequalities remain in American schooling,” as one Holyoke Public Schools official puts it. Remedying the effects of past inequities in the education system remains a critical task for the state, particularly where those have been exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic.

However, new funding made available to districts via the SOA and ESSER has opened doors for communities to be creative and targeted with their education spending. Through community conversations and data reviews, districts have been able to strategically plan when and how to best spend their grants in order to emerge from the pandemic with a resilient education system and to close gaps for our most vulnerable and marginalized populations.