Colorado Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Mid-Point Survey

March 2023
SURVEY CONTEXT AND PARTNERS
Colorado School Finance Project

- CSFP’s mission is to compile, collect, and distribute research-based, non-partisan information and data on topics related to school finance for state and local policymakers.

- This survey was funded through a Learning and Transparency Program grant Colorado School Finance Project (CSFP) received from the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) to provide ESSER-related technical and communication assistance to districts and BOCES. Its supports include:
CSFP Context: ESSER Timeline

It is ESSER halftime — all funds are required to be obligated by September 2024.
Colorado Education Initiative

- CSFP conducted this survey in partnership with Colorado Education Initiative (CEI), a statewide nonprofit whose mission is to accelerate systems change to ensure every student in Colorado is prepared and unafraid to succeed in school, work, and life and ready to take on the challenges of today, tomorrow, and beyond.

- In the spring and fall of 2020, CEI partnered with CDE to conduct two statewide needs inventories to understand challenges facing schools and districts early in the COVID-19 pandemic and inform key decisions about funding, policy changes, and resources for districts and communities. Key findings from the 2020 work are featured on the following slide; the 2023 survey includes themes from these surveys.

- This survey is also a component of Colorado’s Statewide Family Engagement Center grant, focused on building the capacity of families, schools, and communities to address learning recovery and related impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as implement practices and systems to improve student development and family well-being.
CEI Context: Greatest Needs in 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPRING 2020: Beginning of Pandemic</th>
<th>FALL 2020: After Initial Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Emotional support was the top student need followed by support for remote learning</td>
<td>• K-3 reading surfaced as the top student priority, followed by student mental health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Internet connectivity and food access were the top community needs</td>
<td>• Workforce and staffing needs were emerging as major district concerns</td>
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</tbody>
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Statewide needs inventories
SURVEY OVERVIEW
Survey Overview

• The ESSER Mid-Point Survey provides a look at school and public perception of needs half-way through the ESSER funding cycles and includes follow-up questions from themes in the 2020 statewide needs inventories.

• The survey was administered statewide by CSFP and CEI to district leaders, teachers, school leaders, and community members from January 17 to February 6, 2023.

371 respondents overall, representing 124 school districts and 3 BOCES

Districts and BOCES represented serve 81% of Colorado students

Over 60% of respondents represent rural (25%) or small rural districts (38%), with the remainder from non-rural districts or not associated with a particular district
Report Overview

• This initial report provides a high-level summary of results across all respondents, comparing district leaders, teachers/special service providers (SSPs), and all other respondents on most questions. A follow-up report will be released later this spring with more detailed student and district characteristics.

• All Likert-scale questions use a 5-point scale, with 1 representing no need/challenges and 5 representing highest need/largest challenges. Unless otherwise noted, results shown reflect the average response within each respondent group. Generally, differences larger than .4 are statistically significant.

• District leaders' and teachers/SSPs' responses to open-ended survey questions were reviewed and categorized into themes, with comparisons made between these two groups. All other respondents were excluded from this initial qualitative analysis.
What is your role?

The count of respondents by role is displayed below, with percentages of total respondents reflected in the labels on the graph. Throughout the rest of this report, results are compared across three groups: (1) **District Leaders**: One person per district using the highest-ranking respondent – superintendent, chief financial officer, or other district administrators. (2) **Teachers and Special Service Providers (SSPs)**: SSPs include counselors, nurses, social workers, and similar roles. (3) **All Other Respondents**: Everyone not in the other groups, including school administrators, classified employees, school board members, and community members.
Executive Summary

• Across the survey, respondent groups generally prioritized needs and challenges similarly. However, the intensity of the need or challenge varied across respondent groups.

• The top three ongoing educational needs created by COVID are student emotional support and student behavior, unfilled positions, and staff social and emotional support.

• Student subgroups reported to face the highest level of ongoing challenges from COVID include economically disadvantaged students, students experiencing trauma, and students with special needs.

• Most challenging ongoing community needs from COVID are affordable housing, mental health and/or counseling services, child and/or adult care, and financial assistance.

• The majority of district leaders selected navigating reporting and compliance standards as a main challenge to spending ESSER funds, followed by challenges filling available positions and hiring.

• While district leaders expressed appreciation for these funds, many expressed the need for more sustainable funding to address ongoing staffing shortages, student social emotional challenges, and performance gaps.
SURVEY RESULTS: Ongoing COVID Impacts
What is the level of on-going educational need created by COVID in the following areas?

- COVID health related needs
- Remote learning/instruction supports
- Need for Learning Management System(s)
- Communications for students/parents/families
- Instructional supports for teachers
- Disrupted learning
- Family engagement
- Instructional materials
- Student emotional support/behavior
- Unfilled positions
- Staff social-emotional support
- Increased learning gaps between sub-groups
- Instructional supports for teachers
- Disrupted learning
- Family engagement
- Instructional materials
- Communications for students/parents/families
- Need for Learning Management System(s)
- Remote learning/instruction supports
- COVID health related needs

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"The bottom line is that challenges that were faced prior to COVID are still challenges. The double-edged sword is we are still seeing and beginning to understand some of the impacts that became more challenging as a result of COVID. At the same time, we also are seeing some excuses ... that refer back to COVID as the culprit of all the woes in education."

- Non-Rural Special Services Provider
“Emotional health of students and staff should be the primary concern but you can't stop working on other things (like academics) just because the other is your main priority.”

- Rural School Administrator
What is the level of on-going challenges facing the following student groups from COVID?

- Economically disadvantaged students
- Students experiencing trauma
- Students with special education needs
- Middle school students
- Highly mobile students
- High school students
- Elementary students
- Students experiencing homelessness
- English language learners
- Students in foster care
- Students identifying as gifted

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Please describe the highest two on-going challenges faced by student sub-groups.

“We are experiencing high levels of student struggles that are extended through all grade levels in the schools. We have students who are several years below grade level expectations, behind in meeting graduation requirements, struggling with behaviors, and the overall mental health concerns extend through all aspects of the school experience.”

- Small Rural District Leader

District leaders (i.e., superintendents, CFOs, other district administrators) and teachers/special services providers (SSPs) shared similar challenges faced by the students in their schools in their open-ended comments on the survey.

- Commonly cited challenges were increased needs related to mental health, social emotional learning (SEL), and behavioral challenges. A few respondents also elevated the mental health and SEL needs of staff. Related to both academic and social emotional needs, district leaders and teachers/SSPs surfaced ongoing challenges in attendance and engagement.

- Some respondents mentioned staff shortages in general, with several naming particular needs in special education positions and counselors.

- Many district leaders and teachers/SSPs named learning loss caused by the pandemic as a key ongoing challenge, also noting the academic gaps between groups (in particular, students with special needs and economically disadvantaged students).
What are the on-going, local community needs from COVID?

- Affordable housing
- Mental health and/or counseling services
- Child and/or adult care
- Financial assistance
- Workforce development/adult education services
- Internet connectivity (e.g., broadband or wi-fi access)
- Healthcare access
- Access to food or other basic needs
- Transportation
- Technology access (e.g., computer, phones)
- Small business assistance (e.g., loans)
- Shelter (e.g., hotel)
- Information about COVID-19

District Leader

Teachers/SSP

All Other Respondents

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SURVEY RESULTS: ESSER Funding
How concerned are you about these possible challenges when ESSER funding ends in fall 2024?

- On-going staffing shortages
- On-going student social emotional challenges
- On-going achievement gaps
- On-going staff social emotional challenges
- Will have to end programs
- On-going disrupted learning challenges
- Will have to cut staff
- Students families continue to struggle with trauma of COVID
- May not be able to spend all of our ESSER funds

District Leader
Teachers/SSP
All Other Respondents
"ESSER funds were absolutely critical in addressing learning gap needs, especially of the greatest at-risk population but the dependence on those funds, especially for staffing, will be challenging to replace when ESSER funding ends."

- Non-Rural Chief Financial Officer
What have been your district’s main challenges to spending ESSER funds? Please select up to three choices.¹

1. Navigating reporting and compliance standards
2. Challenges with filling available positions and hiring
3. Competing priorities or needs from different departments
4. Lack of multi-year budget planning activities
5. Lack of quality vendors or suppliers
6. I have not experienced any challenges
7. Delays in receiving stimulus funds
8. Lack of organizing team to orchestrate spending
9. Lack of support from procurement team
10. Board or senior leadership waiting to make decisions

¹ Only district leader responses are provided here, since they hold technical responsibility for ESSER spending.
"The two biggest challenges I am hearing the most about these days are unfilled positions and the continued need to authentically engage learners at all grade levels."

- Community Member
How often do you use these methods for communicating about the use of ESSER funds?\(^1\)

1. Updates during public meetings (Board and/or Advisory Committees)
2. Website
3. Word of mouth
4. Newsletters (school or district)
5. Social media posts
6. Press releases

\(^1\) Only district leader responses are provided here, since they hold responsibility for ESSER communications.
How does your district engage stakeholders in ESSER-related decision-making?

“

All ESSER decisions are discussed in public board meetings. They are also communicated on the district website. The district also involves the District Accountability Committee and school staff in the planning process.”

- Small Rural District Leader

Many respondents indicated that stakeholder engagement in ESSER-related decision-making occur through existing meeting structures, such as for District Accountability Committees (DAC) or local school boards. Some district leaders specified that they solicit feedback at meetings designated for budget and strategic planning discussions. The responses between district leaders and teachers/SSPs were similar.

- Many teachers/SSPs indicated they do not know how their district engages stakeholders in ESSER decisions nor have been asked to provide input in these decisions.

- Many district leaders also referenced a variety of online approaches to engage and inform community members, such as surveys, district/school websites, and emails. Other than a few teachers/SSPs mentioning the use of surveys, other online approaches were not identified.

- Some district leaders and teachers/SSPs also discussed stakeholder engagement happening through school-level meetings, such as for School Accountability Committees (SAC).

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SURVEY RESULTS: Overall Reflections
The lessons learned during the pandemic were similar between district leaders and teachers/SSPs, with a few differences described below.

- Many respondents across both groups referenced the importance of adaptation as one of the biggest lessons learned during the pandemic, noting the changing needs of students and staff.

- District leaders noted a general concern for equity, while teachers/SSPs specified the additional challenges of economically disadvantaged families and the need for essential services provided by schools. Several respondents also identified learning gaps and other equity issues.

- Both groups reflected on the limitations of remote learning, including the importance of adequate technology, barriers to high-quality instruction, and mental health issues.

- Some district leaders and teachers/SSPs identified the increasing mental health needs of both students and staff in their responses to this question, and several emphasized the need for additional mental health supports.

“Education is further behind than we thought. It is apparent that if we can’t switch platforms without our students losing significant amounts of learning, we are doing something wrong. Students should be able to learn in a variety of settings, not just one.”

- Non-Rural District Teacher
The lessons learned during the pandemic were similar between district leaders and teachers/SSPs, with a few differences described below.

- While district leaders expressed **appreciation for ESSER funds**, many expressed the **need for more sustainable funding** to address learning gaps, staffing shortages, and mental health needs. Teachers/SSPs did not explicitly mention funding as much but shared similar concerns for learning, staffing, and mental health needs.

- A few district leaders and teachers/SSPs pointed to **divisions created by the pandemic**, including contrasting political views and decisions made about shifting to remote learning.

“On a financial level, we realized that it is incredibly expensive to have the appropriate number of staff employed to meet academic, social/emotional, and physical needs of students and families...It requires substantially more people to provide appropriate interventions, opportunities to engage with parents, and line up supports and resources for students and families.”

- Rural Superintendent
“The learning gap and trauma are still there. More support is still needed. Programs/extra staff are still needed.”

- Small Rural District Teacher

When asked to share anything related to the topics of the survey and/or the COVID-19 pandemic, only a handful of survey respondents provided responses. While district leaders and teachers/SSPs both noted the need for additional mental health supports, they had differing thoughts on other issues. The following themes are broken down by the district leader and teacher/SSP groups and reiterate some of the themes previously described.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mental Health Priorities</th>
<th>District Leaders</th>
<th>Teachers/SSPs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need for additional supports</td>
<td>• Need for additional supports</td>
<td>• Need for additional supports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral concerns</td>
<td>• Behavioral concerns</td>
<td>• Behavioral, attendance, and engagement concerns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Funding</th>
<th>District Leaders</th>
<th>Teachers/SSPs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation of the ESSER funds</td>
<td>• Appreciation of the ESSER funds</td>
<td>• Lack of understanding of ESSER spending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty obtaining funds</td>
<td>• Difficulty obtaining funds</td>
<td>and in a couple cases, skepticism about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for more sustainable funding</td>
<td>• Need for more sustainable funding</td>
<td>how funds were distributed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equity Issues</th>
<th>District Leaders</th>
<th>Teachers/SSPs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Needs of different student populations</td>
<td>• Needs of different student populations</td>
<td>• Learning gaps due to lack of staff and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding challenges of small rural districts</td>
<td>• Funding challenges of small rural districts</td>
<td>other supports</td>
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Additional analyses will be released in April.

In the meantime, please reach out to the following contacts with questions about this report:

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