

Supporting the Mental Health Needs of All Students with American Rescue Plan Funds

In 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children's Hospital Association declared a National State of Emergency in Children's Mental Health. Many people, especially children and young people, are managing new experiences, stressors, and feelings [as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic](#). In a [new survey](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than a third of high schoolers reported experiencing poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey also found that students who had strong relationships with adults and peers at school were less likely to [feel sad or hopeless](#). Yet even before the pandemic, many children and young people had unmet mental health needs due to insufficient capacity to provide care, barriers to care, and [racial and economic disparities](#) that impede access to high-quality mental health care. Too few students have access to the staff and supports that can help address these mental health challenges. Very few schools in this country meet the recommended school psychologist, social worker, and counselor to student ratios. And schools serving more students of color are [less likely](#) to meet the recommended ratios for mental health professionals in school buildings. The ongoing pandemic has exacerbated these challenges.

Student well-being is a community responsibility and everyone in a school community can play an important role in meeting the social, emotional, and mental health needs of every student. Research shows that children and young people learn more, [report feeling safer](#), and develop more trusting relationships with their peers and other adults when the school environment is positive and inclusive. Creating a positive school environment will require increasing the number of staff who are trained and equipped to develop meaningful and trusting relationships throughout school buildings and communities, create affirming environments, and support the needs of all students.

In the first State of the Union, President Biden emphasized the importance of ensuring that every [student who needs mental health](#) support can access care when and where they seek it. Funding from the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ARP ESSER), which provided more than \$122 billion to state educational agencies (SEAs) and local educational agencies (LEAs or districts) to meet the urgent needs of schools and students arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, provided critical investments to expand access to mental health services. As a result, many states, districts, and schools have taken steps to expand existing evidence-based programs, or implement new practices, to support student mental health. An [analysis](#) by FutureEd suggests that LEAs have planned for nearly 4 billion in ARP ESSER funding to support the mental and physical health of students.

ARP ESSER funds may be used to increase access to mental health services, improve mental health systems, and reduce the negative attitudes, stigma, bias, and discrimination that can be associated with mental health. This document highlights policy changes that may be supported with these funds and provides examples of how states and districts can use funds to help students in response to the impacts of the pandemic.

1. Improve Access to High-Quality Mental Health Care

Too few students have access to mental health professionals; for example, current estimates show there is a national ratio of [one school psychologist for every 1,211 students](#). In some states, the number of students is even higher. To help ensure students, teachers, and staff in school buildings have access to the care they need, districts may use ARP ESSER funds to:

- **Create a positive and accessible process** for students, teachers, and staff to seek help and support. This process may include increasing mental health resources and support on school campuses and awareness of those resources and services. Taking a whole school approach to wellness can also create a more positive process for seeking support and services. Mental health literacy training for educators and staff can also be effective in helping students obtain mental health supports inside school buildings and in the community.
- **Use early intervention strategies.** Early interventions conducted by mental health staff are associated with [positive academic and developmental outcomes](#), such as fewer disciplinary encounters, increased engagement, and elevated graduation rates.
- Ensure there is **sufficient access to high-quality mental health staff** (e.g., psychologists, counselors, social workers, and well-trained behavior specialists) within school buildings. Schools can leverage ARP ESSER funds to **hire additional staff**, develop plans for aligning activities across federal and state funding streams, prioritize activities that build local capacity to ensure efforts outlast specific funding sources, and develop comprehensive evaluation plans for adjusting supports based on data. ARP ESSER funds can also be used to set up processes and systems to bill Medicaid for health services, as eligible, including hiring or contracting with staff to do this work.
- **Reduce stigma** associated with seeking mental health support by: providing more information on mental health challenges and the supports available, investing in professional development of school staff, offering tele-mental health options, actively engaging students in health decisions, and actively engaging the wider school community (e.g., holding regular meetings about resources and make practice changes based on community feedback).
- Provide students **equitable access to mental health services that are welcoming and inclusive**, with regard to race, sexual orientation, gender identity, intersex traits, ethnicity, culture, language, and disability including by increasing the [diversity of school counselors](#), mental health professionals, social workers, psychologists, nurses, and other integrated support staff throughout the school building. [Increasing diversity](#) of mental health professionals can improve relatability and accessibility and reduce stigma.
 - Efforts to increase diversity in mental health professions in schools can be supported by [using ARP ESSER funds](#) to offer loan forgiveness and service scholarships, create or strengthen district partnerships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and Minority Serving Institutions, and create career pathways in high schools.

2. Improve Communication and Transparency about Mental Health Supports with the Wider School Community

ARP ESSER funding may be used to meaningfully engage families and students and establish two-way communication between schools, mental health programs, and families to improve access to and awareness of available mental health resources. To improve communication and engagement with the wider school community, schools and districts can:

- **Use accessible language** and ensure that all school materials and mental health personnel communicate in a language understood by multilingual families and students and is accessible to persons with disabilities. Public schools are obligated to ensure meaningful communication with parents with limited English proficiency in a language they can understand.¹ Public schools must also ensure that communications with families and students with disabilities are as effective as communications with others, and this obligation extends to a public school’s web content, as discussed in the [Department of Justice’s recent guidance on web accessibility](#) and the Americans with Disabilities Act². Schools may use ARP ESSER funds to meet or go beyond these legal obligations in order to ensure all students and families are able to access mental health resources at school.
- Establish a **home visit program and provide support** and time for educators and/or mental health professionals to perform home visits and meetings with families and guardians.
- **Increase awareness of available school and district human resources support** for all staff, including where to find mental health support and who to contact and when.
- **Leverage local wellness resources** from local health departments, community partners, or federal resources to provide wellness services to students, teachers, and staff remotely or in person.

3. Implement and Integrate Evidence-Based Approaches to Social, Emotional, and Mental Well-Being

District and school leaders can use ARP ESSER funds to collect and use data to determine the specific needs of students and staff and ensure that those needs are being matched with the right resources. These data can help school and district leaders consider the context that influences the social, emotional, and mental well-being of students. Schools and districts can intentionally integrate social and emotional supports with academics and promote mental health as a positive part of education. To better implement and integrate evidence-based practices, schools and districts can:

- **Use reliable [school climate and other surveys](#)** to determine areas of improvement for educators, students, and families and to monitor progress toward improving in areas of need.

¹ Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires school districts to provide English learner students equal opportunities to meaningfully participate in all programs and activities of the school district, including counseling services.

² Subtitle A of Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act protects qualified individuals with disabilities from discrimination on the basis of disability in services, programs, and activities provided by state and local government entities. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 also protects qualified individuals with disabilities from discrimination on the basis of disability, and applies to federally conducted and assisted programs or activities.

- Use **existing data sources** like attendance, academic, and discipline data to identify students in need of additional supports and guide improvement.
- **Create student-teacher advisory groups** and provide professional development to educators leading these groups. School leaders can build time in the schedule for these groups to regularly meet to build strong teacher-student relationships and improve school engagement.
- **Implement and integrate [evidence-based practices](#) within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)**. Within MTSS it is important to establish positive, predictable, and safe environments. This [effort includes](#) creating a positive, safe, affirming, and welcoming school environment for the entire school community; building strong relationships between students and staff; establishing consistent routines; promoting and reinforcing positive expectations; delivering rigorous, engaging, and culturally and linguistically inclusive instruction; using screening tools to plan, implement, and assess instruction; and providing clear and supportive feedback to students.
- Develop and implement **discipline policies and practices that reflect an instructional and inclusive rather than punitive and exclusionary approach** and emphasize preventive practices and strategies that support the development of social, emotional, and mental health needs. Use **restorative justice programs** and other evidence-based initiatives that are more effective and that are culturally responsive and support the social, emotional well-being of all students.
- **Train all staff in school buildings** on how they can support the well-being of students within their specific roles, recognize student diversity, and specifically affirm [populations who have experienced inequities](#), to ensure mental health supports build on students' strengths and are welcoming and inclusive.
- **Expand community schools**. [ARP funds can be used to support community schools](#) which are well-positioned to meet the needs of students and families by providing well-coordinated and comprehensive supports, including mental and physical health care. ARP ESSER funds, along with other federal, state, and local funds, can be used to create and expand community schools.

Examples of State and District Mental Health and Whole-Child Initiatives Supported by ARP ESSER Investments

The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development is using funds to support in-house school social workers who will assist district staff with social work tasks in rural and remote districts.

The Hawaii Department of Education has provided and will provide ARP ESSER funding for school counselors and social workers to expand much-needed services to students during summer 2021 and summer 2022.

The Kansas State Department of Education will address a state-wide shortage in licensed professionals trained to support students coming out of the pandemic. This program will include a Grow Your Own Counselor model that encourages districts to identify candidates and employ them as student services coordinators while they develop their skills in an approved school counseling graduate program.

<p>The Maine School Administrative District 11 is dedicating a portion of ARP ESSER funds to hire additional social workers in each school. Additional funding will support a mental health smartphone app for students.</p>
<p>The Maryland State Department of Education will use a portion of ARP ESSER funds to address students' mental health needs, including \$10 million in funds to support regional Maryland School Mental Health Response Program teams, and \$3.2 million to address adverse childhood experiences.</p>
<p>The Minnesota Department of Education is using ARP ESSER funds to support districts and charter schools in hiring licensed school counselors, nurses, social workers, and psychologists to help provide early intervention to support students' social, emotional, and mental health.</p>
<p>The New Jersey Department of Education will use a portion of its ARP ESSER state set-aside to establish a grant to districts to support the hiring of staff, including counselors, to address students' and educators' mental health and social and emotional needs.</p>
<p>The Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) is using a portion of the state's ARP ESSER funding to hire new school counselors, mental health professionals, and recreational therapists due to an identified shortage in the state. OSDE has awarded grants for 222 school counselors and 94 licensed mental health professionals, and has awarded 42 contracts for mental health services. It has also launched a School Counselor Corps grant program to allow districts to apply for funding to increase the number of school counselors, licensed mental health professionals, licensed recreational therapists, and/or mental health contract services.</p>
<p>The Puerto Rico Department of Education (PRDE) will use ARP ESSER funds to hire more school health staff and evaluate the effectiveness of social-emotional health interventions. PRDE plans to use ARP ESSER funds to recruit 429 school nurses and 116 school psychologists. In addition, to help schools identify and respond to the impact of the pandemic on student well-being, PRDE will support schools by performing initial screenings for all students, identifying students in need of support, and addressing students' mental and behavioral health needs. An interdisciplinary social-emotional team will assist teachers through this process.</p>
<p>The Rhode Island Department of Education, using the state's 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant model as a guide, will use ARP ESSER funds to support partnerships between districts and community-based organizations. Applicants for funding must provide evidence of a strong partnership between the district and one or more community-based organizations and include evidence of the program addressing family engagement and social and emotional learning.</p>
<p>The Washington, D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education is expanding its Comprehensive School Based Behavioral Health System to expand access to clinical services in public schools across the District of Columbia. This support ensures schools are fully staffed with behavioral health providers to deliver multi-tiered behavioral health services and supports that are essential to the well-being of students and help prevent more complex, lifelong behavioral health challenges.</p>

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