



THE SECRETARY OF EDUCATION
WASHINGTON, DC 20202

April 21, 2021

Dear Chief State School Officers:

During my visits to schools across the country, I've been inspired time and again by the excitement of students and educators who can be together in person now that their school buildings have safely reopened. I've also seen how our schools and districts are working intentionally to address the significant academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs of students, particularly for students who have been most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The U.S. Department of Education (Department) is confident in the ability of students and educators to participate in safe in-person instruction consistent with necessary prevention strategies outlined in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) [*Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools through Phased Prevention*](#), and school districts across the Nation have made great strides toward this goal. The CDC estimates that more than 80 percent of all school staff received at least one vaccination by the end of March, and every State is now offering vaccines to any resident age 16 and older. While it is encouraging that four out of every five schools that enroll students in grades 4 and 8 offered at least some in-person instruction in February, our progress is uneven; and students of color, English learners, and students from low-income backgrounds are disproportionately likely to still be in fully remote settings.

It will take significant resources to continue to reopen schools safely this spring, support sustained access to in-person instruction, and achieve our shared commitment to building back better so that our Nation's education system addresses the needs of all students. The American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act of 2021 is vital to support the future of our students, families, educators, and communities.

The ARP Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER) Fund provides nearly \$122 billion to State educational agencies (SEAs) and local educational agencies (LEAs) to meet the urgent needs of schools and students. Last month, the Department made available to each SEA the first two-thirds of its ARP ESSER allocation, or about \$81 billion in immediate support. Today, I am pleased to release the State plan template for the ARP ESSER Fund, which is designed to promote comprehensive planning by SEAs and LEAs for the effective use of ARP ESSER funds to reopen schools safely this spring; support sustained access to in-person instruction throughout the spring, summer, and into next school year; and to address the academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs of students. Once the Department has approved an SEA's plan, the Department will make the SEA's remaining ARP ESSER allocation available for use, totaling another \$41 billion in funding nationwide.

Importantly, the template calls on SEAs to engage in meaningful consultation with stakeholders and the public to develop their ARP ESSER plans. Through development of your State plan, you will find opportunities to describe your State's approach to using ARP ESSER funds with transparency, effectiveness, equity, inclusive engagement, and strong fiscal safeguards. Your responses to the elements that make up the State plan template will provide critical information to your stakeholders, the Department, and the public about the use of these unprecedented resources. The State plan will also inform the Department's technical assistance to SEAs and LEAs and the Department's approach to

monitoring implementation of ARP ESSER funds to ensure accountability for the use of taxpayer-provided resources and support ongoing progress to meet the needs of all students. In addition, the template allows SEAs to fulfill the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act ESSER II 6-month reporting requirement in section 313(f) of the CRRSA Act.

The State Plan template includes sections for:

- **Describing the State’s Current Status and Needs**
The Department recognizes the extraordinary efforts made by States, LEAs, and educators to support students during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this section, SEAs will describe the progress they have made, the priorities and student needs guiding their ARP ESSER funding decisions, and their current and projected operating status.
- **Safely Reopening Schools and Sustaining their Safe Operations**
The Department recognizes that safely reopening schools and sustaining their safe operations to maximize in-person instruction is essential for student learning and student well-being, and especially for being able to address the educational inequities that have been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this section, SEAs will describe how they will support their LEAs in this vital area.
- **Planning for the Use and Coordination of ARP ESSER Funds**
The Department recognizes that seeking input from diverse stakeholders is essential to developing plans for the use of ARP ESSER funds that are responsive to the needs of students, families, and educators. In this section, SEAs will describe their plans for consultation and for coordinating the use of ARP ESSER funds with other resources to meet the needs of students.
- **Maximizing State-Level Funds to Support Students**
The Department recognizes that States have an extraordinary opportunity to address the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on underserved students through the ARP Act’s required State set-asides to address the academic impact of lost instructional time, provide summer learning and enrichment programs, and provide comprehensive afterschool programs. In this section, SEAs will describe their evidence-based strategies for these resources.
- **Supporting LEAs in Planning for and Meeting Students’ Needs**
The Department recognizes that the safe return to in-person instruction must be accompanied by a focus on meeting students’ academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs, and by addressing the opportunity gaps that existed before – and were exacerbated by – the pandemic. In this section, SEAs will describe how they will support their LEAs in developing high-quality plans for LEAs’ use of ARP ESSER funds to achieve these objectives.
- **Supporting the Educator Workforce**
The Department recognizes the toll that the COVID-19 pandemic has taken on the Nation’s educators as well as students. In this section, SEAs will describe strategies for supporting and stabilizing the educator workforce and for making staffing decisions that will support students’ academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs.
- **Monitoring and Measuring Progress**
The Department recognizes that transparency on how ARP ESSER funds are used and their impact on the Nation’s education system is a fundamental responsibility of Federal, State, and local government. In this section, SEAs will describe how they are building capacity at the SEA

and LEA levels to ensure high-quality data collection and reporting and to safeguard funds for their intended purposes.

The State plan template also includes several important assurances. One addresses civil rights protections, reflecting the State’s responsibility to ensure that no person shall be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subject to discrimination based on race; color; national origin, which includes a person’s limited English proficiency or English learner status and a person’s actual or perceived shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics; sex; age; or disability. Other important assurances, for example, address transparency and compliance with ARP ESSER statutory requirements such as uses of funds, maintenance of effort, and maintenance of equity.

Each SEA must submit to the Department by June 7, 2021, either: (1) its ARP ESSER plan or (2) the State requirements that preclude submission of the plan by that date (e.g., because of pre-existing State board approval requirements) and a date by which it will be able to submit its complete ARP ESSER plan. In order to ensure transparency, the Department will post each plan on the Department’s website when it is received and will indicate each plan’s approval status.

To support States in completing the ARP ESSER State plan and meeting ARP ESSER requirements, the Department has also issued an accompanying notice of interim final requirements with additional details. The notice is available [here](#). These requirements are reflected in the enclosed SEA application template, and are intended to promote accountability, transparency, and the effective use of ARP ESSER funds by ensuring that each SEA meaningfully engages in stakeholder consultation and takes public input into account in the development of its ARP ESSER State plan; ensuring that each LEA develops a plan for the use of its ARP ESSER funds and engages in meaningful consultation and seeks public input as it develops its plan; and clarifying how an LEA must meet the statutory requirement to develop a plan for the safe return to in-person instruction and continuity of services.

I also want to draw your attention to the Department’s updated [Guidance on Maintenance of Effort Requirements and Waiver Requests under the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief \(ESSER\) Fund and the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief \(GEER\) Fund](#). Released earlier this week, this guidance document addresses frequently asked questions about maintenance of effort (MOE) requirements applicable to Federal pandemic relief and recovery funds for education and the process for States to request an MOE waiver. The guidance explains that the Department’s approach to MOE waiver requests will be rooted in the consideration of the impact on students and recognition that the purpose of ESSER, GEER, and other Federal pandemic relief and recovery funds is to expand resources for K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions and their students, not to replace existing State commitments to K-12 and postsecondary education.

Finally, we remain intensely focused on supporting SEAs and LEAs in addressing the immediate needs of students. The Department’s resources include the COVID-19 Handbook Volume 1: [Strategies for Safely Reopening Elementary and Secondary Schools](#) and Volume 2: [Roadmap to Reopening Safely and Meeting All Students’ Needs](#). Last month, educators from across the country joined our virtual National Safe School Reopening Summit, where President Biden issued a call to action to make summer learning and enrichment programs available to students across the Nation. To support States in these efforts, the Department’s Summer Learning and Enrichment Collaborative will launch next week. The Collaborative will bring together key stakeholders from each State to discuss how to build effective plans for high-quality, evidence-based summer learning and enrichment focused on serving students most impacted by the pandemic. More than 30 States have already signed up to participate in the Collaborative, and it is not too late to join this important initiative.

In all of these areas, the Department is eager and committed to continue partnering with SEAs, LEAs, and the education community. Please do not hesitate to let me know how the Department can provide additional support during this critical period.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Miguel A. Cardona". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "M".

Miguel A. Cardona, EdD
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education

Attachment

cc: Governors