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ESSER Funds in Appalachia: An Opportunity to Support Student Wellness and Academic Success

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On March 12, 2020, Governor Mike DeWine ordered all schools closed... The ensuing months and trajectory of the virus resulted in the extended closure of school buildings throughout Ohio meaning that 1.6 million public school children were learning remotely or a mix of in-person and online for part of the 2019-2020 and the 2020-2021 school years. The federal government's response to the challenges facing students, families and schools included a provision in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) focused specifically on education. This issue brief will briefly outline this opportunity for funding, allowable uses of these funds, and the unique needs in both the short and long term in regards to Ohio's Appalachian region.

Under the CARES Act, the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) program provides funds to schools and districts to address the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had and continues to have on children across the nation. Both traditional public school districts and community schools received funds, which were awarded based on the percent total of Title I funds that each entity receives. The funds have broad allowable uses for expenses directly related to the pandemic as well as "other activities that are necessary to maintain the operation of continuity of services."

The ESSER fund at the national level is \$13.23 billion, \$489,205,200 of which Ohio has received. These funds are available for expenditures between Mar. 13, 2020,

Some Allowable Uses of Funds:

- Activities authorized under ESEA, IDEA, the Perkins Act, or McKinney-Vento
- Coordination of preparedness and response efforts
- "Resources necessary to address the needs of their individual schools"
- "Activities to address the unique needs of low-income children or students, children with disabilities, English learners, racial and ethnic minorities, students experiencing homelessness, and foster care youth
- Purchasing supplies, including what is needed for sanitation or educational technology
- Providing mental health services and supports
- Planning and implementing activities for summer learning and supplemental activities
- "Other activities that are necessary to maintain the operation of and continuity of services in local education agencies" including employment

<https://ccip.ode.state.oh.us/documentlibrary/ViewDocument.aspx?DocumentKey=84192>

and Sept. 30, 2022. Ohio’s [state plan](#) for the most recent round of funding is designed to support safe in-person instruction and meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of students, especially those students most impacted by the pandemic. Schools submitted a detailed plan for their own use of funds by August 20, 2021 to the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), which outlined how they planned to, or had already, used these dollars.

A considerable amount of local control gives schools the power to use funds in ways that meet the needs of their students best. This means that school districts can use their funds to address the academic impact of lost instructional time, respond to the academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs of all students. A funds are to be used to address the unique needs students disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, including students from low-income families, students of color, English learners, children with disabilities, students experiencing homelessness, children in foster care, and migratory students.

These additional funds were especially needed in low resourced areas of the state such as the Appalachian region. Students living in Appalachian communities faced significant challenges even prior to the

Total CARES Act Funding in Appalachia:
ESSER Funding: \$438,707,102
Coronavirus Relief Funding: \$100,000,000
Broadband Ohio Connectivity Grant: \$49,934,130
Governor’s Emergency Education Fund: \$49,934,130

pandemic, and COVID-19 has, of course, exacerbated these disparities. Many of these school districts in the region received healthy allocation of federal support and students were able to reap the benefits of numerous services aimed at responding to the needs of students created by the ongoing pandemic and addressing many of those needs that existed well before the COVID-19 public health and economic crisis began.

The [Ohio Poverty Report](#) (June 2020)

estimates that prior to the pandemic, the statewide poverty rate averaged 14.5% between 2014 and 2018, while Ohio’s Appalachian counties had a higher rate of poverty at 17.0%. Moreover, the nine poorest counties in Ohio at that time were in the Appalachian region. For children, the poverty rate tends to be enforce worse than for the general population overall, and in fact, prior to the pandemic, nearly [1 in 4 children](#) living in Ohio’s Appalachian counties were living in poverty. the poverty rate is even worse.

[KIDS COUNT Data](#) across the board indicates how children in Appalachia have historically trailed just behind the rest of the state due to generations of economic disinvestment in the region.

- **In Ohio, 47.3% of students were economically disadvantaged in 2019-2020.** Students are economically disadvantaged in Ohio if they or a resident in their household is eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, receives public assistance, or who meets the guidelines for Title I.
- **In Appalachia, 58.1% of students were economically disadvantaged in the same year.** The majority of students in the region qualify as economically disadvantaged students because they



and their caregivers face financial obstacles that make it more difficult for them achieve economic stability.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many of the already existing challenges for children and families across the state. According to Ohio Report Card data from the 2020-2021 school year:



- **High School Graduation:** The statewide 4-year graduation rate for Ohio students has risen from class of 2016 to class of 2020, 83.6% to 87.2%.
- **Chronic Absenteeism:** In 2020-21, the percentage of Ohio students who were chronically absent increased significantly to 24.0%, compared to 16.7% in 2018-19.
- **3rd Grade Reading Proficiency:** Fewer 3rd grade Ohio students were proficient in reading in 2020-21 compared to the 2018-19 school year, decreasing from 66.7% to 51.9%.
- **8th Grade Mathematics Proficiency:** Fewer 8th graders in Ohio were proficient in math in 2020-21 compared to the 2018-19 school year, decreasing from 57.3% to 42.6%.

Comparatively, the Appalachian graduation rate from 2020-21 was 92.7%. This is notably higher than the state average, signifying a good sign of progress. These numbers have risen statewide and continue demonstrate the resiliency of Ohio’s children; however, it is worth noting that more monitoring and analyses of these educational success measures are necessary in light of [recent changes to graduation requirements](#) over the last couple years. While important to celebrate this progress, it is also important we understand the source of changes in this indicator so that we do not overlook persisting needs among children in Appalachia and across Ohio where ESSER funds and other resources can be targeted.

Of course, educational statistics alone only provide a narrow view of children’s experiences in Appalachia.

Children living in poverty often do not have access to necessities like stable housing, food, or transportation, all of which are essential to learning. Moreover, children in Appalachia, regardless of their income, are more likely to have inadequate access to health care, including behavioral health care.

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened these disparities. Coupled with limited access to high-speed broadband internet, the challenges Appalachian children face are more numerous than ever. The ESSER funds represent opportunities to make short- and long-term investments to support and ensure children have the tools they need to learn and be successful.

The ESSER funds provide a unique opportunity for schools to meet the needs of students and promote whole child well-being, especially in Appalachia. Decades of resilience and clever spending on behalf of administration can culminate in meaningful change with this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create lasting short- and long-term solutions in the wake of the ongoing pandemic. The following are some examples of how school districts in the region have already begun to use these dollars to address the concerns of their communities using ESSER funds:

- Bridgeport Schools in Belmont County [told WTRF](#) that it plans to use the funds to build an addition to the current elementary school in order to give students more fresh air in response to a growing school population.
- The [Post reports](#) that Alexander Local School District and Trimble Local School District, both in Athens County, implemented a summer school program to combat “learning loss” and provide more intervention supports. Alexander Local has also begun to facilitate partnerships with Nationwide Children’s Hospital, Hopewell Recovery Services and Athens County Children’s Services to support children’s mental wellness.
- In Washington County at Waterford Local Schools, ESSER money is being used to put permanent air conditioning in the high school building, [The Marietta Times reports](#).
- At Nelsonville-York Schools in Athens County, [NBC4 reported](#) eligible students were incentivized with \$100 of the ESSER funds if they received the COVID-19 vaccine.

As demonstrated, these funds can be used for a broad array of purposes. Most importantly, the use of funds provision in ESSER provides the needed flexibility to address the unique needs and context of different communities, families, and students throughout the state of Ohio.

Importantly, the introduction of ESSER funds into school budgets could have broad long-term implications. While there are many positive aspects of the additional funding that can support students, with examples shared in the previous section, there are also potential negative impacts on school funding in the future. When public schools receive such huge amounts of money, communities may be more reluctant to pass levies to support them in the long run. For this reason, it is critical that local communities are involved in how these funds are used to ensure avoidance of a funding cliff and to also make sure that there is transparency, collaboration, and clear communications about how the funds are being spent.

Schools have until 2024 to use their ESSER funds to address immediate needs of children in the region and building a long-term foundation so their students are better able to attain wellness and success.

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