
ARP ESSER State Education Agency Plan Summary and Overview

Purpose

This document aims to summarize and highlight key elements of Vermont's American Rescue Plan (ARP) Elementary and Secondary Schools Education Relief (ESSER) State Plan, [Building for the Future: Vermont's Plan for Education Recovery and Beyond](#).

The development and approval of the ARP ESSER State Plan is a requirement of the US Department of Education so that Vermont may receive the remaining one third of its ARP ESSER allocation (approximately \$95,054,703) for distribution to its Local Education Agencies (LEAs), more commonly understood as our Supervisory Unions and Supervisory Districts (SU/SDs). In total Vermont will receive \$285,164,138 through ARP ESSER. Of that total \$256,647,724 will go to LEAs and \$28,516,484 may be reserved by the Agency of Education (AOE) for state-wide priorities to address the impacts of COVID-19.

The following sections represent a high-level summary of the more detailed responses found in the full ARP ESSER State Plan, [Building for the Future: Vermont's Plan for Education Recovery and Beyond](#).

In late July or early August 2021 the Agency will meet with Vermont's Senate and House Education Committees and the Joint Fiscal Committee to discuss the state plan, per [Vermont Act 74 Sec. E.501.3](#). Once this requirement is met, the Agency will submit the state plan to the US Department of Education for review and approval.

The full text of the ARP ESSER State Plan is available for [review and public comment](#) on the [Vermont Agency of Education \(AOE\) website](#).

Timeline and Key Dates for Vermont's Education Recovery Planning and ARP ESSER

Jan. 8, 2021 - Initial draft of education recovery plan presented to Secretary's Advisory Group for stakeholder feedback.

Jan. 22, 2021 - Education recovery planning focus areas presented to Secretary's Advisory Group for stakeholder feedback.

Feb. 1, 2021 - Initial draft of education recovery plan presented to Act 173 Advisory Group (special education advisory group comprised of a variety of stakeholder groups).

Feb. 8-12, 2021 - Education recovery plan presented to legislature, forming the basis for soliciting public testimony from a variety of stakeholder groups during the legislative session.

March 11, 2021 – American Rescue Plan Act enacted by Congress, including ARP ESSER.

March 24, 2021 – Vermont received initial ARP ESSER grant award for two-thirds of the total allocation (for a list of LEA allocations for all three ESSER funds, please refer to [Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief Allocations: ESSER I, ESSER II and ESSER III](#)).

April 22, 2021 – US Department of Education (US ED) releases [Interim Final Requirements](#) for State Education Agencies (SEAs), the AOE, and LEAs to receive remaining ARP ESSER funds, including State Plan and requirement for meaningful engagement with stakeholder groups by AOE and LEAs in development of their plans for the use of ARP ESSER funds.

May 23, 2021 – LEAs receive preliminary award for initial two-thirds of ARP ESSER allocation, but cannot utilize funds until they have submitted their ARP ESSER Phase II application and ARP ESSER LEA Plan (deadline is contingent on approval of ARP ESSER State Plan and will be forthcoming in guidance from the AOE).

July 16, 2021 – AOE released draft version of Vermont’s ARP ESSER State Plan.

TBD (late July or early August, 2021) – AOE to meet with Vermont Senate and House Education Committees and Joint Fiscal Committee to discuss State Plan.

August 2021 – AOE will submit State Plan to US ED for review and approval.

TBD – AOE receives approval of State Plan from US ED and remaining one-third of ARP ESSER allocation is released to Vermont.

TBD – AOE opens ARP ESSER Phase II application for LEAs.

Summer and Fall, 2021 – LEAs develop ARP ESSER LEA plans and engage in meaningful engagement with stakeholder groups.

A. Describing the State’s Current Status and Needs

In this section, US ED requires states to outline the progress they have made in supporting students during the COVID-19 pandemic, describe the priorities and student needs guiding their ARP ESSER funding decisions, and their current and projected operating status. [Section A State Plan Template Questions \(page 4\)](#)

The State Plan contains a detailed analysis of the highest priority needs and most effective strategies that have been identified to date through the education recovery planning process, which began in January 2021. The following section is a high-level look at where Vermont was as an education system in 2020-21, where we are now and where we hope to be over the next several years.

School Operations from March 2020 through June 2021

On March 18, 2020, the Secretary of Education, per executive order of the Governor, mandated that schools move to fully remote operations for the rest of the 2019-2020 school year. After a summer of intensive planning and partnership with the Vermont Department of Health, schools successfully opened for full-time instruction in September 2020. To do so, Vermont put forth stringent public health requirements for schools through its mandatory guidance. The state also provided flexibility for schools to shift to remote learning as local conditions for COVID-19 warranted, or for considerations such as whether staff and students were available for in-person instruction.

Since September 2020, we estimate about 85% of our students were in some form of hybrid learning during the 2020-2021 school year. The most common model of hybrid learning was four days a week of in-person instruction and one day of remote learning. About 50% of our elementary schools made the shift to full in-person instruction by November 2020 and sustained that level of in-person instruction throughout the year. Approximately 10% of our students received instruction through full remote learning during the 2020-2021 year.

Summary of Education Recovery Planning

Shortly after January 1, 2021, the AOE began to plan for Vermont's last phase of the COVID-19 emergency response, termed the "education recovery phase." In [guidance](#) published February 2021, the AOE outlined a recovery planning process establishing three focus areas: Socioemotional functioning, mental health, and well-being; Student engagement; and Academic achievement and success. The first part of the recovery planning process required school districts (LEAs) to conduct a needs assessment in each of these three focus areas. The AOE then engaged with LEAs to determine planning priorities and to establish a plan for recovery strategies by June 1, 2021.

Student Engagement

Recovery planning efforts quickly identified "student engagement" as an immediate priority. We reasoned it would be difficult to make progress in the other focus areas if robust engagement with students was not restored. This led to the prioritization of summer engagement activities. Governor Scott gave direction to this work by establishing Vermont's [Summer Matters](#) initiative for the summer of 2021, developing a new public-private partnership to expand engagement activities for all Vermont's students. The AOE utilized \$4,095,838 of its ESSER II state-level set aside to fund this partnership program with Vermont Afterschool.

Engagement with students will remain a priority for the fall. Through an analysis of district-level data, the AOE has discovered that 30% of districts reported a decline in student attendance and 30% reported a decline in student engagement as a result of the pandemic.

We expect local activities, including the use of ESSER II and, potential ARP ESSER funds, to involve re-engaging students on a continuum from re-focusing on attendance and ensuring timely assignment completion to successfully reconnecting with truant students and their families so that they return to the education system.

These local efforts will, in turn, inform statewide work in areas such as truancy policy reform and the deployment of state services such as mental health and youth services.

Socialemotional Functioning and Mental Health

A second pressing issue facing Vermont's students and schools as a result of the pandemic, consistent with national patterns, is a significant rise in anxiety and stress, and a need for additional supports to address it. The AOE's analysis revealed that 47% of districts reported an increase in students' anxiety, stress or internalizing behavior, and 49% reported an increase in the need for school counseling, mental health counseling and/or family supports.

To assist in addressing these challenges, the AOE is providing tailored state support teams - including AOE, Department of Mental Health, and Department for Children and Families personnel - to each LEA.

Our goal with state-level recovery work, using ESSER II and ARP ESSER funds, will be to develop more robust, integrated service delivery models and structures between education and other social services, and to see those integrated models well established in all regions of the state.

Academic Achievement

Academic slippage was also an area identified as a key concern by LEAs, with 40% reporting a decline in students' academic performance or growth in math due to COVID-19. Thirty percent of districts reported similar declines in English Language Arts. Our recovery planning process requires districts to utilize their Education Support Teams (ESTs) to assess student needs broadly and also focus on academic interventions. We are anticipating that ESTs will identify the need for academic supports such as tutoring services, after school programming and online learning resources to augment the regular curriculum and instructional program.

Through ARP ESSER, LEAs have a specific mandate to set aside 20% of their total allocation to address lost instructional time or learning loss through evidence-based activities that include all of the above sources of academic support. LEAs will be required in their ARP ESSER LEA plans and Phase II grant applications to specifically explain how they will use the 20% mandated set aside.

Safe and Healthy Operations

In addition to the three focus areas outlined in the state's recovery planning process, a fourth recovery priority emerged—improving the overall health and safety of Vermont's school facilities. Federal funds will be a key component of this work and the Agency has rapidly stood up [guidance and a streamlined application process](#) for school construction projects. In addition, through the ARP ESSER state-level set aside funds, the AOE will be providing \$4,000,000 to coordinate support for schools in the area of facilities improvement, including heating/ventilation upgrades, and will continue to focus on the safe operations of schools in the coming months and years.

B. Safely Reopening Schools and Sustaining their Safe Operations

In this section, US ED requires states to outline how they will support LEAs to safely reopen schools and sustain their safe operations.

[Section B State Plan Template Questions \(page 6\)](#)

The State Plan contains a detailed description of the mitigation and prevention measures undertaken by Vermont's schools, following the strict guidelines developed by the AOE in partnership with the Vermont Department of Health and professionals in the fields of education, public health and medicine.

Statewide Plans and Policies

Vermont successfully opened all its schools in September 2020. We implemented a monthly survey to collect information on learning modalities (e.g. in-person, hybrid and remote), and weekly PCR surveillance testing of school staff. In May 2021, the AOE, in conjunction with the Vermont Department of Health, advised districts that all schools would return to full in-person in the fall of 2021 with nominal mitigation measures, if any. Shortly after this announcement, Governor Scott ended the state of emergency in Vermont.

Safe Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services Plans

In this section states are required to describe out the State Education Agency (SEA) will ensure that LEAs that receive the ARP ESSER funds meet the requirements of the American Rescue Plan Act to either within 30 days of the act have a plan for safe return to in-person instruction and continuity of services, or have developed and made publicly available on the LEA's website a plan that meets the requirements of the American Rescue Plan Act.

Because of the strategies and requirements highlighted above, Vermont's schools have had plans for in-person and hybrid learning in place since September 2020 and, as of June 2021, all Vermont schools have returned to in-person instruction. To meet the requirements of the Safe Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services Plans, LEAs have completed [a self-audit](#) of all of the required plan elements, ensuring that they are available to families and open for public comment and input. The ARP ESSER LEA Phase II Application will include an attestation that all requirements of the Safe Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services Plans have been met.

C. Planning for Use and Coordination of ARP ESSER Funds

US ED requires State Education Agencies to seek input from diverse stakeholders to ensure plans are responsive to the needs of students, families and educators. In this section, states are required to describe their plans for consultation and for coordinating the use of APR ESSER funds.

[Section C State Plan Template Questions \(page 8\)](#)

SEA Consultation

States are required to describe how the SEA engaged in meaningful consultation with stakeholders.

AOE's state plan reflects a larger "education recovery" planning initiative that was launched in January 2021. That initiative was developed through significant stakeholder input. For example, the AOE consulted regularly with superintendents, and with its Secretary's Advisory Group through weekly meetings. A special education advisory group, formed to implement changes to Vermont's special education funding system, was consulted monthly. This consultation resulted in formal feedback from the chief disability advocacy organization in the state.

Vermont's education recovery plan priorities, developed over three months (see [Timeline and Key Dates for Vermont's Education Recovery Planning and ARP ESSER](#)) through considerable stakeholder engagement, including the legislative process, and are incorporated into the Vermont ARP ESSER state plan. The AOE also reviewed the state plan with the Vermont State

Board of Education through its open meeting process. Finally, on July 16, 2021 the AOE posted the [plan on its website](#) and is soliciting statewide public comment. The posting of the plan is being accompanied by a public informational campaign to increase awareness.

A key period of stakeholder engagement took place during the legislative session. As will be described below, several major legislative initiatives have been incorporated into the ARP ESSER state plan. These initiatives, which include grants to for the creation of community schools, literacy training initiatives, funding for integrating mental health supports and significant funds to improve school facilities, reflect a process that included broad and extended stakeholder engagement introduced in public testimony. Key stakeholders involved in the drafting of these initiatives include advocacy groups for students with disabilities, racial equity, and mental health community organizations. This legislative process resulted in the passage of a Vermont law ([Vermont Act 74 Sec. E.501.3](#)) which requires the AOE to submit the plan to the education policy committees of the Vermont legislature for their approval in late July 2021.

Coordinating Funds

States are required to describe how they have and will coordinate federal COVID-19 pandemic funding and other federal funding

Emergency Response

As part of the AOE’s emergency response, which began in March 2020 and lasted through January 2021, the AOE used ESSER I and II funds to create an improved communication infrastructure, provide new platforms to facilitate remote learning and responded to emergency needs in the field as LEAs worked to meet pandemic health guidance for safe operations and took steps to make their schools safe for in-person learning. GEER funds were used to support the state’s Career and Technical Education (CTE) centers by providing funding for supplies, equipment and staffing to rapidly build out remote learning opportunities and, starting in the Fall 2020, safely return to in-person learning and the hand-on opportunities central to CTE curriculum.

| Fund | Project Name | Short Description | Cost |
|-------------|--|---|-------------|
| ESSER I | Salesforce CRM | Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tool to respond to queries from the public and the field related to COVID-19 response. | \$251,584 |
| ESSER I | Salesforce (Knowledge Base) and Helpdesk Expansion | The addition of a public knowledge base component to the existing helpdesk tool to provide knowledge articles to users. | \$294,025 |
| ESSER I | Salesforce (Symptom Tracker) | Framework for COVID-19 related symptom checking and tracking for schools | \$407,412 |

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|----------|--|---|-------------|
| ESSER II | Burlington High School Macy's Retrofit | Costs associated with the retrofitting of the former Macy's retail space to accommodate in-person learning for Burlington High School (BHS) students. | \$3,500,000 |
| GEER | Grants for CTE Centers | Grant program for the state's Career and Technical Education (CTE) centers | \$4,268,801 |

Future Supports for Recovery

During the winter and spring of 2021, as the state and education system moved from the urgent and immediate COVID-19 response to a sustained operations modality, the AOE developed a recovery planning strategy centered on three main foci: social-emotional health, mental health, and well-being; student engagement; and academic success. These three priorities are central to the work and planning being done currently at both the AOE and LEA levels and will inform the use of both AOE and LEA ESSER funds for the next 2-3 years.

| Fund | Project Name | Short Description | Cost |
|-------------|---|---|---------------------------------|
| ESSER I | Edmodo | Professional Network and K-5 Learning Management System | \$322,432 |
| ESSER I | PBS Learning Kits | Learning kits created by Vermont PBS, in partnership with AOE staff, and distributed in summer 2021 to young learners attending 21C programs. | \$50,000 |
| ESSER I | Social emotional and Mental Health | Development and support of a website containing curated materials on best practice for educators to ensure students' social emotional, and mental health/well-being | \$378,000 |
| ESSER II | Construction Consultant | Consultant to support LEAs in facilities and construction projects | \$ 127,500 (through 9/30/23) |
| ESSER II | Summer Learning 2021 | Subgrant to Vermont Afterschool | \$ 4,095,838 |
| ESSER II | Summer Learning and Afterschool 2021-2023 | To be determined | \$4,339,131 |
| GEER II | To be determined | To be determined | \$1,930,818 |

D. Maximizing State-Level Funds to Support Students

This section addresses the “extraordinary opportunity” States have to address the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on underserved students through the American Rescue Plan Act’s required State Set-asides. SEAs are required to describe their evidence-based strategies for these resources.

[Section D State Plan Template Questions \(page 10\)](#)

In total the AOE may reserve up to \$28,516,484 for priorities and strategies to address the impact of COVID-19. ARP ESSER State-level set aside funds include specific spending mandates. The following section describes the AOE’s plans, if they have been developed at this early stage of the education recovery process, for each of these mandated categories and for other emergency needs.

Through legislative action \$17,933,000 of this total state-level set aside has been appropriated.

Academic Impact of Lost Instructional Time

Mandated set aside: \$14,258,200. The AOE has not yet selected specific evidence-based interventions to address the academic impact of lost instructional time. The AOE will do so as those needs are identified through the required LEA education recovery planning process.

It is likely there will be an AOE focus on improving literacy outcomes since this had been identified as an area of concern prior to the pandemic and \$3,534,000 has been appropriated through [Vermont Act 28 Sec. 4 \(a and b\)](#).

Evidence-Based Summer Learning and Enrichment Programs

Mandated set aside: \$2,851,640. AOE funds are being used to fund a significant expansion of summer activities during the summer of 2021 as part of Vermont’s education recovery focus on student engagement. This initiative is called “Summer Matters.” \$4,095,838 in ESSER II state level set aside funds are being used to contract with Vermont After School (VAS) to expand student engagement activities statewide. VAS has established some data reporting metrics that will allow the AOE to evaluate the success of this summer’s programming from an engagement perspective. This analysis will inform our approach to Summer 2022 and 2023 programming which AOE intends to fund using ESSER II and ARP ESSER state-level set aside.

Evidence-Based Comprehensive Afterschool Programs

Mandated set aside: \$2,851,640. The AOE has not yet identified specific evidence-based after school programs, although existing evidence-based programs such as 21C will be leveraged.

Emergency Needs

Remaining set aside: \$8,555,004. Through [Act 72](#), the Vermont Legislature has appropriated \$4,000,000 in set aside funds for a school facilities improvement program. In addition, through [Act 74](#), the legislature appropriated \$3,000,000 for regional capacity grants to address students’ social, emotional and mental health needs and \$3,399,000 through [Act 67](#) for integrated service delivery models statewide to ensure each region of the state has a well-articulated service system between and among social services and education services through the creation of

Community Schools. Finally, in Act 74, the legislature appropriated \$1,000,000 for Educator Workforce development (discussed in more detail in [Section E](#), below) and \$3,000,000 for remote learning supports. The AOE will identify the strategies for these funds in the coming months.

E. Supporting LEAs in Planning for and Meeting Students' Needs

This section addresses the need for safe return to in-person instruction to be accompanied by a focus on meeting academic, social, emotional and mental health needs, and by addressing opportunity gaps. States are required to outline how the SEAs will support LEA development of high quality plans for use of ARP ESSER funds.

[Section E State Plan Template Questions \(page 13\)](#)

The AOE is constructing its ARP ESSER Phase II Application to address the requirements outlined in the [Interim Final Requirements](#). Additionally, in advance of the passage of ARP, Vermont required all LEAs to create and submit a Recovery Plan. Vermont will be leveraging these Recovery Plans to demonstrate how schools have prepared for reopening.

Beginning in March 2021, the AOE has held a weekly conversation with superintendents, business managers, curriculum coordinators, special education directors and other interested school staff and administrators to discuss a wide variety of topics related to education recovery and ESSER funds. This forum has been a crucial avenue for the districts to share their questions and needs, and for the AOE to offer technical assistance and support as LEAs plan for the use of their ESSER funds. They have generated a series of tools and targeted guidance documents to aid LEAs during the ARP ESSER planning process and future planning tools include a template for ARP ESSER public facing LEA plans.

LEA Consultation

The ARP ESSER LEA application will include assurances from the LEA that they have conducted meaningful consultation with identified stakeholders and evidence of the outreach to stakeholders, the content of feedback, and how plans have been altered as a result of that feedback.

Vermont's LEAs, through their education recovery planning process, have already begun to engage stakeholder groups. In addition, many LEAs are conducting communications outreach through websites, informational sessions and direct contact with families. The AOE requires that the LEAs document these stakeholder engagement efforts and will require evidence of this engagement in the ARP ESSER LEA application.

F. Supporting the Educator Workforce

This Section address the toll that the COVID-19 pandemic has taken on educators as well as students. SEAs are required to describe strategies for supporting and stabilizing the educator workforce and for making staffing decisions that will support students' academic, social, emotional and mental health needs.

[Section F State Plan Template Questions \(page 15\)](#)

The AOE does not have evidence of layoffs related to the pandemic. Each LEA has submitted a Recovery Plan in which they identify specific needs related to social emotional health and well-being, academic achievement, and student engagement. Many of these plans identify hiring additional staff to meet perceived needs. The AOE is aggregating these needs to understand emerging staffing trends in response to recovery efforts.

Broader indicators suggest that the AOE will need to take a leadership role in supporting LEAs in long-term strategic planning, including fostering a statewide approach that can both support the unique regional needs of LEAs while guarding against an overly competitive marketplace that could further exacerbate regional disparities in staffing. This might include regional approaches to shared staffing and local educator pipeline programs, leveraging online and hybrid models to provide access to qualified staff despite geographic challenges, creating greater flexibility for new educators and out-of-state educators, and recruiting more teachers of color.

Filling Gaps in Certified Teachers

In the near term, the AOE will work with LEAs address gaps in certified teachers for the 2021-2022 school year by expediting access to provisional teacher licenses under existing Vermont regulations. The AOE will also partner with the Vermont Department of Public Safety to expedite the required background check process.

Additionally, the AOE will explore several strategies to expand the teacher pipeline and the diversity of its educator workforce. The strategies listed below could be supported in part or in whole, through the \$1,000,000 appropriated from ARP ESSER state set aside funds through [Act 74](#):

- Create an annual scholarship fund of approximately \$25,000 to support educators seeking initial licensure through Peer Review.
- Hire a 0.5 FTE to work throughout the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states to recruit educators to come to Vermont. This recruiter would represent Vermont schools at job fairs, develop relationships with education departments in schools throughout the region, with particular attention to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and other schools who graduate substantial numbers of historically marginalized candidates.
- Develop a pathway to licensure for educators working in regions of the state where there is specific need. This model would support paraeducators currently working in school settings who are interested in becoming fully licensed educators. Educators would complete a four course sequence over 16 months (one course each Summer, Fall, Spring, Summer semesters) in the Core Teaching Competencies through UVM/VSC/HEC while working under a temporary license; acceptance into and enrollment in the preparation sequence would confer the temporary license.

To inform long-term policy in this area, the AOE will contract for a study of Vermont's educator pipeline to identify policy recommendations in the following areas:

- Licensing reciprocity with other states;

- Identifying regulatory policies from other states that could be adopted in Vermont;
- An examination of the New England educator pipeline dynamics since Vermont’s labor market needs to be considered in the context of the region;
- A policy approach to licensing for designated shortage areas;
- How remote learning could be utilized to address teacher shortage areas and to enable the sharing of staff on a statewide basis; and
- An analysis of Vermont’s higher education system relative to its teacher preparation capacity.

G. Monitoring and Measuring Progress

Transparency on how ARP ESSER funds are used and their impact on the Nation’s education system is a fundamental responsibility of federal, state, and local government. In this section, SEAs are required describe how they are building capacity at the SEA and LEA levels to ensure high-quality data collection and reporting and to safeguard funds for their intended purposes.

[Section G State Plan Template Questions \(page 16\)](#)

This section of the state plan includes a detailed description of the data gathering capacity of the AOE and the AOE’s internal monitoring processes.

The AOE is working with LEAs and external partners to develop processes to gather the required data for US ED.

Public Comment

The AOE is seeking public comment on the [ARP ESSER State Plan](#) through mid-August. Stakeholders and members of the public, including families and students, are welcome to submit their comments and suggestions to the AOE via email at AOE.EdInfo@vermont.gov.