



## **Connecticut's State Plan**

**American Rescue Plan (ARP) Elementary and  
Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER)**

**Reimagining Schools to  
Transform Students' Lives**



**Connecticut State Department of Education**

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By signing this document, I agree to each of the assurances listed in Appendix C and further assure that: To the best of my knowledge and belief, all information and data included in this plan are true and correct.	
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## Introduction

Our Connecticut school communities—with students at the center—continue to be bold and innovative as they respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. In partnership with districts, stakeholders, students, and families, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) is planning a transformative and equitable recovery starting with summer initiatives for learning and fun every day, everywhere, and continuing forward into the next school year. The CSDE and the Connecticut Department of Public Health (DPH), in collaboration with the Office of the Governor, the Office of Early Childhood (OEC), and Office of Policy and Management, are promoting an educational response focused on renewal, reducing opportunity gaps, accelerating learning and advancing equity by providing access to supports, resources, and enhanced enrichment opportunities.

The United States Department of Education (USED) has recognized the importance of these efforts, particularly with the infusion of resources to support education in Connecticut. The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ARP ESSER) has granted Connecticut an additional \$1,105,919,874, providing the opportunity to develop bold, high-impact plans to address the substantial disruptions to student learning, interpersonal interactions, and social-emotional well-being. This represents a total of \$1,709,414,391 in federal COVID-19 relief funding specifically directed to education in Connecticut since the start of the pandemic.

ESSER I created the opportunity to survive, ESSER II created the opportunity to thrive, and ARP ESSER is Connecticut's opportunity to transform. Utilizing the [template provided by the USED](#), the **CSDE ARP ESSER State Plan** provides a comprehensive narrative of how the education community has survived with the help of ESSER I, thrived with ESSER II and the vision for how the CSDE, alongside local education agencies (LEAs), will use ARP ESSER to ensure that collectively we achieve our goal of *reimagining schools to transform students' lives*.

## A. Describing the State’s Current Status and Needs

### A.1. Progress and Promising Practices

Despite being an unprecedented year that challenged our society, economy, and schools, Connecticut has been recognized as a national leader for [its approach to reopening schools](#) and its utilization of data to drive decision-making. Below, we highlight just a sample of the collective **progress** in Connecticut school communities and the **promising practices** developed to support our students and local education agencies (LEAs) in our state and to reimagine education.

First, an important promising practice that has driven Connecticut’s response to the pandemic is tapping into the expertise we have within the state and forging cross-sector partnerships statewide. These partnerships were then leveraged to support school communities across the state. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the CSDE has prioritized providing [support, guidance, and resources pertaining to COVID-19 to school leaders, families, students, and educators](#). An example of the resources provided was presented in [6 Ways the CSDE is Working to Keep Schools Open Safely](#). This document drew attention to some of the promising practices, such as maintaining a strong connection between the CSDE and the Connecticut Department of Public Health (DPH) that facilitated just-in-time and expert guidance to the broader school community and one-of-a-kind connection and collaboration across state agencies.

These connections and collaborations were intentional, as seen in the creation of the K-12 Reopening Subcommittee of the Reopen Rules Committee, which brought together subject matter experts from the Yale School of Public Health, Connecticut Children's Medical Center, and representatives from the school superintendent organization, the school medical advisors, the local health directors, and the school nurse supervisors, and infectious disease and environmental health experts. This cross-agency collaboration deepened with the establishment of “Health and Safety Tuesdays,” where CSDE leaders and DPH’s state and deputy state epidemiologists, among others, host a virtual weekly meeting to provide updates and answer questions from over 600 participants, including superintendents, school nurses, school medical advisors, school board members, union representatives, policymakers, representatives of private and independent schools, and local public health officials. Routinely bringing these stakeholders together strengthened communitywide and statewide partnerships between LEAs and public health providers, in addition to creating and bolstering new ones. In addition, CSDE expanded its data collecting efforts to track the impacts of the pandemic and has since been [nationally recognized for these efforts by Attendance Works](#).

Second, progress during the pandemic was linked to technology, which made access to devices and the Internet a necessity. While there is no replacement for in-person learning, [Connecticut addressed the digital divide](#) so that access to devices and connectivity would not present a barrier to learning. This included providing students with more than 142,000 laptops, 12,000 Kajeet hotspots, and 40,000 cable broadband vouchers to provide at-home Internet access. The CSDE also recognizes the continued need for—and is committed to providing—support for students, educators, and families to access and use technology and the internet. The CSDE has shared information about the Federal Communications Commission’s Emergency Broadband Benefit program with superintendents and educational stakeholders. In addition, CSDE has provided free access [to digital resources to support](#)

[online and offline learning](#) and to technology to aid in the facilitation of virtual, remote, and hybrid learning. Looking forward toward the reimagined use of technology, the CSDE, in partnership with the University of Connecticut, researchers from the state's universities, regional educational service center (RESA) representatives, and district and school educators, launched the first-of-its-kind collaborative to conceptualize and coordinate COVID-related research in education in the state.

Third, the Connecticut COVID-19 Education Research Collaborative (CCERC) will coordinate the development and enactment of research on COVID-related educational issues, ensuring strong connections between the research and Connecticut's districts and schools. Launched at the end of May, the CCERC will be a resource to consider studies that document: how school districts implemented remote learning, examine variations by school district characteristics, and assess relationships with student outcomes such as attendance, behavior, and performance, and examine educators' experiences teaching during COVID. These types of studies will illuminate successes and help CSDE target resources toward the most meaningful next steps.

Fourth, planning for our future progress and promising practices requires input from our stakeholders, so in March 2021, CSDE launched the [AccelerateCT Taskforce](#) to create a framework to assist districts in promoting renewal, reducing opportunity gaps, accelerating learning, and advancing equity post-pandemic. The AccelerateCT Taskforce is a cross-section of stakeholders representing various sectors who were charged to identify best practices and offer guidance on how to implement bold, high-leverage strategies, programs, and practices culminating in the development of the [AccelerateCT Framework for Accelerating Educational Opportunity and Access](#) document. The document, published in May 2021, includes [specific special education guidance and a process for Planning and Placement Teams](#).

Finally, the CSDE also recognizes, and is continuing its commitment to addressing, the social-emotional needs of students that existed prior to—and were exacerbated by—COVID-19. In March, the CSDE published [7 Ways CSDE is Leading Social-Emotional Learning \(SEL\)](#) to highlight some of its SEL initiatives, including procuring the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA) system, providing flexibilities for educator evaluations, and hosting webinars specifically designed to support student and family social-emotional well-being. [This webinar series](#) consisted of four parts: Family Tips: Providing Social and Emotional Support to Children for COVID-19; The Three Rs of Learning from Home: Tips for Stressed-out Families; Student Voices: Distance Learning During COVID-19 Virtual Connecticut Forum; and Mi Experiencia Educativa en el tiempo de COVID-19, the last of which was delivered in Spanish. Families were also provided with [additional social-emotional support resources](#). The social-emotional well-being of Connecticut's students and school staff remains a top priority of the CSDE.

This is just a snapshot of the many promising practices coming out of Connecticut in response to the pandemic. To best capture the lessons learned and best practices across the state as requested by our stakeholders, the CSDE will conduct a webinar inviting school districts to submit to the U.S. Department of Education's (USED) [Safer Schools and Campuses Best Practices Clearinghouse](#), in addition to connecting with schools that have shared particularly innovative ideas in their ESSER II applications. The CSDE also plans to submit a collection of promising practices in the weeks to come.

As a state, we have made great progress and identified numerous promising practices, but we know there is still work to be done. The ARP ESSER provides an ongoing opportunity to use our established state-level priorities, described in detail below, and create initiatives for all students—especially those disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

## **A.2. Overall Priorities**

Since the moment Connecticut began responding to the pandemic in March 2020, the CSDE has been working to ensure that the education community had the resources and support to survive the rapid transition to remote learning. Pairing ESSER I and state coronavirus relief funds, we purchased needed devices and connectivity, supported districts' purchase of personal protective equipment (PPE) and cleaning services, subsidized additional and substitute staffing, and carried out other measures needed to support social distancing efforts. When the ESSER II funds were awarded, the CSDE put great effort into ensuring that the districts and the state as a whole were able to shift out of the mindset of surviving and into one of thriving. With this in mind, the CSDE developed state-level priorities under [ESSER II](#), including a comprehensive application and guidance. Now, as Connecticut considers the historic ARP ESSER award, it can build upon the solid foundation of ESSER II and move towards the mindset of transformation.

The CSDE revisited the ESSER II state-level priorities and identified areas that directly connect to the issues currently facing students and schools across our state as a result of or in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The foundation of the Connecticut ARP ESSER plan is built upon the following CSDE state-level priorities, as outlined in the [CSDE ARP ESSER guidance document](#). These priorities are supported by data collected across various student groups and informed by stakeholders' voices. Students need support across the board—from learning acceleration to social, emotional, and mental health. School staff also need extra supports to provide academic renewal, as well as support to address their own social, emotional, and mental health. And while the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are felt across the education community in Connecticut, data also show us that our underserved students were disproportionately affected, and therefore require a dedicated focus in the CSDE priorities (data and details can be found in table A1).

With that in mind, the CSDE has established a commitment to equity that is carried through all five of the state-level priorities.

### **CSDE Commitment to Equity**

It is our collective responsibility to fulfill the outlined priorities through an equity-focused lens. Access must be focused on our preK-12 populations most disproportionately affected by COVID-19, including students of color, students with disabilities, English learners, students experiencing homelessness, disengaged youth, youth in foster care, students from low-income families, students involved in the justice system, and/or students who experienced barriers to remote learning or whose progress was disrupted.

## CSDE State-Level Priorities

**Learning Acceleration, Academic Renewal, and Student Enrichment:** Advancing equity and access in education for students in Connecticut remain top priorities. The CSDE continues to focus on academic supports to accelerate learning for our students, particularly those disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

**Family and Community Connections:** The complex issues brought about by the pandemic have made it clear that the success of schools, families, and communities are interdependent and all have a stake in students' well-being. The CSDE believes investing in mutually beneficial school-family-community partnerships will not only support students to achieve their full potential, but it will also strengthen families and stabilize communities.

**Social, Emotional, and Mental Health of Students and of Our School Staff:** The school community experience during the pandemic has been one of collective challenge and trauma. The CSDE is taking a coordinated approach to providing social-emotional supports to students and staff that will allow the agency to build upon existing efforts already underway in districts across the state.

**Strategic Use of Technology, Staff Development, and the Digital Divide:** Applying what we have learned during the pandemic requires careful consideration of the importance of student access to in-person learning and enrichment balanced with the strategic use of technology to engage and expand learning opportunities.

**Building Safe and Healthy Schools:** Ensuring our school buildings are safe and healthy environments that enable all our students to excel remains an important aspect of recovering from COVID-19. The CSDE is committed to supporting districts in their efforts to invest in changes that support the physical health and safety of our students and staff.

In support of the collective call to think boldly and create transformative programs for the students of Connecticut, the CSDE provided the above priorities to local education agencies to guide their planning for ARP ESSER spending. While crafting the ARP ESSER plans, LEAs must consider how they can address the most critical and/or most widespread issues facing their schools and students through the lens of these five priorities.

### A.3. Identifying Needs of Underserved Students

A priority of the CSDE throughout the pandemic has been to deploy data-informed policies, which includes understanding the depth and breadth of challenges that underserved students are facing. To determine the state's highest priority academic, social, emotional, and/or mental health needs for the 2021-22 school year, the CSDE followed suit by:

(1) Examining existing state-level datasets: The CSDE examined the robust data collected in EdSight, the CSDE's education data warehouse. EdSight reports data on learning model and monthly attendance, including chronic absenteeism. The attendance data are disaggregated by traditional student groups such as race/ethnicity, free/reduced price meal eligibility, students with disabilities, and English learners, as well as by other groups such as by grade, homeless status, and student learning model. The CSDE has been reporting these data publicly at [Supporting Student Participation](#) since October 2020. More details about how the data were collected and used can be seen in A.5.

