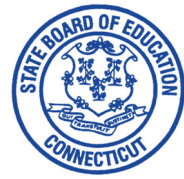




STATE OF CONNECTICUT

STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION



Good morning. Chair Murray and Ranking Member Burr, committee members, thank you for having me here today.

My name is Charlene Russell-Tucker, and I am the Commissioner of Education in Connecticut. I am honored to appear before you all today to represent our great state and share information regarding the impacts of the pandemic – March 2020 to today- on learning in my state, and the immense effort of the entire ecosystem that has been mobilized to facilitate learning recovery (academic renewal) that includes addressing the social, emotional, mental, physical and behavioral health needs of our students and school staff. I will address the impacts and supports/promising practices for students; our system of school administrators, educators and school staff, and families; as well as communities.

I want to lead with what makes Connecticut unique -- what in Connecticut is referred to as “The Connecticut Difference.” This is our longstanding focus on *best-in-class* collaboration, working together, and listening to one another, in search of common ground for the sake of our students.

Throughout this pandemic, and into recovery, we have made it a hallmark of our response and recovery efforts to work with our various partners and stakeholders—educators and administrators, families, students, advocates, policymakers, local health officials, and more—as often as possible to develop and implement our policies. Policies designed without hearing different perspectives, and without our constituent's input and feedback, are not likely to produce the intended and needed results.

In August 2020, I spearheaded, in robust partnership with the Connecticut Department of Public Health, “Health and Safety Tuesdays—” virtual calls to provide weekly opportunities for superintendents, local health officials, school board members, school nurses, medical advisors, policymakers, teachers’ union representatives, and other educational partners to engage in a dialogue with the state education agency leaders and our public health epidemiologists and key expert staff for up-to-date and emerging COVID-19 guidance, to triage questions and concerns, and ultimately, forge, build, and maintain trusted relationships. These weekly sessions – 75 held since the pandemic began through the end of this school year – had over 1,100 registered participants and became the reliable and credible space for maintaining safe school environments to support learning.

This collaborative approach is the way we build effective policy; we bring it to the people we serve and create numerous opportunities for conversation.

And when our families were concerned about returning their students to school in the fall of 2020 and 2021, we held *Virtual House Calls* for parents and caregivers in partnership with Connecticut Children’s Medical Center and the Connecticut Chapter of American Academy of Pediatrics. This gave thousands of families the opportunity to directly ask questions and share concerns with pediatricians and medical experts, and get immediate answers and guidance to COVID-19 and their children’s health and safety. This solidified trust among family members regarding the safe return to school each fall.

When planning how to prioritize and implement our Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds, this same methodology was used. We engaged our stakeholders through

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roundtables, feedback sessions, and focus groups. Some may ask why we do this? We do this because our students, educators, school staff and families deserve this level of effort from their leaders!

Connecticut has a beautifully diverse student body of more than half-a-million students. Across 205 districts, we have over 1,500 schools and more than 110,000 school staff devoted to helping our students thrive.

Looking more closely at our student population, more than half of students identify as nonwhite; 42.7% are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, 16.2% are students with disabilities, and 8.2% are English learners with more than 145 spoken languages - across our student body over 180 languages are spoken.

Also important to Connecticut’s context and background, with each round of ESSER funds distributed to states, Connecticut established the priorities for investing the more than \$1.7 billion that has been allocated for education. The priorities at both the state and districts levels are:

- **Learning Acceleration, Academic Renewal, and Student Enrichment**, which focuses on the academic supports students need to thrive and become well-rounded, engaged citizens upon graduation. (over \$729M budgeted for investment statewide)
- **Family and Community Connections**, which focuses on investing in strengthening or forming new school-family-community partnerships to support students. (over \$70M budgeted for district investment statewide)
- **Social, Emotional, and Mental Health of Students and School Staff**, which focuses on supporting students and school staff to re-engage with their school communities as we’ve returned to in-person learning. (over \$183M budgeted for district investment statewide)
- **Strategic Use of Technology, Staff Development, and the Digital Divide**, which focuses on the importance of in-person learning balanced with the strategic use of technology to expand learning opportunities. (over \$147M budgeted for district investment statewide)
- **Building Safe and Healthy Schools**, which focuses on allocating resources to support the physical health and safety of students and school staff. (over \$254M budgeted for investment statewide)

As you can see, these priorities cover the experiences of our students, educators, school staff, and wider communities. It is through thorough guidance issued at the state level, diligence and innovation at the district level, and partnership at the community level, that Connecticut has embarked on a bold and equitable learning recovery from this pandemic.

As of June 10, 2022, all funds have been obligated for all three streams of ESSER funds. The charts and table below contain more information regarding the percent of each stream that has been drawn-down at the district level and expended at the state level.

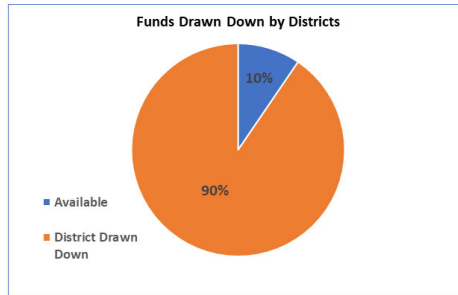
| Connecticut Federal COVID Recovery Funds – State Reserve | | | |
|---|----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| | ESSER I | ESSER II | ARP ESSER |
| Obligated | 11,106,393 | 49,242,646 | 110,669,666 |
| Expended | 7,838,867 | 10,572,207 | 10,617,921 |
| Balance | 3,267,526 | 38,670,439 | 100,051,745 |
| % of Funds Expended | 70.58% | 21.47% | 9.59% |

ESSERI (March 2020) – ‘Survive’

Total Awarded:
\$111 million

Districts (LEAs): \$99.9 million

State-level set-aside: \$11.1 million



Funds available through 9/30/2022.

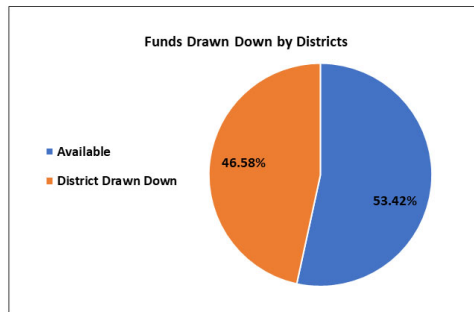


ESSER II (December 2020) – ‘Thrive’

Total Awarded:
\$492.4 million

Districts (LEAs): \$443.2 million

State-level set-aside: \$49.2 million



Funds available through 9/30/2023.



ARP ESSER (March 2021) – ‘Transform’

Total Awarded: \$1.1 billion

Districts (LEAs): \$995 million

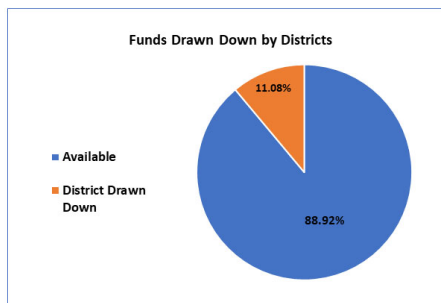
Required reservation:

- \$199 million to address learning loss

State-level set-aside: \$110 million

Required reservation:

- \$55 million to address learning loss
- \$11 million for summer enrichment
- \$11 million for afterschool programs



Funds available through 9/30/2024.



Addressing the Digital Divide:

In March of 2020, when the pandemic necessitated the closure of schools and the sudden shift to remote learning, we were all faced with an uncertain future. Our state immediately bolstered our relationships across state agencies, districts, and communities – and we provided consistent, timely communication to the field. We had school districts that made a smooth transition seamlessly to remote instruction, while others struggled with paper packets that needed to be picked up by families etc. In June of 2020, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) published results of its “Student Participation in Distance Learning” survey. In sum, CSDE found that:

- Over 90% of students who participated in distance learning after class cancellations due to COVID-19 participated through technology-based online learning while fewer than 10 percent participated through other methods (e.g., printed learning materials/packets, 1:1 phone calls, wellness checks).
- Tens of thousands of students statewide experienced the following barriers to greater participation in distance learning:
 - Access to a device in the home – nearly 10 percent (around 50,000 students)
 - Internet access in the home – nearly six percent (over 29,000 students)
 - Family, health, and trauma issues – over 17 percent (nearly 92,000 students).

With the first round of ESSER signed into law, we set out to ensure students could access their learning, and this meant addressing the digital divide. Ensuring connectivity among our student body required strong school-family-state partnerships, as we had to accurately assess the need in each community.

Under Governor Lamont, we launched the *Everybody Learns Initiative* which invested more than \$43 million to purchase more than 142-thousand laptops, 12-thousand hotspots, and 40-thousand cable broadband vouchers to address the digital divide in Connecticut and empower students and families across the state to learn from home. This initiative brought together the Office of the Governor, Connecticut State Department of Education, Department of Administrative Services, Office of Policy and Management, and the Connecticut Commission for Educational Technology to coordinate with internet companies and school districts.

Focusing on School Attendance and Engagement:

Beginning with the 2020-21 school year, we also rolled out two new data collections—weekly collection of Learning Models (e.g., in-person, hybrid, or remote) and Enrollment, as well as the monthly collection of Student Membership and Attendance, to allow us to make data-informed decisions to focus resources on student engagement and participation during the 2020-21 school year.

When we returned to school in Fall of 2020, 34% of districts were fully in-person; 60% were hybrid; and 6% were fully remote. Come December of 2020, 42% of districts were fully in-person; 30% were hybrid; and 28% were fully remote. By June of 2021 we were proud to announce that, 86% of districts were fully in-person; 14% were hybrid; and none were fully remote. For the 2021-22 school year, all districts operated fully in-person with extremely rare exceptions of limited closure due to local COVID outbreaks.

In 2020-21, student attendance on days when they learned remotely was substantially lower than on days when they learned in-person. This was true for almost all student groups. Additionally, students from some of our more vulnerable populations including English learners, students from low-income

families, and students experiencing homelessness, tended to be learning remotely at greater rates than their peers.

These *just-in-time* data points allowed us to better identify patterns early on around issues with participation so we could proactively work with educators, families, and community partners to address the root causes of chronic absence and disengagement and establish systems of support to reach all of our students.

In September of 2020, attendance rates were slightly lower than those in the 2019-20 school year; however, student groups disproportionately impacted by the pandemic experienced substantially lower attendance rates when compared to the previous year.

Come December of 2020, the year-to-date chronic absenteeism rate was 21.4 percent. However, the rate was 36.1 percent among English learners, 33.1 percent among students with disabilities, 35.8 percent among students eligible for free meals, and 55.6 percent among students experiencing homelessness.

By the end of the school year, the state average chronic absenteeism rate was 20.7 percent, 33.9 percent among English learners, 32.0 percent among students with disabilities, 36.1 percent among free meal eligible students, and 57.9 percent among students experiencing homelessness.

The State's response to this data collection was the Governor's Learner Engagement and Attendance Program, or LEAP, which was announced in April of 2021. Underway in 15 high-needs districts, LEAP is aimed at addressing student chronic absenteeism and disengagement resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Local home visitors meet families where they are—at home—and provide the necessary resources to support students' return to school.

Through these visits, families have obtained back-to-school supplies; support with technology, including student laptops and assistance with school district portals; connections with healthcare providers to support student mental health and well-being; and more.

As of December 2021, nearly 7,000 students across the 15 LEAP school districts had received more than 12,000 contacts from home visitor staff to encourage and support increased student attendance in school. This upcoming school year, thanks to financial commitments of our legislature, we are able to continue this program.

Learning Acceleration, Academic Renewal, and Student Enrichment:

Learning recovery to me-- our definitions may differ slightly—begins with identifying gaps in learning that have occurred during the pandemic. Then, we ensure we institute and bolster evidence-based supports to promote academic achievement and improved outcomes for all students. Importantly, a focus must be placed on student groups disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, including but not limited to students with disabilities, English learners, students experiencing homelessness and students who faced barriers to remote learning in 2020 and 2021.

To objectively gauge the academic impact of the pandemic on student achievement and growth, CSDE committed to administering all state student assessments in Spring 2021 to the fullest extent possible. The purpose of administering these assessments was not to hold the adults accountable for student outcomes during challenging times; instead, it was intended to objectively know how our students were

progressing academically through the pandemic so we could collectively target supports and resources where they're needed the most. These assessment data, when coupled with our attendance data, produced clear evidence to show that students who learned in-person lost the least ground academically, as compared to those who learned in hybrid or remote modes. Moreover, the effects were greater in mathematics, and in the elementary and middle grades, but not in high school. A similar finding was seen in our chronic absenteeism analyses where the gap in chronic absence rates between in-person and hybrid students was greater for elementary and middle school students, but not for high school students. These findings informed CSDE's decision to advocate strongly for in-person instruction for all students in 2021-22.

With the third round of ESSER funding, we used our state-level set-aside to extend licenses with online learning/credit recovery platforms, continue the development of our K-8 model curricula, and provide direct financial support to our 58 Family Resource Centers.

With Governor Lamont, we announced the deployment of more than \$16 million to provide comprehensive supports for students with disabilities whose services were disrupted during the pandemic. This includes addressing delayed, interrupted, suspended or inaccessible individualized education program (IEP) supports and services; conducting special education evaluations; supporting supplementary tutoring and reading instruction; and providing individualized in-home support.

At the district level, we saw flexible course offerings to promote credit recovery, improvements to parent-school communications, continued technological updates, and more. All approved district ESSER plans, among other grants, are available for anyone to see on Connecticut's electronic grants management system (eGMS) at connecticut.egrantsmanagement.com. This information is routinely communicated with families and stakeholders to encourage two-way dialogue at the district level regarding ESSER investments.

With the more than \$1.1 billion American Rescue Plan ESSER funding coming to Connecticut, learning recovery was certainly at the forefront of our minds—and we knew this was a collective call to action to transform education in Connecticut.

Moving quickly to deploy these funds, we invested more than \$8.6 million in our first round of Summer Enrichment Grants, which served more than 108,000 students and was evaluated by our research collaborative, the Connecticut COVID-19 Education Research Collaborative (CCERC). CCERC found that the initiative met its goal of expanding access to summer programming for Connecticut students, including nearly doubling the number of students among camps that also operated in the summer of 2020, and students and staff overwhelmingly enjoyed their camp experiences. This year, our Summer Enrichment grants total more than \$12.2 million, and we look forward to learning from another evaluation to guide future investments.

The Department, as well as our legislative counterparts in Connecticut, has recognized the immense need to focus on ensuring our students are reading at grade level and that students who need additional literacy support are identified.

In collaboration with experts and stakeholders, the Department recently announced the launch of the Science of Reading Masterclass, funded through ESSER II. The Masterclass includes statewide

professional learning and coaching to district teams to support comprehensive K-3 literacy instruction aligned with the science of reading.

Evaluating Effectiveness and Sustainability:

ESSER II funds were used to establish the first-of-its-kind, aforementioned research collaborative called the Connecticut COVID-19 Education Research Collaborative (CCERC). CCERC will not only study the impacts of COVID-19 on students' learning but also study the efficacy of the programs and supports put in place in response to the pandemic's effects. CCERC brings together researchers from public and private universities across Connecticut to work collaboratively on these evaluations. Among its projects, CCERC is currently conducting a remote learning audit so that we can learn of the impact, challenges, and promising practices brought about by the sudden shift to remote learning in March of 2020.

Beyond understanding the impacts of the pandemic, CCERC demonstrates the Department's commitment to programmatic accountability, and sustainability. So, instead of being concerned about a funding cliff that is talked about in many circles, Connecticut is instead focused on building evidence on the effectiveness of its interventions because by knowing what works, we will be able to advocate for continued, sustainable funding at both the state and federal levels as well as with philanthropy. Connecticut will have the strength of results to say, "fund and sustain what works." This will hopefully serve as a parachute that will help Connecticut's education community land safely from the cliff.

Supporting Educators:

Our Connecticut educators and school staff worked heroically throughout the pandemic. In working to keep schools safely open, Connecticut prioritized access to COVID testing, vaccines, and contact tracing support for educators and school staff. However, we were not immune to the nationwide staffing shortages.

We offered staffing flexibilities to districts while ensuring that all Connecticut students have access to appropriately certified, authorized, and permitted educators through collaboration with educator preparation programs across Connecticut. In addition to the Department's efforts, our State Board of Education also approved emergency certification endorsements and flexibilities regarding educator evaluation.

Responding to the need for increased technological support, CSDE used a portion of its ESSER funds to offer the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) Summer Learning Academy to Connecticut educators at no cost, and we are currently contracting to provide additional professional development to districts, including, but not limited to, ISTE certification and additional ISTE University courses.

At the district-level, we have seen innovative practices such as offering training workshops on school learning platforms, creating a technology-based Professional Development Hub for educators to expand their expertise in utilizing learning platforms, upgrading all school and district-based technology systems, and more.

CSDE's continued efforts to diversify the state's educator workforce did not cease amidst the pandemic. In fact, in May of 2021, Governor Lamont announced we had met our State Board of Education's five-year goal of having 10% of Connecticut educators be people of color. Continued efforts include

Educators Rising, recruits and supports high school students' with interest in the teaching profession, and NextGen Educators, which brings highly motivated students enrolled in educator preparation programs into classrooms to serve as building substitutes. NextGen not only provides additional relief to substitute teacher shortages; it also allows teacher candidates to build strong resumes and rapport with districts.

Finally, we recently announced a \$2-million investment in aspiring educators in preparation programs across Connecticut. This investment will help defray costs associated with testing and obtaining educator certification in Connecticut.

Supporting and Engaging Families and Communities:

I like to say, "It can't be about them without them." We cannot assess the impact of this pandemic on student learning, educators, and families without authentically engaging with them. CSDE is staunchly committed to two-way dialogue with our array of stakeholders— from educators to families to advocates, including our monthly meetings with partners representing unions, superintendents, and school boards, and advocates who represent families.

Family and community engagement is a particular passion of mine. In 2017, I developed and implemented the Commissioner's Roundtable for Family and Community Engagement in Education, which is a diverse constituent group of education stakeholders representing school and district staff, advocacy organizations, parents and guardians, community members, and students, to advise the Commissioner of Education regarding policy and programmatic priorities. The Roundtable meets quarterly to bring authentic parent and community voice to CSDE's products and initiatives; communicate state-level initiatives with families and communities; recommend effective practices to increase successful school and district engagement with families; and provide strategies to empower families in supporting their children's education.

Prior to the pandemic, the Department, the Family Engagement Roundtable, and other partners led the co-creation of a Definition and Framework for family engagement in Connecticut. It states: *"Family Engagement is a full, equal, and equitable partnership among families, educators and community partners to promote children's learning and development from birth through college and career."* This provided an excellent foundation on which to build our pandemic relief efforts. Authentic partnerships between schools and families have been especially critical during this pandemic, which is why Family and Community Connections is one of our ESSER investment priorities—not just one we set for districts.

We also recently completed our second formal round of ARP ESSER stakeholder forums/surveys just last week. Stakeholders participated in focus groups and were also given the opportunity to complete a survey to provide feedback on current and planned investments of state set-aside funds in family and community connection initiatives. District investments in this area include partnering with non-profit and community agencies to support the creation of parent academies on technology; supporting emotional well-being; and expanding family access to cultural experiences, no-cost after-school programs, and multigenerational activities at local libraries and parks in the community.

Strengthening Student Voice:

In November of 2021, we launched Voice4Change, the first statewide student participatory budgeting initiative in the country, to give students a direct say in how a portion of the ESSER funding (\$1.5M) should be spent across Connecticut schools. With goals of boosting engagement among high school students and sparking lifelong passions for civic engagement, Voice4Change is grounded in the Connecticut State Board of Education’s mission emphasizing the importance of preparing students to civically engage in the world around them. Studies have shown that modeling civic engagement in school prepares students to make it a lifelong habit. We are preparing our students to be future leaders by empowering them to make an impact today.

Under the guidance of the same five investment priorities we set forth for districts, students crafted and voted on proposals. What did we see? More than 80% of winning proposals addressed the need for more supports for student social, emotional, and mental health. They also saw what worked during the pandemic—best practices they wanted to make permanent in their school going forward, like creative and innovative learning environments such as outdoor classrooms. We are so proud of the innovation we saw among the students who participated in Voice4Change, and we cannot wait to see these projects come to life this fall.

Supporting the Social, Emotional, and Mental Health Needs of Students and Staff:

This pandemic has brought keen attention to the need to address the social, emotional, and mental health needs of our students and school staff. While Connecticut has a longstanding history with this work, COVID-19 has increased the demand for mental health services and supports. ESSER funding has afforded us the opportunity to support resources that can be deployed locally at no cost in districts and to launch the Connecticut Behavioral Health Pilot.

The Behavioral Health Pilot stems from what I call my “Big Audacious Goal,” which is to ensure every Connecticut school has a coordinated and sustainable system of care for all K-12 schools to provide comprehensive behavioral and mental health supports and services to students and staff. Currently, our Behavioral Health Pilot is underway in select demographically varied districts in partnership with community partners to assess their mental health support needs. The specific needs and gaps in service will drive the development and implementation of these systems of care. The Pilots will then inform our plans to scale these systems statewide.

I am privileged to live in a state where education receives robust bipartisan support from the legislature. This past session, Connecticut lawmakers passed the most comprehensive mental health bills in the state’s history—including grants for schools to hire staff to support student well-being, bolstering the Governor’s home-visiting initiative already underway, increasing summer programs’ capacity to support the mental health of its campers, and more. We all know that recovery is a long path ahead of us, but I am confident in leveraging the strong partnerships already in place in Connecticut for the benefit of our students.

Mobilizing the Community:

While you would be hard pressed to find someone who doesn't believe this pandemic has caused unprecedented disruptions to school, work, and life, disruption is a time to innovate, create, partner, and collaborate so we are constantly learning and growing together.

This is the time to find our collective strengths and intentionally move forward to redesign education with a focus on equitable access to a world class education, including leveraging new and existing strategic partnerships to strengthen our systems of support.

Connecticut is grateful for the financial support provided to spark learning recovery, and we look forward to continued partnership with our federal counterparts, including the U.S. Department of Education.

As Commissioner, I am part of a strong, nationwide network of state commissioners, and I can guarantee you no two stories are alike. But what I can surely guarantee you is that we wake up every morning with our students, educators, and school staff at the forefront of our minds, because it is when our schools are supported that our students achieve more, and our communities achieve more, and together—we all achieve more.

We must use this moment to think holistically about the continuum of supports necessary for our children to thrive.

Finally, none of the efforts and initiatives that I bring from our great state would be possible without the excellent staff at the CSDE, our sister agencies, particularly the Department of Public Health, our State Board of Education, our school district superintendents, administrators, educators and staff, our policymakers, and the many education partners in our state. *That truly is the Connecticut Difference!*

Chair Murray and Ranking Member Burr, HELP committee members: thank you once again for the opportunity to share Connecticut's education recovery story with you today. Thank You.