



# HOW TO PRIORITIZE FUNDING FOR STUDENTS'

## Social, Emotional, and Academic Development: Promising Examples From State ARP Investments

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AS STUDENTS CONTINUE TO RECOVER FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, THEY NEED SUPPORT WITH MANAGING THE EXPERIENCES, STRESSORS, AND CHALLENGES BROUGHT ON BY THE PAST FEW YEARS. A nationally representative survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that [more than a third](#) of high schoolers experienced poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. While mental health was a concern well before COVID-19, [nearly all students](#) have experienced worsened mental health and well-being ever since — with research showing disparities based on race, ethnicity, LGBTQ+ identity, and other factors. Meanwhile, school-based services and support dwindled, at a time when students needed them the most. As students continue to recover from the fallout of the pandemic, they need support with managing the experiences, stressors, and increased challenges brought on by the past few years.

Students' social and emotional well-being is foundational to and integrated with academic learning and is a collaborative responsibility for everyone in the community. Schools in particular play an important role in meeting students' social, emotional, and mental health needs — this has become only clearer since the COVID-19 pandemic. But states have historically provided insufficient resources and capacity to schools and districts to provide mental health supports to students. For example, [few states prior to the pandemic](#) met the recommended ratios for school psychologists and school counselors to students in schools, and schools serving [students of color](#) were already less likely to meet the recommended ratios for mental health professionals. Recognizing the crucial role schools play in mental health, President Biden during the [State of the Union](#) address in 2022 emphasized the importance of mental health access and support for students. Through multiple federal responses, such as the American Rescue Plan's Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ARP ESSER) and the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, states and districts received an unprecedented amount of funding to meet the urgent needs of schools and students. These funds provided the opportunity for states to expand access to mental health services and many states took steps to increase access to mental health services, improve mental health systems, and reduce stigma, bias, and discrimination associated with mental health. Furthermore, given the integrated nature of addressing students' mental health and well-being with ensuring students' access to inclusive and supportive learning environments that address students' social, emotional, and academic development (SEAD) more broadly, it is especially crucial now to take stock of what states have done with these funds, and how to sustain evidence-based programs and practices, given this funding is drawing to an end.

State and district leaders have expressed concern about the fiscal cliff as ESSER draws to a close [by the fall of 2024](#), especially when expenditures, such as staffing for mental health professionals, would require continued funding. States and districts have until early 2025 to spend the money. This brief provides a review of publicly available state ESSER plans in nine states and identifies how they have used ARP ESSER funds to support students' SEAD in ways that should be sustained beyond the spending of those funds and concludes with for evidence-based programs. These geographically and politically diverse states were selected because they are places where EdTrust has strong partnerships.

## How should states prioritize funds to support SEAD?

[Students' social and emotional well-being are inextricably linked to academic learning](#) and states should prioritize funding programs and opportunities that holistically support students' needs, such as:

- [Implementing evidence-based strategies and structures for school safety and discipline](#)
- [Ensuring educators have skills to continue supporting students through professional development](#)
- [Investing in wraparound supports to meet students' needs](#)
- [Building and strengthening family and community engagement](#)
- [Adopting curricula that are both rigorous and reflective of students' diverse backgrounds](#), experiences, and interests

This brief highlights state efforts to support SEAD through these systemic policy approaches using ARP ESSER dollars. For a review of how states were investing in students' social, emotional, and academic development prior to the pandemic, see EdTrust's [50 state policy scan](#).

Readers may also refer to existing briefs that highlight how states used ARP ESSER dollars and other federal grants to invest in other important priorities, [including educator diversity](#) ensuring students of color have access to high quality educators of color that have positive social, emotional, and academic impacts, and [invested in evidence-based efforts](#) to support students' and adults' social and emotional learning that are systemically integrated across practices and policies can have positive and holistic impacts on students.

Furthermore, as concerns grow about the impact of a fiscal cliff, policymakers should be sure to reallocate funding from harmful approaches — such as school safety practices that harden schools in ways that reinforce the [school-to-prison pipeline](#) — and should instead choose to support [evidence-based practices](#) that improve school climates and benefit all students. By prioritizing investments in promising practices, such as those highlighted in this brief, policymakers can sustain positive outcomes beyond the end of ESSER funding.

*As concerns grow about the impact of a fiscal cliff, policymakers should be sure to reallocate funding from harmful approaches to opportunities and programs that are evidence-based and equitably address the unique needs of all students.*

# States Using ARP Funds for Ineffective School Hardening Approaches

## A NOTE ON IMPLEMENTATION

While the examples provided in this brief are what we consider to be “bright spots” based on the policy language, it’s important to note that implementation of these policies within states has varied. We highlight these policies as examples of what other states can consider funding, with an emphasis that it must be done with fidelity of implementation and ongoing monitoring to truly impact student outcomes.

## STATES USING ARP FUNDS FOR INEFFECTIVE SCHOOL HARDENING APPROACHES

Across the nation, the return to in-person learning was fraught with concerns about students’ behavior and safety. In many cases, school districts and states turned to hardening approaches — school police and security personnel, surveillance, and metal detectors. The research behind these practices, however, suggests that [these are not effective ways of creating safe schools](#) and addressing student behavior, and instead cause [devastating harm, especially for students of color](#), and [strengthen the school-to-prison pipeline](#). Despite the harms of school hardening, policymakers [erroneously rely upon these practices for school safety](#). Some examples of states using ARP funding for these purposes include:

- [Delaware](#) launched a new school [security initiative](#) that invests almost \$1 million in threat assessment tools, which consist of developing teams of staff to evaluate a wide range of “threats” and recommend disciplinary action. [In practice, threat assessments often remove layers of protection against discrimination](#) for students of color and [students with disabilities](#).
- [Kentucky](#) passed the [School Safety and Resiliency Act](#) (SSRA) which emphasizes several hardening approaches, such as building security, threat assessments, and law enforcement engagement.

*Rather than investing in the hardening approaches above, state leaders should prioritize investing in evidence-based discipline practices that address student behavior with both accountability and support to ensure safer schools that support students’ social, emotional, and academic development.*

# Improving Discipline Practices

Rather than investing in the hardening approaches above, state leaders should prioritize investing in evidence-based discipline practices that address student behavior with both accountability and support to ensure safer schools that support students' social, emotional, and academic development. In total, [nearly \\$15 billion is spent annually on security personnel in schools](#) from a wide range of funding sources, and states are spending [hundreds of thousands more on metal detectors](#) and other school hardening approaches. As states grapple with the end of ESSER funding, policymakers should reconfigure budgets to lessen spending on hardening approaches and instead support more evidence-based approaches to address discipline and school safety. Some examples of states using ARP funds to support discipline in positive ways that can be sustained once COVID-relief funding is fully spent include investing in professional development opportunities and coaching for positive discipline practices, and collecting and reporting data for school leaders to better support students. More details on these examples are below:

- [Delaware](#) Department of Education ([DDOE](#)) convened [leaders](#) from schools, the Delaware Association of School Leaders (DASL), and the Restorative Practices Group have started on plans for addressing the need to return to a more restorative and mental health-focused approach to discipline in their schools. [DDOE](#) also committed resources including coaching and consulting from DASL as well as the Restorative Practices Group to support school and district leaders as they begin implementing their plans to reduce exclusionary discipline and increase student achievement for all students.
- The [Kentucky](#) Department of Education (KDE) provided funds to comply with the School Safety and Resiliency Act (SSRA). While the SSRA enables hardening practices, it also provides opportunities for districts to invest in policies and practices that avoid the overuse of exclusionary discipline measures, such as out-of-school suspensions, and create a positive and supportive learning environment for all students. To support districts in using these state funds to invest in positive, evidence-based approaches, rather than school hardening measures, KDE developed a trauma-informed toolkit that includes best practices for a [trauma-informed discipline response and behavior system](#).
- [Louisiana](#) Department of Education (LDOE) collects student absentee and [discipline data](#) from each school system and is supporting school system leaders in implementing the evidence-based practice of a Dropout Early Warning System, which gives educators important and timely data about student attendance, discipline, achievement, and dropout rates, so that educators and school leaders can address these issues.
- The Maryland State Department of Education ([MSDE](#)) invested in providing professional development and technical assistance to LEAs on reducing and eliminating disproportionate out-of-school suspensions of students with disabilities and students of color. The MSDE has partnered with the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Mid-Atlantic to provide this professional development. The MSDE also updated [guidelines](#) for a State Code of Discipline that now include a call for a more restorative approach to student discipline and for LEAs to avoid exclusionary discipline. The MSDE hopes that the combination of these investments and updated guidance will reduce exclusionary discipline overall, and reduce, and ultimately eliminate disproportionate out-of-school suspensions.

## Improving Wraparound Services

Wraparound services are a wide range of community and school resources that are typically coordinated through a multi-tiered system. These services include both universal supports for students and more targeted supports for students with greater needs, and are crucial for supporting student well-being as communities and families continue to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. More than [200,000 students](#) lost a parent or caregiver to due to COVID-19, and all students experienced changes in routine and structure, as well as social isolation. These adverse experiences can have significant impacts on the mental health of young people, and schools can provide supports for students to not only recover but thrive in the aftermath of these challenges. Implementing a multi-tiered system of supports with fidelity can have lasting impacts on the supports students receive and provide significant returns in student outcomes. Additionally, beyond ARP funds, there are [federal and state funding streams that are available for multi-tiered systems of support](#). The following states provide examples of investing in wraparounds services that can be sustained once COVID-relief funding is spent to meet the holistic needs of students, including mental health screeners, mental health professionals, and supports for basic needs and academic needs:

- The Louisiana Department of [Education](#) invested in providing access to a mental health screener and additional support for students who qualify for trauma support services.
- The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) has [passed legislation](#) that calls for local education agencies to provide wraparound services, including extended learning time, safe transportation, health services, additional support staff such as social workers, mentors, counselors, and psychologists, healthy food provisions, and other crucial supports for student wellness. Beyond these supports at the local level, MSDE has developed a [website](#) to share best practices, training, and resources to help school district leaders and school staff support students' mental health. MSDE has also incorporated [opportunity to learn measures](#), including information on access to school counselors, social workers, nurses, and school psychologists into reporting requirements.
- [Texas Education Agency](#) invested in support and guidance to LEAs on how to maximize existing and newly hired mental health professionals on their campuses, including resources and guidance on mental health screening, connecting to local or regional mental health resources, and providing information resources on the impacts of grief and trauma-informed care.



# Improving Professional Development

Educators' professional development enhances their knowledge and skills to address students' learning challenges. Professional development for educators requires thoughtful planning followed by careful implementation with feedback to ensure it responds to educators' learning needs. These investments are continuous and have been part of states' investment plans since before the pandemic, thus making them essential to continue even when COVID relief funding is spent. As states approach the fiscal cliff and consider the limited funds that remain, leaders should ensure professional development opportunities are targeted towards providing educators with evidence-based skills and mindsets that support student well-being and holistic development. The examples below highlight states that have invested in training and resources for anti-bias mindsets, as well as skill-building to support whole child development:

- The California [Department](#) of Education increased educator training and resources in subjects such as anti-bias strategies, environmental literacy, ethnic studies, and LGBTQ+ cultural competency.
- Delaware invested in [Implicit Bias Awareness](#) with a goal of making staff members aware that bias does exist and that they can recognize and manage the impact of their own internal bias while limiting the potential negative impact on the kids that they serve. In addition, Delaware provides cultural competence training to educators to look at different norms, values, and perceptions as it relates to cultural differences and how we can view these differences as areas of opportunity for increased awareness and understanding of others. The state is also supporting classroom management training on using the classroom environment to prevent behavioral incidents from occurring in the first place. This is accomplished by providing teachers with the tools to design engaging learning activities that encourage students to focus. In addition, teachers are given tools and practices that help them see the signs of escalation prior to that escalation becoming disruptive and requiring action. Teachers are better equipped to prevent and contain occurrences which in the past may have required the assistance of a disciplinarian or administrator.
- The Tennessee [Department](#) of Education emphasized providing social and emotional support to students, faculty, staff, and leaders with training opportunities available through TDOE's [Best for All Central website](#). These training opportunities focus on the importance of relationships in schools, how positive daily interaction and reactions to student behavior plays a significant role in a student's day, and emphasize that all adults in a child's life contribute to these relationships: educators, assistants, bus drivers, front office personnel, nutrition workers, and more. Another training titled "Whole Adult: Self Care Matters" was designed for educators and leaders and focuses on the importance of caring for oneself to be able to care for others.
- In Washington State, [Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction](#) (OSPI) has invested in providing training and technical assistance to all LEAs and, during the pandemic, has added specific focus on identification of students experiencing homelessness and providing supports intended to improve enrollment and attendance. The agency committed to using funds to support the needs of students experiencing homelessness to augment direct supports in these high-need LEAs, to increase community-based supports through funded partnerships with community-based organizations, and to increase capacity for all LEAs to successfully serve students experiencing homelessness. Para-educators play a critical role in providing services and supports to students with disabilities in Washington State. The state Legislature is [continuing their commitment to these educators](#) by funding two professional learning days per year. They also provide funds for the creation of a training program for para-educators on community, family, and student engagement.

# Improving Access to Rigorous and Culturally Sustaining Curricula

Rigorous and culturally sustaining curricula links students' cultures, languages, and life experiences within the classroom environment. This practice enables educators to deliberately create a classroom environment that acknowledges all students, connecting cultural experiences within daily instruction, and their families as assets to learning at school and home, and communicating clear high expectations for all students. Making these connections is important today as students and schools face the lingering effects of COVID-19 such as interrupted instruction and social stress. Curricula is also an ongoing investment for states as it is continuously improved and updated. As states consider how best to choose curricula, leaders should keep the need for both rigor and representation in their choices. Below are examples of how states used ARP funds to improve access to rigorous and culturally sustaining curricula that can be sustained once these COVID-relief funds are spent, such as by investing in professional learning opportunities for teachers to support students academically and targeted academic learning opportunities to accelerate learning.

- California set aside funding for [accelerated learning](#), which includes offering additional learning opportunities, summer classes, or high-dosage tutoring that provide academic instruction and curriculum aligned to California's learning standards. Targeted interventions include programs that provide specific support and services for multilingual learners, students with disabilities, homeless students, foster youth, and other at-risk learners. The state has enrichment opportunities that include programs designed to give students the opportunity to try new things and explore and develop interests outside of the classroom. The state has ensured there are professional learning opportunities for teachers to review data to identify specific gaps in knowledge and skills.
- New York is addressing the academic impact of COVID-19 by investing in summer learning through the ARP ESSER funding period and expanding after school programs for high-need school districts. New York State Education Department (NYSED) required districts to utilize these funds to implement evidence-based interventions and will provide technical assistance to support implementation and monitoring. [NYSED](#) invested in new full-day pre-K programs for four-year-olds and expanded opportunities for four-year-olds to attend free public pre-K programs where they can catch up on early childhood learning, socialization, and other foundational skills required for long-term success. A crucial goal of these programs is to accelerate learning to mitigate the impact of lost instructional time and help close pre-existing performance gaps. NYSED also listed the following as options districts could fund with ARP ESSER funds: rigorous [curricular offerings](#), academic screeners that inform how students are doing, accelerated learning opportunities that challenge students, and intervention programs, tutoring and extended learning opportunities to support students where they need it.

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# Improving Student, Family, and Community Engagement

[Engaging students, families, and communities in schools is important](#) for students' success as parents want better information to guide their children throughout the education journey, and educators make it a responsibility to develop goal-linked partnership programs reaching all families and helping all students succeed. Below are some examples of ways that states have used ARP funds to invest in family and community engagement that can be sustained once COVID-relief funding is spent, including investing in the development of guides and other state-level resources to support practitioners with engaging students with the most need, and collaborating with students, families, and educators in developing engagement solutions.

- The California Department of Education created [a guide outlining suggestions and resources for effectively using ARP plans to support homeless children and youth](#) — with an emphasis on outreach strategies for staff support, engagement and re-engagement with both students and families, and coordination with community partners.
- Delaware invested in [stakeholder](#) engagement in promoting student success. This [alliance with students, families, educators, and other education stakeholders](#) continues to serve as a support of necessary dialogue to enact shared accountability for solution-oriented actions. This collaboration will strengthen students while supporting families and communities, and students play a critical role in the process. Delaware utilized funds for engaging students who have missed the most instruction, provided educators with professional learning to most effectively use data to meet student needs, and provided access to student and family supports in families' home languages.
- The Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) published the [Louisiana Student Well-Being Vendor Guide](#) to assist LEAs in supporting the well-being of students by focusing on three critical areas: prioritizing positive intentional relationships between students, staff and families; attending to students' individual needs; and responding to student behavior with appropriate support.
- [Tennessee Department of Education \(TDOE\)](#) developed three Superintendent Engagement groups and hosted bi-monthly feedback sessions in the spring of 2020. These groups provided TDOE leadership critical information and feedback to discover the issues schools, districts and communities were facing. Each group focused on one of Tennessee's strategic priorities: academics, whole child/student readiness, and Educators. This group was beneficial in:
  - Risk assessment: through direct communication about potential flags, gaps, or issues with decisions, feedback, input, etc.;
  - Review: through real-time review and feedback delivered on department grants, support, and initiative roll outs; and,
  - Ideas and innovation: through qualitative and quantitative feedback on district implementation, efforts, and impact.

[These three engagement groups](#) have impacted TDOE's relationship with districts and fostered more district-to-district collaboration along with sharing of the best ways to support all students and individual student groups throughout the pandemic. These strategies have also provided insight into student groups most impacted by the pandemic. With these direct feedback loops and frequent touchpoints, TDOE personnel have been able to respond with specific resources and support in real-time with the state — equipping districts with information and materials needed for local implementation.



## Beyond ARP

This brief provides a deep dive into how some states have used ARP ESSER funds to support students' social and emotional well-being in ways that support academic improvements. Even after ARP ESSER funds run out, students' social, emotional, and academic needs will persist. Many of these examples can, and should, be sustained beyond the end of ARP ESSER funds with intentional effort. State leaders should be working now to plan how they will sustain the most effective and impactful programs. Some recommendations for state leaders to [ensure education equity in investments as ESSER funding winds down](#) include:

- Invest in programs and opportunities that equitably address the unique needs of students
- Ensure there are stated goals of investments and that programs are achieving their goals
- Ensure investments fit into overall strategies for addressing the needs of students

States must now identify alternative funding streams for sustaining effective programs when ARP ESSER funds run out. For example, states can lean into the Title I funds in ESSA, which already requires districts whose total Title I allocation exceeds \$500,000 to reserve at least 1% of their allocation for family engagement activities.

Furthermore, while budget cuts are top of mind for state leaders as ESSER funds come to an end, state leaders cannot shirk their obligation to ensure that all students have access to high-quality educational opportunities. Some recommendations for [state leaders as they consider sustaining funding to meet students' needs](#) include:

- Find or raise additional revenue, such as by using funds from large surpluses or overfunded reserves, adopting progressive taxes, and eliminating unfair tax cuts for the wealthy, and applying for and accepting federal education funding
- Create temporary transition grants for low-wealth, high-poverty districts
- Hold funding harmless for high-poverty districts if they cannot progressively raise revenue
- Implement budget cuts in ways that do the least harm to high-need districts if cuts are unavoidable
- Be transparent about funding decisions with advocates

As ESSER funds come to an end state and district leaders can use this brief to identify examples of bright spots where other states have used ARP ESSER funds and adapt these examples to invest in ways that make sense for their own states' contexts and needs. Ultimately, state and district leaders will need to identify other funding sources to support critical elements for student success, prioritize funding evidence-based practices for students with the highest needs, and use the remaining ESSER funds for investments that create sustainable change.