

Federal K-12 COVID Relief

THE COMPLETE PICTURE



You may have seen the Institute for Reforming Government's Transparency Tool for Federal K-12 COVID Relief and thought...that doesn't seem right.

Here's the context missing from their narrative...

Districts have plans in place

IRG's report completely misses the fact that districts have plans in place to spend their federal COVID relief dollars, instead focusing on the technical aspects of how that spending happens (see the second page for detailed information).



It's a difficult time to plan

Unlike other states, Wisconsin's implementation of the largest federal support program (ESSER III) was challenged by the state contributing no new spending authority for schools through its budget process, resulting in a massive fiscal cliff that districts are currently navigating.

New spending authority is critical

The upcoming budget will be **incredibly important** for districts, which are currently operating on a one-time federal funding source during a period of high inflation and workforce shortage.



WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF
Public Instruction
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THE DETAILED PICTURE

Each pot of ESSER funds has a specific intent per the federal government.

- ESSER I: Crisis Response.
- ESSER II: Resume In-Person Instruction.
- ESSER III: Address Unfinished Learning.

All ESSER funds must be used to “prepare for, plan for, respond to the COVID-19 pandemic,” per the federal government.

Each pot of ESSER funds has a different deadline and districts are encouraged to spend the funds down in order of the deadline.

- ESSER I: September 30, 2022
- ESSER II: September 30, 2023
- ESSER III: September 30, 2024

Unlike other states, Wisconsin did not just provide cash payments to LEAs up front because this practice leads to a significant number of audit findings. Instead, we followed federal accounting practices to reimburse LEAs for allowed costs.

- Districts are first required to submit a budget and plan for use of the funds. DPI staff review those budgets and plans against federal and state allowable uses of the funds and either accept the plan, request more information, or reject the plan. If the plan is not accepted, DPI staff work with the district to create an allowable plan.
- Districts spend the funds and then submit a claim for reimbursement to DPI.
- DPI staff review the claim against the district's approved plan and budget.
- If the claim aligns to the approved plan and budget, DPI then reimburses the district for the amount of the claim. Therefore, a district's ESSER fund balances do not show they have been spent until well after the funds have actually been spent.
- District needs have changed over the course of the pandemic, from initial needs like masks, hand sanitizer, and hot spots to provide remote instruction, to now modifying curriculum and hiring more staff to provide interventions to address unfinished learning and gaps in learning.
- Districts have the authority to modify their plans and budgets at any time before the deadline. Many districts chose to submit only a partial budget for their ESSER III funds while they actively review data on student needs to determine the best way to spend those funds, knowing they have a little more time to spend those funds.
- All of these requirements add capacity pressures to district operations.

There are additional federal requirements for things like construction, and while districts had some latitude in how they spend their ESSER I and II funds, there was a new requirement in spending of ESSER III funds, requiring that at least 20% of their funds be used on evidence-based improvement strategies.

- Districts who wanted to invest in new HVAC systems or other construction needs for the health and safety of students and staff, also had to contend with supply and workforce shortages that meant modifying their plans.

Anyone can see a district's ESSER III plan and budget.

- They can be found at <https://dpi.wi.gov/arp/esser-iii/lea-plans>
- Note, if you receive a message that the plan is unavailable, that means that either DPI is actively reviewing the plan or the district is currently making changes to the plan and budget.

Our districts are actively spending these funds in ways that will benefit students within state and federal guidelines.

The department itself has been challenged by the lack of administrative funding and capacity

- Instead of building dashboards, we are helping districts meet federal guidelines while spending dollars in ways that are meaningful to learner growth.