

ESSER: Moving the Needle on Equitable and Adequate Education Funding for English Learners

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic hit all students in U.S. classrooms hard, with the school closures and later shift to remote or hybrid learning that took place in 2020 and 2021. Test scores and anecdotal reporting by teachers and parents have made clear the academic toll suffered by students across the board in K-12 schools. The public-health crisis disproportionately affected the nation's 5 million English Learners (ELs). The inequities and challenges they experience were exacerbated given they were less likely than other students to have access to digital devices and broadband and more likely to experience language barriers between their families and school officials, among other factors. As a result, ELs have been experiencing declines in academic achievement and English language development, as well as higher absenteeism and an increase in mental health challenges.

Yet the silver lining for ELs and other students may be that the setbacks and learning losses they experienced during the pandemic have been matched by an unprecedented amount of federal funding to address their challenges.

Since March 2020, approximately \$189.5 billion has been made available to states and school districts to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on public

elementary and secondary school students—especially the nation's most vulnerable and underserved populations, such as ELs. The federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds present states and school districts immediate opportunities to address pandemic-era challenges such as disruptions to learning. ESSER funding also presents a momentous opportunity to narrow, and in some cases fill, gaps and disparities caused by historically inadequate funding allocated toward the education of ELs. Over the last 20 years, federal funding via Title III of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (most recently reauthorized as the *Every Student Succeeds Act*) has remained relatively flat and has not kept up with the growing number of ELs in U.S. schools. This has contributed to long-standing challenges and inequities endured by these students.

The silver lining for ELs and other students may be that the setbacks and learning losses they experienced during the pandemic have been matched by an unprecedented amount of federal funding to address their challenges.

In Spring 2022, Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysts interviewed administrators from five school dis-

tricts in California, Georgia, Illinois, Minnesota, and Tennessee that serve relatively large populations of ELs to understand how districts were investing ESSER funds to support these students. The interviews underscored how access to ESSER funds has allowed school districts to invest in structural changes and resources that support ELs in ways that go beyond pandemic response.

Among the examples of investments made were initiatives to support ELs' academic recovery, social-emotional learning, student re-engagement, and teacher retention. For example, to support ELs' academic recovery, which requires support for their language development, Chicago Public Schools used ESSER funds to expand a 20-week ESL tutoring intervention program to help ELs with academic content and language development. For social-emotional learning, Metro Nashville Public Schools used ESSER funds to extend its Navigator program, an innovative check-in program that helps district staff connect students and families with resources and support needed. Other examples include using ESSER funds to purchase language development software aligned to English language development standards, enhance family engagement and outreach to re-engage students, hire bilingual staff, and support educators in obtaining credentials needed to teach ELs.

It was evident, though, that many school districts chose to spend their ESSER funds to back existing pre-pandemic initiatives and needs, which supports the argument for additional funding for ELs. The question remains whether school districts will be able to sustain the new resources, programs, and outreach efforts once the ESSER funds, which are being disbursed through September 2024, are gone. Without sustained education investments, the effects of the pandemic on children's educational progress will not wane.

Federal, state, and local governments should make a commitment to continue to fund specific interventions for ELs and other students to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. Congress, for example, should consider increasing Title III funding levels to meet the needs of the nation's growing EL population—with one out of every ten children in K-12 an English Learner. And states and school districts should leverage the numerous budget and policy mechanisms available beyond Title III to allocate funding necessary to sustain targeted support for ELs. The federal and state governments and school districts also should evaluate the impact of ESSER investments on EL outcomes to benchmark where future investments can prove most effective.

While ESSER is providing an unprecedented infusion of support for U.S. students, it should not take a global pandemic to obtain levels of funding that provide English Learners equal and equitable opportunities to learn.

1 Introduction

Students identified as English Learners (ELs) have endured long-standing inequities and challenges in U.S. schools. One contributing factor to this is the lack of equitable and adequate federal funding to help ELs thrive academically and support their language development. Even as the nation's 5 million ELs make up one in ten students enrolled in public K-12 education, federal funding has not kept up with their population growth.¹ Over the last 20 years, federal funding via Title III of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (most recently reauthorized as the *Every Student Succeeds Act*) has remained relatively flat, rising from \$664 million in 2002 to \$890 million in fiscal year (FY) 2023.² Though a numeric increase, in fact, Title III funding has decreased by 12.3 percent since 2010 when adjusted for inflation.³ In light of this, EL advocates argue that increasing Title III funding would help rectify the years of un-

derinvestment and provide more equitable funding for ELs—one of the nation’s highest-need and most rapidly growing student populations.⁴

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated inequities and challenges experienced by ELs. Prior to the public-health crisis, ELs ranked among the lowest-achieving groups by almost every measure of academic achievement, including graduation and dropout rates, college preparation, and academic achievement on state standardized tests.⁵

School building closures and the resulting remote or hybrid learning that occurred in 2020 and 2021 disproportionately affected ELs because they were less likely to have access to digital devices and broadband, more likely to experience familial language barriers with schools and an increase in familial responsibilities, and faced increased disruption to learning and English language development services and support. Pandemic aside, ELs are more likely to attend under-resourced schools that are unable to provide them the comprehensive support they need to learn grade-level content as they simultaneously learn English.⁶ As a result, ELs are experiencing setbacks in English language proficiency within academic contexts as well as declines in academic achievement, increased mental health challenges, and in some cases higher absenteeism than other students.⁷

To mitigate economic and other effects of the pandemic, Congress appropriated \$5 trillion through three massive relief packages⁸—the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act* (CARES Act), the *Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act* (CRRSA Act), and the *American Rescue Plan Act* (ARP Act).⁹ These laws provided economic relief to individuals and businesses through stimulus payments, expanded unemployment benefits, and small business aid, as well as major resources for health-care and public-health systems. The mea-

asures included roughly \$189.5 billion to support public elementary and secondary schools and the most vulnerable and historically marginalized students, including ELs.

ESSER funds present a momentous opportunity to narrow, and in some cases fill, gaps and disparities caused by historically inadequate Title III funding allocated toward the education of ELs.

These unparalleled and unprecedented federal investments in public K-12 education since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, referred to collectively as Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds, present states and school districts with an immediate opportunity to address disrupted and/or missed instruction and English language development services and support resulting from school closures and remote learning, enhance communication and outreach with families, and invest in structural changes needed to keep students and staff safe as schools returned to in-person learning. Furthermore, ESSER funds present a momentous opportunity to narrow, and in some cases fill, gaps and disparities caused by historically inadequate Title III funding allocated toward the education of ELs.

This issue brief reports findings from a project that sought to understand how school districts were investing ESSER funds to support ELs. It provides a brief overview of ESSER funding and accountability measures; highlights examples of investments made to support ELs’ academic recovery, social-emotional learning, student re-engagement, and teacher retention; and concludes with recommendations for federal, state, and local policymakers.

2 ESSER Funding Landscape

As part of its pandemic recovery measures, Congress provided roughly \$189.5 billion in additional federal funding for public K-12 education (see Table 1).¹⁰ Schools have been allowed to use the funding for a wide variety of reasons, including any purpose authorized under the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) and other federal laws governing support for students with disabilities or experiencing homelessness, adult education, and career and technical education. These investments are intended to help state and school district leaders address the most pressing needs associated with the pandemic, such as academic learning loss. Additionally, these investments can be used to invest in structural innovative changes that will make schools more equitable in the long term for all students who have disproportionately been affected by the pandemic, including ELs. When used in such ways, ESSER funds therefore present an opportunity to realize the nation’s long-standing commitment to equal opportunity for all students.¹¹

3 Accountability Measures in ESSER Funds

Though education policymaking and service delivery are predominately state and local responsibilities, the federal government plays a critical role in ensuring equal access to education for all students, regardless of background, thus including ELs and children of immigrants.¹² Legal provisions established by the federal government and overseen by federal agencies tell states what systems they must have to qualify and receive federal funds that support the education of high-need students.¹³ ESSER funds are no exception.

For all ESSER funds, states are required to distribute at least 90 percent of their allocation to local education agencies (LEAs)¹⁴ and can use up to 10 percent for state activities (including 0.5 percent for administration). Additionally, states are required to develop tracking systems to review how school districts are spending the money to mitigate the disparate effects of the pandemic on students and report certain spending data to the federal Department of Education.¹⁵ Several tools are available to track trends and developments, promoting transparency in both

TABLE 1
Federal Investment in Public K–12 Education Since March 2020

| Legislation | Date Signed into Law | Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Funds | Funding Expiration Date |
|--|----------------------|--|-------------------------|
| <i>Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act)</i> | March 27, 2020 | \$13.2 billion | September 30, 2022 |
| <i>Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA Act)</i> | December 27, 2020 | \$54.3 billion | September 30, 2023 |
| <i>American Rescue Plan Act (ARP Act): K–12 Education</i> | March 11, 2021 | \$122 billion | September 30, 2024 |

Sources: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE), “[Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund](#),” accessed November 2, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, OESE, “[Deadlines and Announcements](#),” accessed July 11, 2023.

state and local ESSER spending. Examples of such tools include a dashboard for ESSER expenditure reports, an ESSER relief fund tracker, and an LEA plan database.¹⁶

In addition to developing tracking systems, the CARES Act, CRRSA Act, and the ARP Act include reporting ESSER provisions for accountability purposes. Under the terms laid out by the federal government in the CARES Act, LEAs were required to complete and submit CARES Act performance reports throughout the project period.¹⁷ Further stipulations and accountability measures were introduced in the subsequent CRRSA and ARP legislation. For example, in the CRRSA Act, states were required to submit a detailed report to the secretary of education within six months of award outlining how they are using ESSER funds to measure and address learning loss among students, including ELs, disproportionately affected by COVID-19 and school closures.¹⁸

For ARP funding, which runs through September 2024, states and local school districts were required to create spending plans, with local plans going to the state and state plans to the federal Department of Education.¹⁹ State and school district proposals had to include information on how they planned to safely reopen schools. Additionally, the legislation mandates that at least 20 percent of the total ARP ESSER allocation to a school district²⁰ be used to address learning loss through the implementation of evidence-based interventions (such as summer learning or summer enrichment) and students' social-emotional and mental health needs. States and districts were required to provide an explanation on how spending will address the needs of the district's most disadvantaged students.

Regarding underserved student populations, which includes ELs, the ARP ESSER plan template required state education agencies (SEAs) to describe:²¹

- ▶ the top academic and social-emotional needs of each student subgroup;
- ▶ how SEAs will include consultation with stakeholders representing the interests of these student subgroups for the purposes of input on ARP spending plans; also, how they will ensure that LEAs do so;
- ▶ how SEA and LEA activities will address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on these student subgroups;
- ▶ how interventions will address lost instructional time and students' social-emotional needs;
- ▶ the degree to which the state is facing teacher shortages, including in areas such as bilingual education and English as a Second Language (ESL); and
- ▶ the enrollment and mode of instruction (in-person, remote, hybrid) for student subgroups.

However, despite federal mandates, state and school district spending has not been easy to follow, in particular for ELs. Some districts clearly articulate and report ESSER spending for ELs, while others lack detail. Bearing in mind the magnitude of ESSER funds made available; the new accountability, reporting, and spending requirements tied to these funds; and the historically inadequate spending on education for ELs, MPI analysts sought to better understand how school districts across the United States were leveraging ESSER funds to better support ELs. Have ESSER funds been used to mitigate the effects of the

pandemic on ELs in innovative ways? Or have the funds helped fill needs and gaps created by a history of inadequate funding? It may be too early to tell, but these questions merit the initial exploration undertaken below.

4 Understanding ESSER Investments to Support ELs

In Spring 2022, MPI analysts set out to explore how school districts were using ESSER funds to address EL needs and to identify innovative practices. More specifically, the inquiry focused on understanding how districts were investing ESSER funds to support ELs and how many, if any, of the new strategies, practices, and/or interventions implemented were developed with ELs in mind.

Five school districts from across the United States were selected and recruited to participate in the project (see Table 2), with input from the MPI National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy (NCIIP) National Partnership to Improve PreK-12 Success for Immigrant Children and Youth. The partnership is comprised of eight state partners: Californians Together; Coalition of Asian American Leaders, Min-

nesota; Conexión Américas, Tennessee; Intercultural Development Research Association, Texas; Latino Community Fund, Georgia; Latino Policy Forum, Illinois; Minnesota Education Equity Partnership; and New York Immigration Coalition.

The MPI analysts found that the school responses to EL challenges using ESSER funds are concentrated in four broad areas: academic recovery, social-emotional learning, student re-engagement, and teacher retention and capacity. The following sections elaborate on each of these areas.

A. Academic Recovery

To address unfinished learning and mitigate the academic gaps brought on by the pandemic, school districts have been utilizing ESSER funds to amplify the reach of expanded learning programs such as tutoring, summer school, and after-school programs to support ELs’ academic recovery.

The Chicago Public Schools, for example, has invested ESSER funds to expand after-school programs. For example, the school district used \$2 million in support for ELs to expand summer programming for 9,000 students.²² The district has also utilized its ESSER funds to support after-school programming for ELs at 150 schools, hiring and training college

TABLE 2
School Districts Participating in Study and Their EL Enrollment, 2021–22

| District Name | State | Number of English Learners | EL Share of Students |
|--|-------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| Azusa Unified School District (Los Angeles County) | CA | 1,627 | 22% |
| Chicago School District | IL | 69,033 | 20% |
| Marietta City School District | GA | 1,772 | 21% |
| Metro Nashville School District (Davidson County) | TN | 20,919 | 27% |
| St. Paul School District | MN | 9,471 | 29% |

Sources: California School Dashboard, “District Performance Overview: Azusa Unified (2021),” accessed July 11, 2023; Illinois Report Card 2021–2022, “City of Chicago SD 299,” accessed July 11, 2023; Georgia Department of Education, *2021 Georgia Charter Systems Annual Report* (Atlanta: Georgia Department of Education, 2023); Tennessee Department of Education, “Metro Nashville Public Schools,” accessed July 11, 2023; Sait Paul Public Schools, “Data Center,” accessed July 11, 2023.

tutors to work with these students. The district also has been able to fund the expansion of an ESL tutoring intervention program to address EL academic recovery. Through this program, EL students receive two hours of ESL intervention programming for 20 weeks. The program is managed by an ESL-endorsed teacher who helps students with academic content and language development.

For ELs, research shows that tutoring not only reinforces language acquisition, but helps nurture confidence, independence, and self-guided learning.²³ Additionally, research finds that one-on-one tutoring in writing can simultaneously enhance ELs' linguistic knowledge and significantly improve the acquisition of most of the examined sentence-level linguistic features.²⁴ As school districts make decisions on how to use their ESSER funding, investing in high-dosage tutoring is not only a strategic investment but is one of the most cost-effective academic interventions according to researchers,²⁵ and is incredibly effective for accelerating students' learning.²⁶

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The MPI analysis also found that districts have utilized ESSER funds to invest in program software to address learning loss. For example, Metro Nashville Public Schools used ESSER funds to purchase English language development software that aligned with the WIDA English Language Development Standards, which provide a foundation for curriculum, instruction, and assessment for ELs in K-12. The software, Lexia English, is an adaptive learning program that supports students' English language acquisition through academic conversation. It integrates speaking, listening, and grammar with core

academic subjects. Through the software, teachers can access actionable data to better support student achievement, helping them address the learning loss brought on by the pandemic and connect students with academic recovery services.

Investments to support ELs' academic recovery are vital to their learning and language development. A study by the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison examining performance on the WIDA ACCESS for ELLs, a standardized assessment of English language proficiency for ELs in K-12 used by 41 states, territories, and federal agencies, found lower average rates of English proficiency compared to prior years. The findings from the study, which looked at English proficiency scores from four academic years beginning with the 2018–19 period suggest that on average ELs' performance on ACCESS for ELLs has declined since the start of the pandemic.²⁷ Other studies show similar findings. In a Georgia survey, about two-thirds of teachers reported that EL achievement was lower during the 2021–22 school year than a typical year.²⁸

While it is essential to continue to gather more accurate data on the impact of the pandemic on ELs' academic achievement and language development, the available data, although not complete, offer school district leaders a starting point for better understanding the effects and indicate the need to invest in more effective and targeted interventions to address unfinished learning and advance language development.

B. Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is increasingly recognized as important for child development as it encourages self-awareness and relationship skills, and may enhance personal well-being.²⁹ With these results and research indicating SEL is a good financial investment,³⁰ school districts are using ESSER funds

to invest in SEL to mitigate some of the pandemic's negative effects on student mental health. Among school districts interviewed, districts are utilizing the new financial resources to support students' mental health, expand family and community partnerships, and increase staff capacity to serve more students.

The Azusa Unified School District, for example, has designated money to purchase software called Care Solace. The software provides social-emotional well-being support and mental health assistance to all district families. Students and families can use the software to book appointments, contact a crisis hotline, and speak with a care companion. The care companion helps families navigate insurance, research availability, and help families schedule appointments with local, trusted mental health resources. In addition, a multilingual team is available 24 hours, 365 days a year.³¹

Metro Nashville Public Schools also is using a check-in system, with a Navigator program launched during the virtual start of the 2020–21 school year and extended through the use of ESSER funds. Through this innovative program, each student is assigned a Navigator based on their assigned school; many are teachers, though Navigators also include administrative and other school staff. Each Navigator checks in with a small group of students, one on one, on a regular basis. The Navigator serves as a mentor and connects students to additional needed resources. In addition, regular Navigator check-ins with students focus on social-emotional supports, as well as identifying and addressing needs and challenges. Students also use Sown to Grow to check in; the software generates important data for educators to use to support students.

The Nashville district also has established four community support hubs across high-need areas to connect students and families with social-emotional support. At each support hub, staffers connect fami-

lies and students with wraparound support services. The community support hubs provide students and families with expanded outreach and are aligned with social-emotional and mental health and wellness resources. The support hubs also provide access to housing, food, clothing, and technology support for attendance and enrollment assistance. The hubs are open to all students, but personalized invitations are sent to those who are experiencing chronic absenteeism and are in need of extra support. Navigators at support hubs call families and students every other week and collect data on food, technology, housing, academic supports, and mental health. During the 2020–21 school year, Navigators completed 360,000 check-ins with more than 60,000 students, resulting in more than 2,800 collaborative referrals for services and support.³²

Elsewhere, many districts have used ESSER funds to increase their staff capacity, allowing them to create positions and hire therapists, social workers, translators, and district liaisons to provide counseling to address social, emotional, and academic challenges. Such investments fill a long-term need for additional positions. Georgia's Marietta City Public Schools, for example, has increased bilingual staff capacity by hiring four new district liaisons who speak Spanish and Portuguese. The increase in on-campus staff has permitted more direct contact with families and students and has allowed liaisons to connect families with school resources, further nurturing existing relationships to ensure student and family well-being.

The pandemic has elevated concerns for the social-emotional well-being of all students, including ELs.³³ Research from 2020 indicates that youth with immigrant parents were 34 percent more likely to experience poorer physical and mental health than peers with parents born in the United States.³⁴ ELs and immigrant communities faced a higher risk of contracting COVID-19, a greater sense of isolation due to language and cultural barriers, and increased

financial strain. This has resulted in unprecedented levels of anxiety and depression for ELs and immigrant families throughout the pandemic,³⁵ making more urgent the need to invest in more SEL programming and hire additional staff to support them.

C. Student Re-Engagement

Student absenteeism surged during the pandemic, including for ELs, who prior to the public-health crisis were 1.2 times less likely to be chronically absent than their non-EL peers.³⁶ With the onset of the pandemic, ELs began to experience higher rates of chronic absenteeism. For example, while chronic absenteeism for Houston's 197,000 students increased 88 percent over the average rates for 2017–18 and 2018–19, it climbed by 158 percent among ELs.³⁷ In the Chicago Public Schools, EL absenteeism rates rose from 18.2 percent in 2019 to 24.8 percent in 2021.³⁸

In response, the school districts interviewed have used ESSER funds to support family, school, and community engagement in an effort to re-engage ELs and reduce absenteeism rates. The Chicago Public Schools, for example, has worked with Civic Consulting Alliance to develop a re-engagement framework. As a result, the district took a new approach to re-engaging students in Summer 2021 through strategies including using a student prioritization index to identify those in need of more individualized support as well as hiring about 500 outreach ambassadors via community-based organizations to conduct home visits and reach out to thousands of students by the end of the summer. Outreach ambassadors also organized youth programming and parent phone banking as well as canvassed to engage students and their families. The Chicago district paid almost \$2 million in federal ESSER funds to nonprofits and churches to help with home visits and canvassing.³⁹ As a result of these efforts, the district reached 85,459 students in Summer 2021.⁴⁰

Given EL parents are more likely to be limited English proficient, robust language access efforts are integral to properly communicating with them and building positive relationships.

Other school districts have invested ESSER funding to support family engagement by increasing translation and interpretation services for students and parents for whom English is not their primary language. Given EL parents are more likely to be limited English proficient, robust language access efforts are integral to properly communicating with them and building positive relationships. Research indicates strong family and community engagement can increase student achievement, improve attendance and behavior, and enhance staff understanding of student needs.⁴¹ As such, the need for multilingual staff remains critical to reaching and re-engaging EL students and their families. As with many districts in the United States, Metro Nashville Public Schools has invested some of its ESSER funds for translation and interpretation services. More specifically, the district spent about \$2.4 million for translation and interpretation services and hired 67 full-time, in-person interpreters to serve students and families and increase two-way communication. The district also provides an over-the-phone interpretation service and allocated funding toward a contract service to supplement the work of the full-time interpreters.

D. Teacher Retention and Capacity

The pandemic placed huge strains on educators, with many exiting the profession.⁴² National staff and teacher shortages, due to factors such as inadequate compensation, personal safety fears, and poor school climate, have left many school districts with the challenge of filling staff vacancies.⁴³

Teacher shortages are also affecting ELs, who bring unique experiences and needs as they learn grade-level content and develop the English language proficiency to be successful in school. This requires teachers to not only have content-area knowledge and skills, but also language development knowledge and skills. A shortage of teachers qualified to teach ELs has afflicted many states and school districts for years. Sustained investments in teacher retention and capacity are imperative for supporting ELs.

Teachers endorsed or certified to teach ELs (e.g., ESL and/or bilingual education) are experiencing record lows in recruitment and retention.⁴⁴ According to the U.S. Department of Education’s Teacher Shortage Area Data database, 33 states and the District of Columbia reported statewide EL teacher or specialist/consultant shortages in 2021–22.⁴⁵ Given that many mainstream teachers are not equipped to teach the ELs in their classrooms, this is especially alarming.⁴⁶

The school districts interviewed are allocating ESSER funds on professional development for teachers to advance their careers and increase their infrastructure support. For instance, ESSER funding has allowed the state of Illinois and Chicago Public Schools to build multilingual support capacity. In March 2022, Illinois announced a \$4 million grant, funded with federal pandemic relief dollars, to support the state’s bilingual educator pipeline.⁴⁷ The grant will cover the cost of tuition for bilingual educators with a non-renewable five-year provisional license to earn their Professional Educator License, which will allow them to continue to teach in bilingual classrooms beyond the term of their provisional license. In addition, the grant covers tuition for educators with their Professional Educator License who wish to complete the necessary coursework to earn the ESL and/or bilingual endorsement. Chicago Public Schools is leveraging these state grants and its existing partnerships with five state universities to increase the number of teachers who can partic-

ipate. Additionally, the district allocated \$45 million in FY 2023 to support professional development. This funding is paying for instructional coaches at 184 schools that serve students with significant educational needs.⁴⁸

School districts are also utilizing their ESSER funds to provide teachers with more infrastructure support. St. Paul Public Schools, for example, is using \$1.9 million to support its multilingual learner infrastructure and build a foundation for continued support. The district has developed a coaching model where ESL and bilingual teachers support general education teachers and share best practices. The district has also begun to work on a partnership with local universities to launch a grow-your-own program to help non-teacher employees earn their teaching certification.

To fill vacancies and improve professional development for all teachers, the Metro Nashville Public Schools budgeted \$4 million toward helping educators earn an endorsement in EL education through June 2023. District officials met with local universities and outlined what they want teachers to learn from this program. The goal is to not only strengthen the knowledge base of existing EL teachers but to improve the professional development of all teachers and provide the district with more flexibility on how to serve ELs. When teachers choose to participate in the EL endorsement program, they sign a contract with the school to stay for an additional two years. This avoids attrition and helps mitigate the risk of losing teachers to other schools in the same district.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

While the COVID-19 pandemic hit all public school students hard with school closures and a later turn to remote or hybrid schooling, the effect was par-

ticularly severe for English Learners. School districts across the country have been utilizing the record infusion of roughly \$189.5 billion in federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to address some of the challenges associated with the pandemic, such as chronic absenteeism, as well as pressing needs such as academic recovery, social-emotional learning, and teacher retention and capacity.

It should not take a pandemic to obtain levels of funding that provide ELs with equal and equitable opportunities to learn.

Interviews by researchers at the Migration Policy Institute’s National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy with school district leaders highlight how access to more federal funding has allowed schools to invest in structural changes and resources that support ELs. ESSER funds have not only provided school districts with much-needed relief to address challenges brought on by the global public-health crisis, but they have also allowed investment in needs that have often been pushed aside by other budget priorities or due to a historic lack of funding for ELs. However, it should not take a pandemic to obtain levels of funding that provide ELs with equal and equitable opportunities to learn.

While this issue brief offers examples of some of the ways in which school districts have targeted their ESSER funding, it will take time to understand the impact of these investments on the education and language development of ELs. A key question also looms over the conversation: Will school systems be able to sustain the resources, programs, and outreach efforts once the ESSER dollars are gone?

Once the ESSER funds, which remain available through September 2024, have been spent, states and school districts will need sufficient funding to continue to support the recovery of ELs from the

pandemic setbacks as well as to address the challenges they were experiencing pre-pandemic. Federal, state, and local governments should commit to continue to fund specific interventions for ELs to mitigate both sets of challenges. Without sustained education investments, the learning loss and other effects of the pandemic on students’ educational attainment and well-being will not be surmounted.

As this research has shown, school districts are utilizing numerous strategies to support ELs. There are several key ways that actors at federal, state, and local levels can continue to support ELs.

Federal government:

- ▶ Congress should increase Title III funding to meet the needs of the growing EL student population given historic underfunding and the ongoing need for substantial federal support after ESSER funds are spent.
- ▶ The U.S. Department of Education should collect and disseminate information on how state education agencies and local school districts used ESSER funds to support ELs, both for transparency purposes and to showcase local examples of best practice for ELs. This could be accomplished, for example, through an online repository of information or webinars that feature innovative investments to support ELs.

States, districts, and schools:

- ▶ Officials should leverage other federal, state, and local funding sources to allocate the resources necessary to sustain targeted support for ELs.⁴⁹
- ▶ State and local education agencies should scale up evidence-based programs and strategies that meet the needs of ELs, such as those identified in this research, including high-dosage tutoring, paid professional

development opportunities for bilingual teachers and staff, family outreach and engagement, community support hubs, and academic software.

- ▶ School administrators should ensure data on district spending and EL outcomes are regularly updated and available in ways that are accessible and meaningful to all stakeholders.
- ▶ Officials should evaluate the impact of ESSER investments on EL outcomes and use lessons learned to make a case for continued funding to expand and improve programs.

The pandemic introduced new challenges in the classroom that in many ways escalated the impor-

tance of focusing attention on the nation's 5 million ELs. Yet the need for qualified EL teachers, multilingual staff, EL family outreach and engagement, enrichment and tutoring programs, and social-emotional learning support and services for ELs were not introduced by the pandemic—they have been there all along.

While ESSER funds provided school districts much-needed relief to address impacts directly associated with the pandemic, they also served to fill gaps due to historically inadequate funding for ELs and allowed districts to invest in resources and programs that were long overdue. The gains made thanks to ESSER should not be allowed to roll back in the absence of new commitments to funding and support.

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Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition, “English Learners: Demographic Trends” (fact sheet, August 2022).
- 2 U.S. Department of Education, “FY 2023 Congressional Action” (data tables, March 28, 2022).
- 3 Statement of Amalia Chamorro, Director of Education Policy, UnidosUS, submitted to the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Subcommittee, House Committee on Appropriations, “Investing in Latino Student Success,” May 19, 2021.
- 4 See, for example, UnidosUS and National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) sign-on letter, “FY 22 Appropriations for English Learners/Title III,” May 11, 2021.
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