



Identifying Effective and Equitable Socio-Emotional Supports for Students and Educators

Full Report
JULY 2025

**Center for Connecticut
Education Research Collaboration**

Partner Institutions





Identifying Effective and Equitable Socio-Emotional Supports for Students and Educators

Full Report

JULY 2025

Project Lead.....Sandra M. Chafouleas, University of Connecticut

Co-PIs.....Latoya Haynes-Thoby, University of Connecticut
Thomas Lee Morgan, Sacred Heart University
Michael J. Strambler, Yale University

Research AssistantsMolly Ferreira
Michael Weiner
Kathleen M. Williamson

About CCERC

The Center for Connecticut Education Research Collaboration (CCERC) is a research partnership between the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) and institutions of higher education across Connecticut. CSDE sets the agenda, identifies projects, and allocates funding for CCERC. The University of Connecticut manages funding and provides an administrative team. A Steering Committee composed of researchers from various Connecticut institutions guides the administrative team in developing and approving research projects and reports. Researchers from Connecticut universities and colleges constitute the research teams. The mission of CCERC is to address pressing issues in the state's public schools through high quality evaluation and research that leverages the expertise of researchers from different institutions possessing varied methodological expertise and content knowledge.

CCERC was formed initially using federal relief funds to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning and well-being and recovery efforts in the state's schools. The partnership was subsequently institutionalized to respond to ongoing evaluation and research needs of the CSDE, provide research opportunities for Connecticut researchers, and foster collaboration across the state's institutions of higher education.





Identifying Effective and Equitable Socio-Emotional Supports for Students and Educators

JULY 2025

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	6
Full Report	10
References	36



Isolation, trauma, challenge, and loss defined much of 2020 and 2021 for many and has had broad and not yet fully understood impacts. Many districts have used ARP ESSER (American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds to hire or develop support structures for students during this difficult time. (Stock Photo)

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the socio-emotional well-being of students, teachers, administrators, and communities in deep and ongoing ways. Isolation, trauma, challenge, and loss defined much of 2020 and 2021 for many and has had broad and not yet fully understood impacts. Many districts have used ARP ESSER (American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds to hire or develop support structures for students during this difficult time. This study provides a deeper understanding of the types of proposed supports during and following the pandemic, and the potential effectiveness of those strategies. Results provide a map of the current landscape as well as suggested paths forward in supporting individuals, schools, and the communities to which they belong. The mixed methods project was guided by the following research questions:

1. What do districts report as planned socio-emotional supports?
2. What do districts and schools report as the socio-emotional supports actually being delivered, for whom and under what conditions?
3. How do districts and schools report that the pandemic generally, periods of isolation due to remote learning, and return to in-person schooling have influenced the socio-emotional well-being of students, teachers, and administrators?
4. How are school district and building leaders supporting teachers and other school staff to promote equitable so-

cio-emotional outcomes for students?

5. How do key groups (students, teachers, school leaders, district leaders, families, community members) perceive effectiveness of the supports being delivered?

This overall project involved three parts: (1) analysis of districts' ARP ESSER plans with regard to social, emotional, and mental health supports of students and staff; (2) a district leader survey; and (3) interviews with district leaders.



(Stock Photo)



Isolation, trauma, challenge, and loss defined much of 2020 and 2021 ... Many districts have used American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds to hire or develop support structures for students during this difficult time.

Executive Summary

PART ONE

In Part 1 of this report, findings are provided from the analysis of districts' ARP ESSER plans in Priority Area 3 (social, emotional, and mental health supports of students and staff).

Five priority areas outline the use of ARP ESSER funds and goals in Connecticut; this report focuses on Priority 3, the social, emotional, and mental health supports for students and staff. Connecticut districts submitted ARP ESSER plans that capture details about the social, emotional, and mental health supports each district plans to implement, as well as budgetary details and background information about the district itself. Coders categorized district ARP ESSER plans by the types and quality of planned socio-emotional supports and used the recommendations provided in the October 2021 report by US Department of Education and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health Needs, as the organizing framework to evaluate the quality of the supports.

PART TWO

In Part 2, findings are provided from the analysis of the District Leader Survey.

District leaders in all 201 districts across the state were invited to complete a survey in the fall of 2023. The survey asked district leaders to report on the following district practices and processes from Fall 2021-Fall 2024: 1) what districts planned to do to provide social-emotional supports; 2) what supports districts actually implemented (across elementary, middle, and high school levels); 3) what student groups districts targeted with those supports; 4) whether and/or how districts supported teachers and staff; 4) how districts addressed equity; and 5) how districts assessed the effectiveness of implemented social-emotional supports.

The degree to which findings can be generalized to the state is limited given that only 15% of districts responded. However, findings still hold value for understanding some district efforts and challenges, especially when considered in combination with other data in the other two reports. For services directed towards students, individual-level services and universal school-based services were reported as the most common approaches used by districts. For the latter, social and emotional learning (SEL) was a commonly reported approach with Second Step, RULER, and Responsive Classroom being the top three programs used. Although districts gave attention to gaps in students' social and emotional concerns across groups, they tended to focus more on students in special education. The greatest challenge reported for supporting students' was the lack of time available for engaging

in programming. Regarding staff, district leaders reported hiring and professional development as key approaches for supporting students' and educators' well-being. They also reported recognizing educators' efforts and providing group activities as a means of teacher support. Similar to reported efforts to support students, leaders reported the lack of staff and staff time as the main challenges to supporting staff.

PART THREE

In Part 3, findings are provided from the analysis of the District Leader Interviews

The third component of this comprehensive mixed methods research project aimed at understanding and enhancing how public school districts in Connecticut are fostering equitable socio-emotional outcomes for students in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This portion of the project involved interviewing district leaders from three districts to understand how socio-emotional supports were understood and implemented for students, educators, and families. This study is driven by the pressing need to address the multifaceted challenges posed by the pandemic, particularly in terms of its impact on the emotional and mental well-being of students, educators, and administrators. The primary objective of this research was to delve into how district leaders responded to these challenges with a focus on equity, ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, have access to the support they need to succeed. Through the use of interviews, the study aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of how Connecticut's public school districts are navigating the complex landscape of socio-emotional support in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a strong emphasis on equity, effectiveness, and the well-being of the entire school community.



 (Stock Photo)

FINDINGS: PART 1

The **vast majority of Connecticut districts (94%) submitted ARP ESSER Plans** (188 out of 201).

- Of the 188 districts that submitted ARP ESSER Plans a **little more than three-fourths (77%) planned to use funds specifically for social, emotional, and mental health of students and staff** (Priority 3). The remaining 23% of districts did not indicate specific allocation to Priority 3.
- Districts planned to spend **over \$80 million of ARP ESSER funding on the social, emotional, and mental health of students and staff** (Priority 3). On average, 16% of proposed ARP ESSER funds per district were allocated to Priority 3.
- **Almost all (97%) of the proposed strategies were strongly aligned** with recommendations provided by the US Department of Education.

- With regard to the comprehensiveness of proposed strategies in relation to the seven recommendations provided by the US Department of Education, a little over **three-fourths (77%) of proposed strategies addressed one to two recommendations, whereas almost one-quarter (23%) included more than three.**
- A total of 460 strategies were proposed across the 144 districts that planned to use funds for Priority 3. **Over half (52%) of those districts included plans to enhance workforce capacity**, with hiring staff (63%) proposed more than skill-building (32%).
- The **majority of proposed strategies were focused district-wide (77%) and were directed toward universal supports (59%)** whereas 22% focused on targeted or intensive supports and 13% on addressing across tiers of intensity.



📷 (Stock Photo)

FINDINGS: PART 2 AND 3

All 32 surveyed districts reported that they implemented social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) supports for the 2021-23 and 2023-24 school years.

- Over 50% of districts reported that they implemented social, emotional, and behavioral supports a great deal during the school years.
- These supports were most commonly funded by federal grants, state grants, and district or school financial funding.
- Most district leaders indicated that they provided universal/schoolwide supports (88%, commonly referred to as Tier 1 supports) for SEB programs.

- The three most popular SEL programs implemented during this period were Second Step, RULER and Responsive Classroom, which were reported by 12 (43%), 9 (32%), and 5 (18%) district respondents, respectively.
- Over 90% of districts reported they planned to continue these SEL programs in the 2023-2024 school years.
- The majority (over 93%) of districts reported that they provided resources to students to seek supports outside of school during the 2021-23 and 2023-24 school years.

In Part 2, findings are provided from the analysis of the District Leader Survey.
In Part 3, findings are provided from the analysis of the District Leader Interviews.

District Services & Challenges Related to Students

- Nearly 90% of responding district leaders reported an increase in students seeking support for social, emotional, and/or behavioral concerns.
- Most districts reported implementing schoolwide and individual-level services related to social, emotional, and behavioral supports.
- Social and emotional learning programs were commonly implemented, with the most popular programs being Second Step, RULER, and Responsive Classroom in that order.
- Districts reported gaps in students' social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes for various demographic groups, and districts tended to focus on reducing gaps in outcomes for students receiving special education services.
- The greatest challenges around implementation involved finding the time to provide services as well as the staffing to provide them.

District Services & Challenges Related to Staff

- Districts used staff hiring and professional development as key means for supporting staff and students.
- The most common approaches noted by districts were:
providing them with professional development;
acknowledgment and recognition; and
group activities (e.g. yoga, classes, meditation, walking clubs)
- Of the supports offered to staff, they used professional development the most.
- The most common challenge concerning staff reported by leaders was their lack of personnel and time to implement programming **outside of school** during the 2021-23 and 2023-24 school years.

Full Report

Our research team would like to express appreciation to all those involved in this study, including the school districts whose ARP ESSER plans were accessed and the research assistants who helped analyze these plans.

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the socio-emotional well-being of students, teachers, administrators, and communities in deep and ongoing ways. Isolation, trauma, challenge, and loss defined much of 2020 and 2021 for many and has had broad and not yet fully understood impacts. Many districts have used APR ESSER funds to hire or develop support structures for students during this difficult time. This study provides a deeper understanding of the types of

proposed supports during and following the pandemic, and the potential effectiveness of those strategies. Results provide a map of the current landscape as well as suggested paths forward in supporting individuals, schools, and the communities to which they belong. This mixed methods project was guided by the following research questions:

1. What do districts report as planned socio-emotional supports?
2. What do districts and schools report as the socio-emotional supports actually being delivered, for whom and under what conditions?
3. How do districts and schools report that the pandemic generally, periods of isolation due to remote learning, and return to in-person schooling have influenced the socio-emotional

well-being of students, teachers, and administrators?

4. How are school district and building leaders supporting teachers and other school staff to promote equitable socio-emotional outcomes for students?
5. How do key groups (students, teachers, school leaders, district leaders, families, and community members) perceive effectiveness of the supports being delivered?

As shown in Table 1, the overall project involves three components: (1) an analysis of districts’ ARP ESSER plans in Priority Area 3 (social, emotional, and mental health of students and staff); (2) a district leader survey; and (3) interviews with district leaders

TABLE 1. STUDY DATA SOURCES

Data Source	Description	Representation
ARP ESSER Plan Analysis	A comprehensive researcher-created coding scheme developed to analyze the ARP ESSER Plans	188 school districts that submitted ARP ESSER Plans
District Leader Survey	Survey disseminated to all 201 school district leaders in Connecticut asking how districts are supporting equitable social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes	Survey distributed to all 201 school districts in Connecticut
District Leader Interviews	Interviews conducted with key groups within districts, with questions across domains related to providing social, emotional, and behavioral support in schools	Small sample of school districts in Connecticut

This mixed methods project was guided by the following research questions:

1. What do districts report as planned socio-emotional supports?
2. What do districts and schools report as the socio-emotional supports actually being delivered, for whom and under what conditions?
3. How do districts and schools report that the pandemic generally, periods of isolation due to remote learning, and return to in-person schooling have influenced the socio-emotional well-being of students, teachers, and administrators?
4. How are school district and building leaders supporting teachers and other school staff to promote equitable socio-emotional outcomes for students?
5. How do key groups (students, teachers, school leaders, district leaders, families, and community members) perceive effectiveness of the supports being delivered?

ARP ESSER Plan Analysis

BACKGROUND

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act was established in 2020, with the goal of providing funds for Connecticut’s state government to help address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over time, a more specific focus was instituted to help school districts recover; districts were granted relief funds from the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) to help reduce the overall achievement gaps, provide access to resources, advance equity, enhance enrichment opportunities, and accelerate learning. A total of \$1.7 billion in federal funds were given to Connecticut from the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020 to the most recent funds distributed in March 2021. Included in the CARES Act, the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER I) fund was established in March of 2020 to help states as an immediate response to the onset of the pandemic. In Connecticut, \$111 million in funds were distributed statewide through September 30, 2022. Later, the ESSER II fund was created to give states an additional \$492.4 million through September 30, 2023. Eventually, the CARES act evolved into the American Rescue Plan (ARP ESSER) and granted Connecticut an additional \$1.1 billion to be used through September 30, 2024 (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2021).

TABLE 2. FIVE CSDE PRIORITIES FOR ARP ESSER DISTRICT PLANS

Priority	Description
1	Learning Acceleration Academic Renewal and Student Enrichment
2	Family and Community Connections
3	<i>Social, Emotional, and Mental Health of Students and Staff*</i>
4	Strategic Use of Technology, Staff Development, and the Digital Divide
5	Building Safe and Health Schools

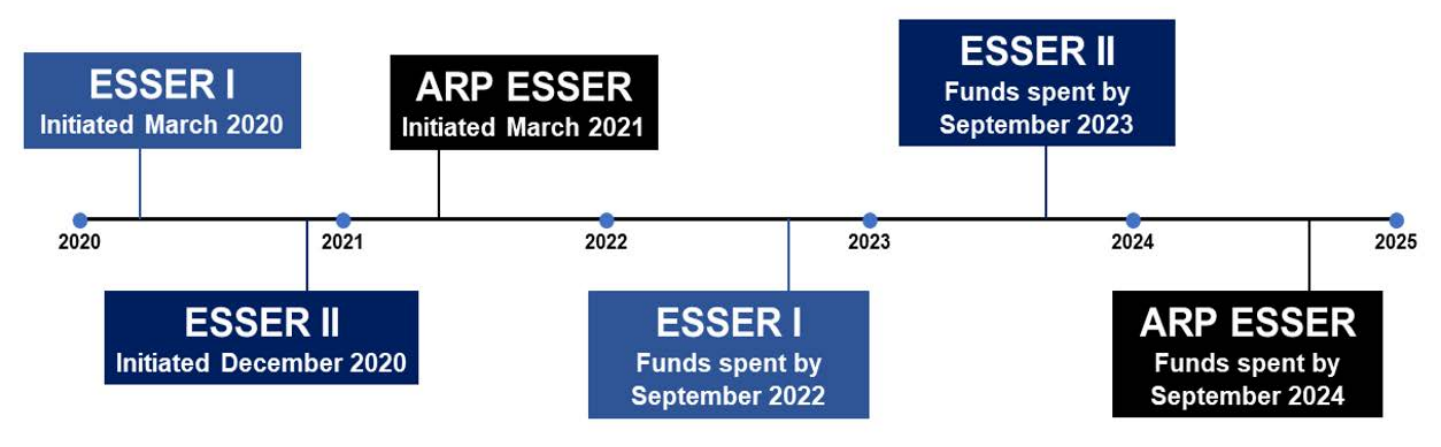
* Priority 3 serves as the primary focus of this report.

In order to access these additional funds, school districts submitted specific ARP ESSER Plans that outlined how they would propose to spend their money to support staff and students in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Funding was allocated based on Title 1 formulas. Funding applications were released by the CSDE on May 24, 2021, and were to be completed by August 16, 2021. In developing the requirements for the ARP ESSER Plans, the State outlined five priority areas in which districts could allocate their funds (see Table 2). This arm of the study is mainly focused on the social, emotional, and mental health supports for students and staff, referred

to as Priority 3.

According to the Connecticut State Department of Education (2021, p. 5), 20% of funding was required to be set aside for Priority 1 to address the academic effects of learning loss. Additionally, district plans needed to include descriptions about how the remaining funds would be used to implement strategies and which priorities these strategies addressed. Once completed, ARP ESSER Plans were required be made publicly accessible online through the CSDE’s online eGrants Management System (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2021).

Figure 1. Timeline of ESSER Plans



DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

ARP ESSER Plans

ARP ESSER Plans were retrieved from the Connect State Department of Education’s online eGrants Management System in March 2023. For the purposes of this project, each district’s initial plan approved by CSDE, also referred to as Revision 0, was downloaded for analysis. Revised plans (e.g., Revision 1, Revision 2) were not included in the study. Submission dates on the initial plans range from June 2021-June 2022.

Coding Scheme

A comprehensive researcher-created coding scheme was developed to analyze the ARP ESSER Plans. The primary focus of the coding scheme included a detailed review of the Priority 3 narrative. This coding encompassed the following areas: (1) identification of planned strategies for supporting students and staff with the ARP ESSER funds and details about implementation; (2) assessment of how those strategies aligned with recommended best practices (see Table 2); (3) evaluation of the overall strength and comprehensiveness of the district’s plan for supporting the social, emotional,

and mental health of students and staff, and (4) budgetary details from the ARP ESSER Plan and about the district itself. A planned strategy was defined as a specific action intended to improve the social, emotional, and mental health of students or staff.

With regard to evaluation of overall strength and comprehensiveness, the coding scheme drew from recommendations provided by the United States Department of Education and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services. In October 2021, a report was published titled “Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral,

Table 3. 2021 U.S. Department of Education Recommendations for Supporting Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health Needs

Recommendation	Examples found in CT ARP ESSER Plans
1. Prioritize wellness for each and every child, student, educator, and provider	Implement employee wellness programming, activities to promote social connection among faculty & staff
2. Enhance mental health literacy and reduce stigma and other barriers to access	Host events to increase parent knowledge on social, emotional, and mental health; establish school-based health center
3. Implement a continuum of evidence-based prevention practices	Implement mindfulness activities, deliver universal social emotional learning, provide small-group or individual counseling, purchase curricular materials, create specialized programs for students with disabilities, facilitate extracurricular activities that promote well-being and connectedness, engage parents in school activities
4. Establish an integrated framework of educational, social, emotional, and behavioral health support for all	Create a vision or mission to guide district initiative, establish committee to oversee social, emotional, and mental health initiatives; revise team structures within a multi-tier framework
5. Leverage policy and funding	Share success stories with decision-makers, review and revise policy
6. Enhance workforce capacity	Create and hire for new full- or part-time positions, provide professional development and training
7. Use data for decision making to promote equitable implementation and outcomes	Purchase new assessment tool, implement universal screening, conduct equity audit

Note. Recommendations for addressing challenges to the delivery of mental health supports in schools, as outlined in the 2021 report published by the United States Department of Education and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. Examples from this table are taken from reported examples from the coded Connecticut ARP ESSER District Plans, with the exception of recommendation 5. Since no Connecticut plans provided examples for this priority, the example was taken from the researcher-created ARP ESSER Plan codebook (available upon request).

and Mental Health Needs.” This report served as a resource for educators in pre-school through post-secondary settings as they worked to safely re-open schools during the COVID-19 pandemic and respond to the evolving needs of students, staff, and families. The report identified seven challenges to delivering mental health support and outlined seven corresponding recommendations to address these challenges. These seven recommendations were used as the organizing framework for the analysis of districts’ planned strategies for supporting the social, emotional, and mental health of students and staff.

Procedures

Coding of the ARP ESSER Plans was completed between March-September 2023. The team of coders included four undergraduate students, two graduate students, and one research assistant. Each coder participated in 12-15 hours of training on the coding scheme, which included didactic instruction, guided practice with feedback, and independent practice; coders also received ongoing supervision and feedback while completing their coding assignments. Each district’s ARP ESSER Plan was independently coded by two members of the research team. Discrepancies in coding were reviewed by a member of the research team to establish consensus.

Data Analysis

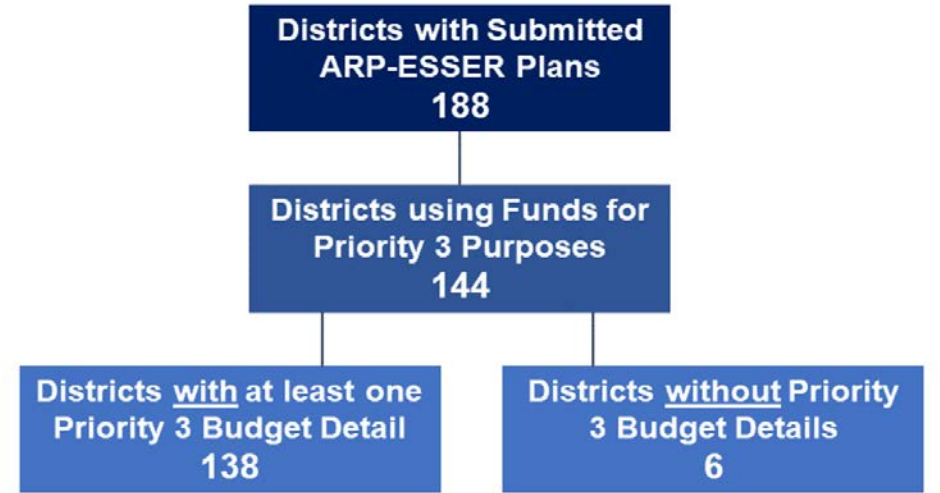
The data analysis process included a mix of interpreting numerical data to find patterns and trends about the various supports that districts proposed in their ARP ESSER Plans. In addition, analyses were conducted to evaluate the relationships between strength and comprehensiveness of plans and (a) proposed budgetary spending on Priority 3, (b) chronic absenteeism, and (c) suspension rates. Comparisons of results for both Alliance status and Charter vs. Non-Charter status were examined.

FINDINGS

Submission of ARP ESSER Plans

Most districts in Connecticut (94%) submitted ARP ESSER Plans (see Figure

Figure 2. Districts in Connecticut with Submitted ARP ESSER



Note. Priority 3 Area focuses on social, emotional, and mental health of students and staff. Total possible districts was 201 based on information in EdSight for the 2021-2022 school year.

2). All (100%) of Alliance districts submitted plans, and 92% of Non-Alliance districts submitted plans. Out of the 188 districts that submitted plans, 144 (77%) districts included plans to use their funds specifically for social, emotional, and mental health of students and staff (Priority 3). Additionally, the vast majority (n = 138) of districts that planned to use their funds for Priority 3 purposes also reported, at least once, regarding how they would spend that money within the Budget Detail of their ARP ESSER Plan.

Proposed ARP ESSER Spending on Priority 3

In evaluating the budget details provided by the 144 Connecticut districts that submitted ARP-ESSER plans, the vast majority (n = 138) provided at least one budgetary detail related to proposed Priority 3 spending.

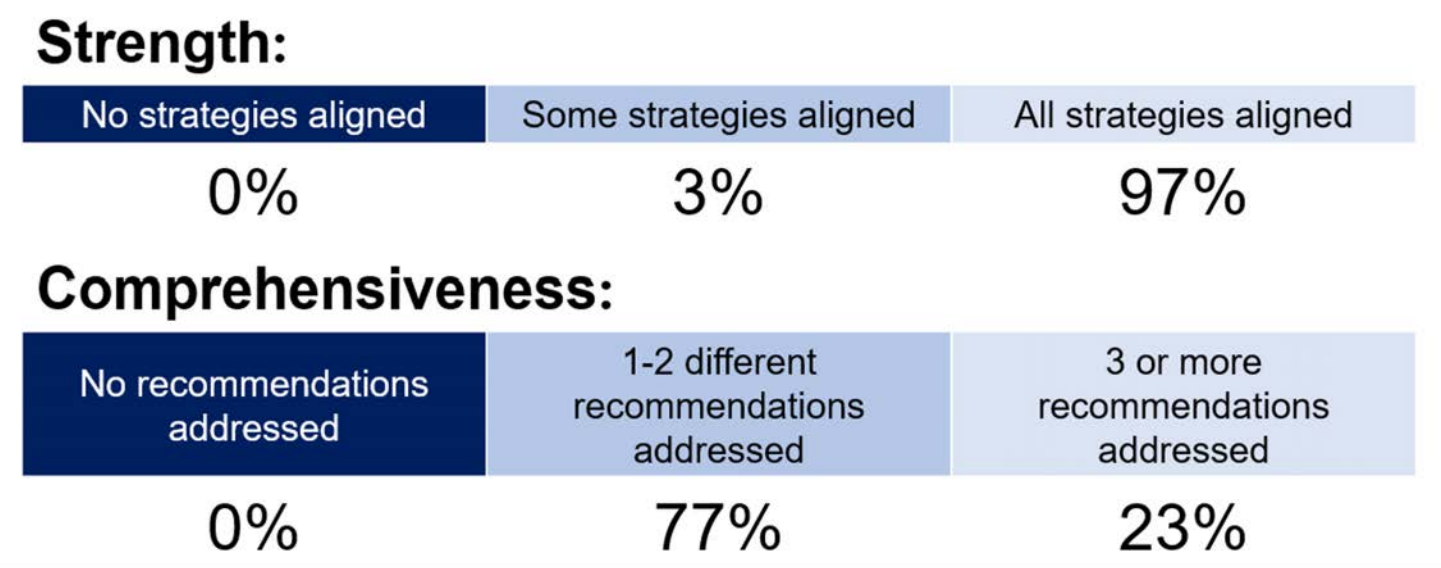
In evaluating the budget details provided by those districts, substantial variability was noted on Priority 3 planned spending, with an average of \$589,169 and a range from \$1,000 to \$12.4 million. It is important to note that this large range would be expected given wide variation across districts in total expected ARP ESSER funds. On average, however, this represents about 16% of total ARP ESSER funds per district.

Quality of Priority 3 Planned Strategies

Strength and comprehensiveness ratings were developed to offer indicators of the quality of content within the Priority 3 plans. Strength ratings were determined by whether the proposed strategies aligned with the seven U.S. Department of Education’s seven recommendations. With regard to evaluation of strength, the vast majority (97%) of districts reported planned strategies that aligned with the recommendations, meaning that all of their proposed Priority 3 strategies fell within the seven recommendations (see Figure 3).

Comprehensiveness ratings were determined by evaluating how many of the recommendations were addressed by the proposed Priority 3 strategies. A little over three-fourths (77%) of districts proposed strategies that included one or two of the U.S. DOE recommendations. This represents a less comprehensive scope of planned supports than the 23% of districts that earned the highest comprehensiveness rating (i.e., 3 or more recommendations).

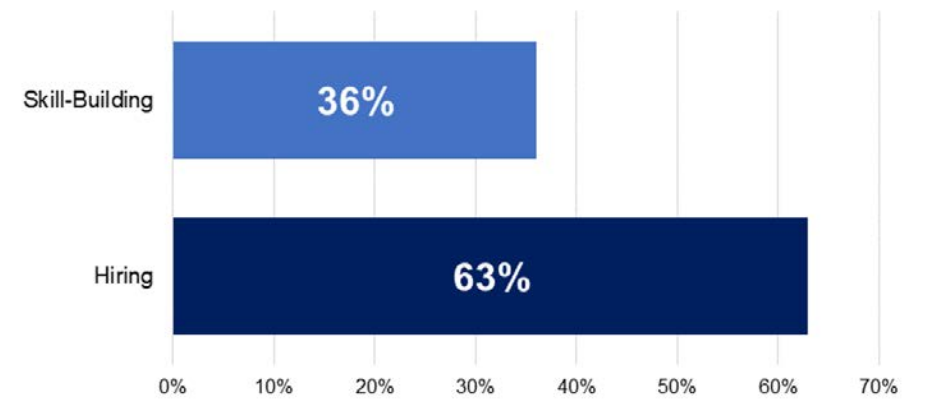
Figure 3. Quality of the Planned Priority 3 Strategies Included



Note. Priority 3 Area focuses on social, emotional, and mental health of students and staff. Evaluation includes those districts reporting planned Priority 3 strategies and alignment of those strategies with the 2021 recommendations provided by the U.S. Department of Education and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services.

Table 4 shows the percent of strategies aligned with the different recommendations provided by the U.S. Department of Education and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services. Across the 144 districts that planned to use funds for Priority 3, a total of 460 individual planned strategies were identified that addressed the needs of social, emotional, and mental health for students and staff. Of those 460 planned strategies, 455 (99%) aligned with the US Department of Education’s recommended practices for supporting social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health in schools. Alignment, however, was not evenly distributed across the recommended practices as the majority of planned strategies fell within only two recommendations. Just over half (52%) of the proposed strategies primarily aligned with the recommendation to enhance workforce capacity, and almost another third (31%) of proposed strategies aligned with the recommendation to implement a continuum of evidenced-based prevention practices. Very few fell within the other recommendation categories, with none of proposed strategies aligning with the recommendation to leverage policy and funding.

Figure 4. Proposed Strategy Focus Aligned with Recommendation to Enhance Workforce Capacity



Content Analysis of Priority 3 Planned Strategies

Next, the planned strategies falling within the two most frequently referenced recommended practices (enhance workforce capacity, implement a continuum of evidence-based prevention practices) were more closely evaluated.

With regard to the “enhance workforce capacity” recommendation, the proposed strategies were first coded into two categories: hiring or skill-building. Out of the 238 proposed strategies across the 144

districts that planned to use their funds for Priority 3, the majority (63%) focused on hiring new employees whereas 36% focused on building the skills of the district’s existing workforce through activities such as professional development and training.

We further evaluated the proposed strategies to enhance workforce capacity through hiring. Of those 150 proposed strategies, the largest reference was to hiring social workers (34%).

With regard to the 36% of proposed strategies that referenced skill-building

Table 4. Detailed Alignment of Priority 3 Strategies with U.S. Department of Education Recommendations Across Districts in Connecticut

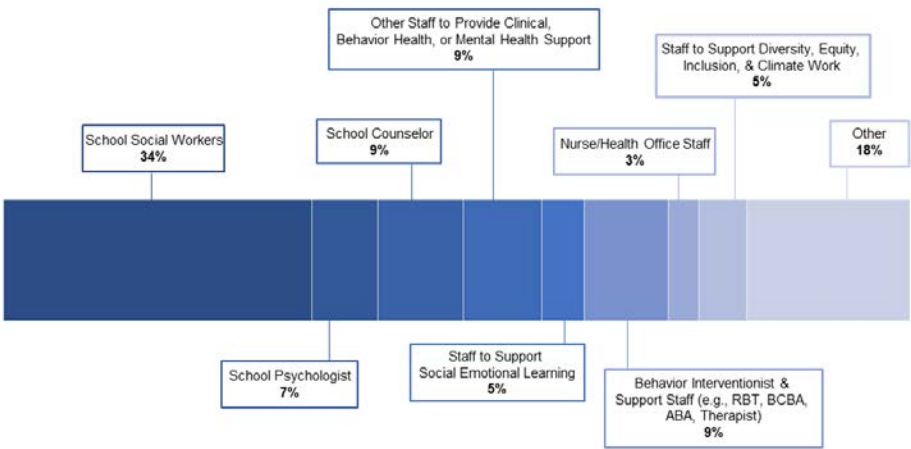
Recommendations for Supporting Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health Needs Provided by the U.S. Department of Education and Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services	% of Reported Planned Strategies Aligned with the Recommendation
1. Prioritize wellness for each and every child, student, educator, and provider District-provided examples: Implement employee wellness programming, activities to promote social connection among faculty & staff	5%
2. Enhance mental health literacy and reduce stigma and other barriers to access District-provided examples: Host events to increase parent knowledge on social, emotional, and mental health; establish school-based health center	2%
3. Implement a continuum of evidence-based prevention practices District-provided examples: Implement mindfulness activities, deliver universal social emotional learning, provide small-group or individual counseling, purchase curricular materials, create specialized programs for students with disabilities, facilitate extracurricular activities that promote well-being and connectedness, engage parents in school activities	31%
4. Establish an integrated framework of educational, social, emotional, and behavioral health support for all District-provided examples: Create a vision or mission to guide district initiative, establish committee to oversee social, emotional, and mental health initiatives; revise team structures within a multi-tier framework	4%
5. Leverage policy and funding Researcher-created examples: Share success stories with decision-makers, review and revise policy	0%
6. Enhance workforce capacity District-provided examples: Create and hire for new full- or part-time positions, provide professional development and training	52%
7. Use data for decision making to promote equitable implementation and outcomes District-provided examples: Purchase new assessment tool, implement universal screening, conduct equity audit	6%

Note. Recommendations for addressing challenges to the delivery of mental health supports in schools, as outlined in the 2021 report published by the United States Department of Education and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. Examples from this table are taken from reported examples from the coded Connecticut ARP ESSER District Plans, with the exception of Priority 5. Since no Connecticut plans provided examples for this priority, the example was taken from the researcher-created ARP ESSER Plan codebook.

to enhance workforce capacity, over half of the proposed strategies (57%) referenced skill-building topics intended to address the needs of all students. Some examples of this include professional development on restorative practices, training on SEL curriculum, and the train-the-trainers model for positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS). Additionally, over three-fourths (76%) of these skill-building topics were aimed at all faculty and staff as opposed to targeting a specific group, such as teachers, guidance/school counselors, and school psychologists or school social workers.

The 139 planned strategies addressing the recommendation to “implement a continuum of evidence-based prevention practices” were coded using a multi-tiered prevention framework and looking at the intended population target: universal (all students), targeted (some), or intensive (few) tiers of service delivery. Those strategies that explicitly noted cutting across all tiers were designated as multi-tier. As shown in Figure 6, the majority (59%) of the planned strategies

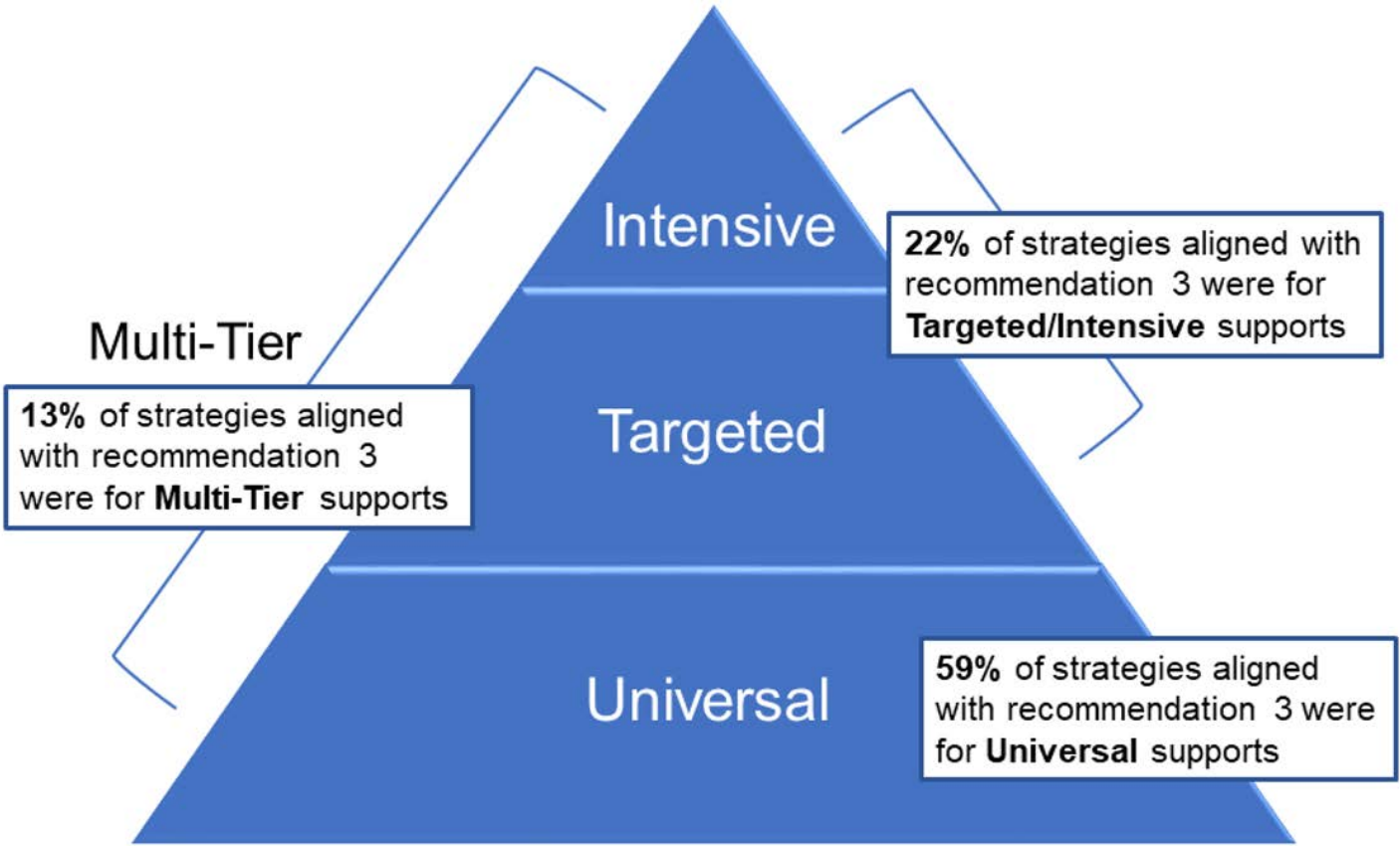
Figure 5. Planned Roles to be Hired Among Strategies Aligned with Recommendation to Enhance Workforce Capacity



Note. Total proposed strategies referencing hiring = 150. Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding. The “other” category includes roles, such as deans, paraeducators, club advisors, IEP coordinators, and academic coaches.

referenced implementation of universal supports to promote social, emotional, and mental health. Another 22% of strategies referenced supports directed to more intensive population targets (i.e., targeted or intensive). Additionally, 13% of planned strategies specifically referenced implementation of supports directed across population targets (i.e. across multiple tiers).

Figure 6. Proposed Population Target for Strategies Aligned with the Recommendation to Implement a Continuum of Evidence-Based Prevention Practices



In addition, the planned strategies were evaluated with regard to intended implementation periods and target grade levels. Over three-fourths (77%) of the levels indicated in the proposed strategies were directed to be implemented district-wide (see Figure 7). Additionally, districts planned to implement about three-fourths (74%) of the strategies during the 2021-2022 school year (see Table 5).

Evaluating & Measuring Success

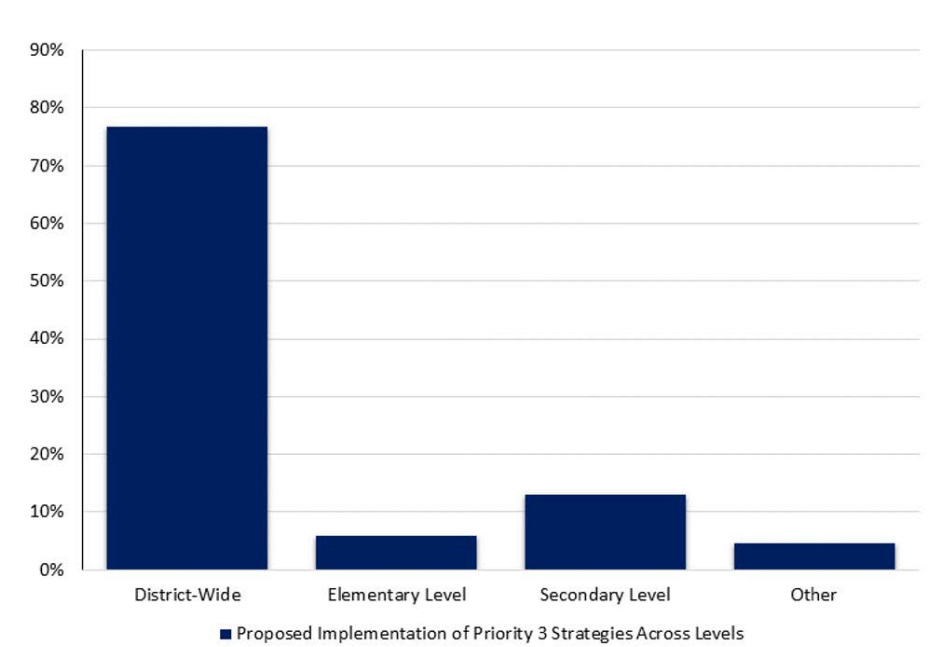
School districts identified various ways of evaluating and measuring the success of planned strategies within their ARP ESSER district plans. Overall, 983 evaluation indicators were included across the planned Priority 3 strategies (see Table A7 in the appendix). In many cases, more than one proposed indicator was noted to evaluate outcomes. In some cases, the proposed indicator focused on outcomes related to fidelity (e.g. strategy completion, permanent product) and in others, student-focused indicators (e.g. grades, attendance) were noted. The top three most frequently proposed indicators included attendance data (17%), quantifiable behavior measures (16%) (e.g., number of office discipline referrals, suspension rates, caseload numbers, student to staff ratios, number of students participating in program, number of referrals for intervention), and surveys (13%). The largest category (27%), however, was “other” which included a range of non-specific indicators or content that was non-responsive to that portion of the ARP ESSER Plan template.

Evaluation of Relationship Between Plan Strength and Comprehensiveness and Key Variables

Statistical analyses were conducted to evaluate the relationships between strength and comprehensiveness of plans and (a) proposed budgetary spending on Priority 3, (b) chronic absenteeism, and (c) suspension rates. In addition, comparisons of results for both Alliance status and Charter status were examined.

Findings should be considered exploratory: caution in interpretation is suggested given small and unbalanced sample sizes for some

Figure 7. Proposed Grade Level for Implementation of Priority 3 Strategies



Note. Priority 3 Area focuses on social, emotional, and mental health of students and staff. Percentages based on the 468 levels indicated across all identified Priority 3 strategies. Other included responses that did not identify the implementation level, included select school(s) or specific grade levels. Postsecondary and Adult Education are excluded as no proposed strategies were specified.

Table 5. Proposed Implementation Period of Planned Priority 3 Strategies

School Years	Strategies
2021-2022	74%
2022-2023	47%
2023-2024	27%

Note. Priority 3 Area focuses on social, emotional, and mental health of students and staff. Note the percentages do not equal 100 as strategies were often indicated as expected to be implemented across multiple school years. About 8% of strategies lacked specific detail about the expected implementation year (e.g., will continue, ongoing, Friday mornings).

analyses.

First, t-test analyses were conducted to examine whether funding allocation for Priority 3 funding differed across strength and comprehensiveness ratings. No significant results were found from these analyses, as shown in Table A9.

Next, chi-square tests were conducted to

determine whether Alliance and Non-Alliance districts differed with respect to proposed Priority 3 strategy strength and comprehensiveness ratings. No significant results were found for strength ratings and district Alliance status. However, as shown in Table A10, Alliance Districts were statistically underrepresented in rating 1 (1-2 recommendations

addressed) and overrepresented in rating 2 (3 or more recommendations addressed) as compared to Non-Alliance districts. Note, again, cautions in interpretation are warranted as this analysis does not account for APR ESSER funding allocated per district.

The same analysis was conducted for Charter/Non-Charter status in relation to the strength and comprehensiveness ratings. These analyses showed no significant differences, as shown in Table A10.1.

Next, the relationships between strength and comprehensiveness ratings and student outcomes (chronic absenteeism, suspension rates) were evaluated. Student data for both years of 2021-22 and 2022-23 were included. In addition, regression analyses were performed to evaluate whether the percent of Priority 3 funding allocation was associated with strength and comprehensive ratings.

Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism was defined as missing 10 percent or more of the total days in the school year. For these analyses, attendance data were provided from EdSight, Connecticut’s official source for education data.

As shown in Table A11, among all school districts in 2021-2022, those with higher strength ratings (i.e., ratings of 2 with regard to alignment with the U.S. Department of Education recommended practices) had fewer students who were chronically absent. Districts with strength ratings of 1 had an average of 32.9% of students who were chronically absent whereas districts with strength ratings of 2 had an average of 20.63% of students who were chronically absent. Additionally, as seen in Table A11.1, chronic absenteeism did not differ by strength ratings across Alliance or Non-Alliance districts, and significant results were not found for the 2022-2023 school year between strength ratings and chronic absenteeism.

The opposite pattern was found for comprehensiveness ratings and chronic absenteeism for both school years (see Table A11 and Table A11.1). That is, districts with higher comprehensiveness ratings had more chronically absent students (m = 25.22% for Year 1; m =

Alliance Status

Alliance districts are defined as, “school districts among the lowest accountability index measures in the state” (Alliance Districts, n.d.). There are currently 36 Alliance districts in Connecticut, which are eligible to receive additional support and funding to help alleviate the disparity in educational experiences of CT students and families.

Charter v Non-Charter Status

The CDSE’s Biennial Report on the Operation of Charter Schools in Connecticut (2022) defines charter schools as advanced school models that use research-based, educational methods that include tuition-free public schools, magnet schools, agricultural schools, and other technical career-specific schools. In Connecticut, there are currently 21 Charter schools between both the state and local level, that serve approximately 10,930 students in 10 host districts.

22.34% for Year 2) compared to those with lower comprehensiveness scores (m = 19.71% in Year1; m = 16.60% in Year 2). This same pattern was found among Alliance districts. Alliance districts with higher comprehensiveness scores had 34.68% (2021-22) and 30.34% (2022-23), and Alliance districts with lower comprehensiveness scores had 27.94% (2021-22) and 23.07% (2022-23) of chronically absent students on average.

In addition, the percentage of funding allocated to Priority 3 funding was found to be negatively associated with chronic absenteeism in 2021-22 (b = -0.17) and 2022-23 (b = -0.10). See Table A13 and A13.1. As an example of the association between Priority 3 funding allocation and absenteeism, a 1% increase in spend-

ing was associated with a .17% decrease in chronic absenteeism in 2021-22 and .10% in 2022-23.

Suspension Rates

As shown in Table A11 and Table A11.1, for both school years (2021-22, 2022-23), results indicated comprehensiveness ratings were associated with suspension rates; the direction of the effect was similar to the findings for chronic absenteeism. Among all districts, districts with higher comprehensiveness scores had more suspensions (m =7.39% in 2021-22; m=7.98% in 2022-23), on average, compared to districts with lower scores (m=5.19% in 2021-22; m=5.57% in 2022-23). No significant findings were found within Alliance and Non-Alliance districts in 2021-2022. For 2022-2023, however, Alliance districts with higher comprehensiveness scores had 2.84% suspensions whereas those with lower scores had 2.14% suspensions, and this difference was statistically significant. No difference was found for Non-Alliance districts.

No association between priority 3 funding and suspension rates was found for 2021-22 or 2022-23.

Overall, these exploratory analyses highlight the complexity of relationships between setting and contextual features, planned supports, and desired outcomes. Some results suggested that strong alignment of planned practices with the U.S. Department of Education recommended practices and higher allocated funding for those effects was associated with more desired outcomes such as decreased absenteeism. Results related to the comprehensiveness of planned Priority 2 strategies, however, did not support findings in expected directions given associations suggesting higher chronic absenteeism and suspension for those districts with more comprehensive planned supports. Cautions are needed as analyses represent exploratory associations only, and do not represent causal claims. In addition, available data include only a small number of potential variables; for example, it is possible that districts with higher comprehensiveness scores proposed more comprehensive strategies given higher needs in their settings. The intensity of those needs may

not easily remedied within the small window of this evaluation nor time frame for ARP-ESSER spending. The forthcoming case studies portion of this project may provide further insights. Finally, it is also important to acknowledge that these data represent planned, not implemented, strategies given data were collected from submitted ARP-ESSER district plans created over a short window of time in order to access this funding.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- The **vast majority of Connecticut districts (94%) submitted ARP ESSER Plans** (188 out of 201).
 - All of the Alliance districts submitted plans whereas 92% of Non-Alliance districts submitted plans.
- Of the 188 districts who submitted ARP ESSER Plans, a little **more than three-fourths (77%) planned to use funds specifically for social, emotional, and mental health of students and staff** (Priority 3).
 - The remaining 23% of districts did not indicate specific allocation to Priority 3.
- Districts planned to spend **over \$80 million of ARP ESSER funding on the social, emotional, and mental health of students and staff** (Priority 3).
 - On average, **16% of total ARP ESSER funds per district** was proposed as allocated to Priority 3.
 - Planned spending on Priority 3 ranged from \$1,000 to \$12.4 million across districts, with an average of \$589,169.
- **Almost all (97%) of proposed strategies were strongly aligned** with recommendations provided by the US Department of Education.
- With regard to the comprehensiveness of proposed strategies in relation to the seven recommendations provided by the US Department of Education, a little over **three-**

fourths (77%) of proposed strategies addressed one to two recommendations, whereas almost one-quarter (23%) included more than three.

- A total of **460 strategies were proposed across the 144 districts who planned to use funds for Priority 3.**
 - Over half (52%) of those districts included plans to enhance workforce capacity
 - Strategies to enhance workforce capacity proposed hiring staff (63%) more than skill-building (32%).
 - The most frequently indicated planned hire included social workers (34%).
- The **majority of proposed strategies were focused district-wide (77%) and were directed toward universal supports (59%).**
 - 22% focused on targeted or intensive supports and 13% on addressing across tiers of intensity.
- With regard to indicators for measuring or evaluating success of planned strategies, **23% of noted indicators fell within the “other” category**, meaning that the indicators were not specific enough to be coded included content was non-responsive to that portion of the ARP ESSER Plan template
 - Excluding the “other” category, the **top three most frequently proposed indicators for measuring success of planned strategies included attendance data (17%), quantifiable behavior measures (16%) (e.g., number of office discipline referrals), and surveys (13%).**
- Given sample sizes, **caution is suggested in interpretation of exploratory relationships between Priority 3 strength and comprehensiveness ratings and key variables.**
 - Generally, there were no differences in strength and comprehensiveness ratings between for Alliance/Non-Alliance or Charter/Non-Charter status, with

the exception of higher comprehensiveness ratings for Alliance versus Non-Alliance districts.

- Districts with higher strength ratings had lower rates of chronic absenteeism in 2021-22, but significant differences were not found for 2022-23.
- Districts with higher comprehensiveness ratings had the opposite pattern, with higher chronic absenteeism and suspension across both 2021-22 and 2022-23.
- Districts that allocated a higher percentage of funding to Priority 3 had lower chronic absenteeism in both 2021-22 and 2022-23.

In conclusion, this report summarizes proposed Connecticut school district efforts as presented in their submitted ARP-ESSER plans as related to the social, emotional, and mental health supports for students and staff (Priority 3). In evaluating these findings, it is important to acknowledge that these data represent planned, not implemented, strategies given data were collected from submitted ARP-ESSER district plans created over a short window of time in order to access this funding. Overall, results support that a majority of districts included emphasis on Priority 3 in their planned spending, and that the overall quality of the proposed strategies were well-aligned with recommendations on supporting social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs as provided by the US Department of Education and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. Districts were diverse in their choice of proposed strategies, with 460 different strategies included across the plans. Over half of the districts, however, did include plans to enhance workforce capacity, with about two-thirds of those strategies focused on hiring behavioral health staff such as social workers. Although cautions in interpretation are needed, the exploratory analyses highlight the complexity of relationships between setting and contextual features, planned supports, and desired outcomes. The forthcoming case studies portion of this overall project may provide further insights.

District Leader Survey

SURVEY DATA

Procedures

The District Leader Survey was distributed to all school districts in the state of Connecticut (i.e., each of the 201 districts listed on the Connecticut State Department of Education’s Ed Sight website) for completion by one district leader in each district. Superintendents were asked to complete the survey themselves or share it with a more appropriate district-level leader for completion based on their knowledge and responsibility for the district’s social, emotional, and behavioral supports, such as Directors of Pupil Personnel, Assistant Superintendents for Student Services, and Directors of Mental Health. The survey was launched electronically using the Qualtrics online platform between November 2023-January 2024.

The District Leader Survey was developed by the research team, building upon the structures provided in the IES School Pulse Panel (Institute of Education Sciences, n.d.) data dashboard. It included 50 questions across five constructs related to providing social, emotional, and behavioral support in schools: 1) planned implementation, 2) reported implementation, 3) educator support, 4) equity, and 5) evaluation. The survey targeted district practices and processes spanning the 2021-2022, 2022-2023, and 2023-2024 school years,

with items assessing plans for Fall 2024. All but three items were close-ended in nature. The survey yielded primarily quantitative information. Out of the 201 school districts, 35 school districts responded, with 32 (15.9%) completing the survey. Given this response rate, responses should be interpreted with caution and not generalized to public school districts at large. All items from the survey, along with tabulated responses, can be found in the Appendix.

FINDINGS

Below, we report findings on students and those focused on staff. Results consist of the 32 school districts whose district leaders responded to the survey and sample sizes (referred to as “n”) represents school districts. In some instances, the sample sizes vary because not all districts responded to all questions.

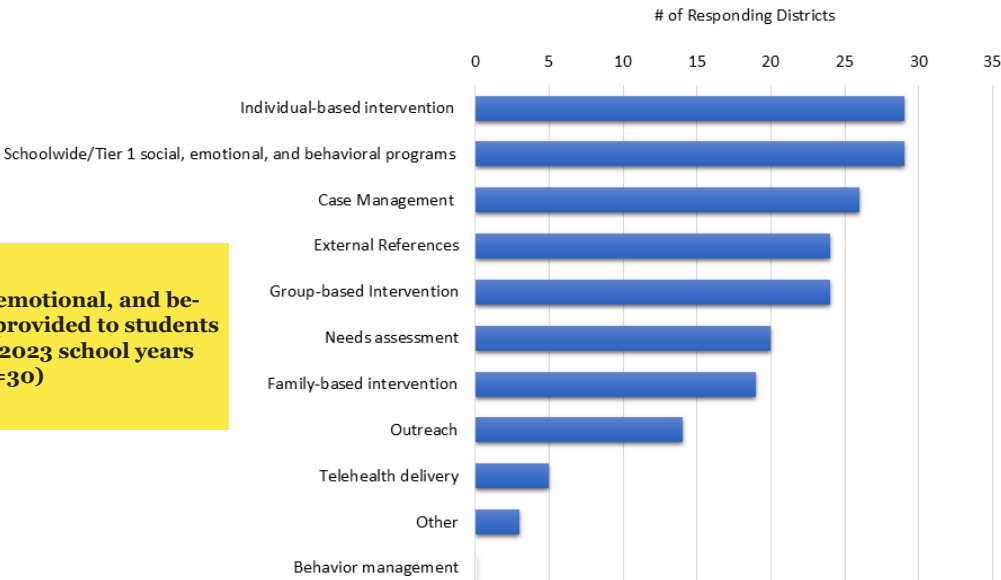
Reported District Services & Challenges Related to Students

All 32 districts reported that they implemented social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) supports for the 2021-23 and 2023-24 school years. Of those 32 districts, over 50% of districts reported that they implemented social, emotional, and behavioral supports a great deal during the school years (Table B9 & B11). These supports were most commonly funded by

federal grants, state grants, and district or school financial funding (Table B43). Between the years of 2021 and 2023, most district leaders indicated that they provided universal/schoolwide supports (88%, commonly referred to as Tier 1 supports) for social, emotional, and behavioral programs. These programs included approaches such as implementing social and emotional learning (SEL) programs and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). The three most popular SEL programs implemented during this period were Second Step, RULER and Responsive Classroom, which were reported by 12 (43%), 9 (32%), and 5 (18%) district respondents, respectively. Just over 90% of districts reported they planned to continue these SEL programs in the 2023-2024 school years.

The same number of districts (29, 96.6%) indicated that they implemented individual-based programs as those that indicated they implemented schoolwide efforts (see Figure 8) and these included such interventions as providing one-on-one counseling or therapy to students. In addition to resources provided by the school, the majority (over 93%) of districts reported that they provided resources to students to seek supports outside of school during the 2021-23 and 2023-24 school years (Table B14 & B15).

Figure 8. Social, emotional, and behavioral supports provided to students during the 2021-2023 school years (n=30)



Student Needs and Populations of Focus

All Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (2019-20), 88% of districts reported an increase in the percentage of students who sought social, emotional, and behavioral supports (n=28; Table B20), with 22 districts (71%) indicating that students with Individualized Education Program (IEPs) or 504 plans sought such services (see Figure 9 & Table B38). Nearly all districts targeted some of their supports to specific demographic groups such as students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or 504 plans as well as economically disadvantaged students (e.g., students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch) during the 2021-22 school year (Table B26 & B27)

Furthermore, gaps in academic skills were also reported as either somewhat of a problem or a major problem among over half of the reporting districts in the 2021-23 and 2023-24 school years (Table B33). Half of the reporting districts focused on reducing gaps in academic skills among

students with special education status and 21% focused on racial and ethnic gaps (Tables B35 & B37). Some of the gaps in social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes that districts reported focusing on closing were racial and ethnic gaps, income-related gaps, and English learner status gaps. However, in both years, the majority of districts (46% in 2021-23, and 45% in 2023-24) primarily focused on closing the social, emotional, and behavioral gaps present in special education (Table B30-B32).

Challenges to Implementation

Various factors limited district’s efforts to effectively provide social, emotional, and behavioral supports during the 2023-2024 school years. The most common barrier reported in providing these supports was staffing. Specifically, a little over half of districts (52%) reported insufficient professional staff coverage to manage caseloads as well as inadequate access to licensed social, emotional, and behavioral professionals (see Figure 10).

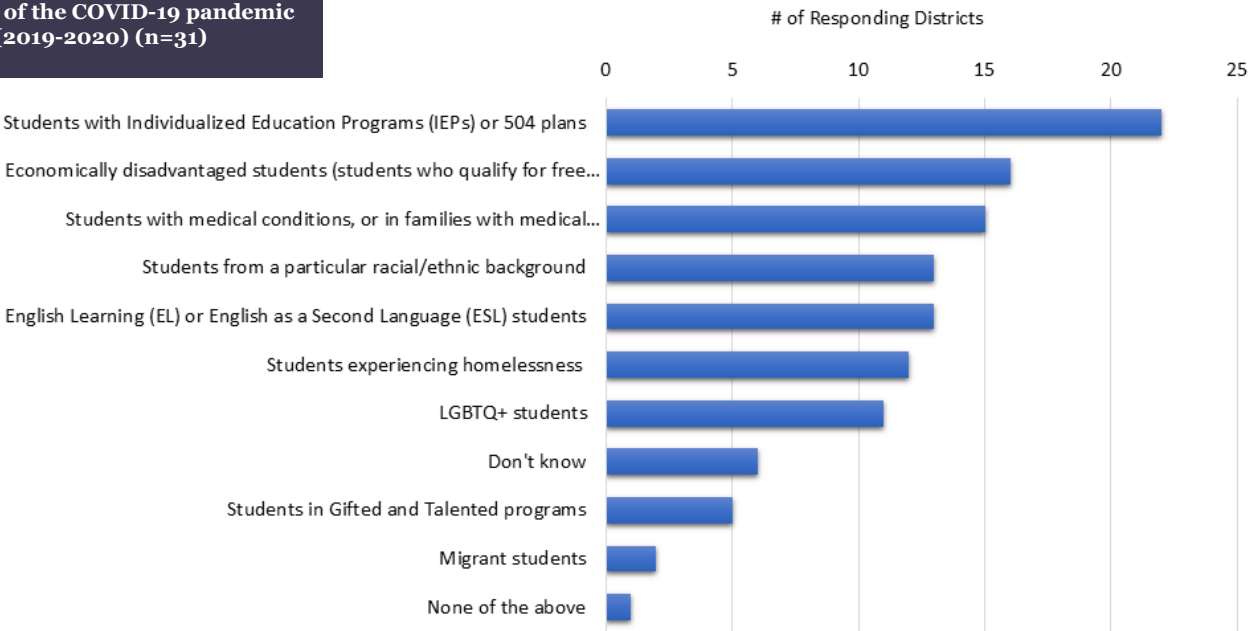
Although many districts reported there not being a challenge in accessing useful social and emotional instructional resources, 40% of districts reported it being challenging to find the time to focus on those social, emotional, and behavioral issues. Additionally, many districts (33%) reported a challenge in keeping students engaged during these school years (Table B42).

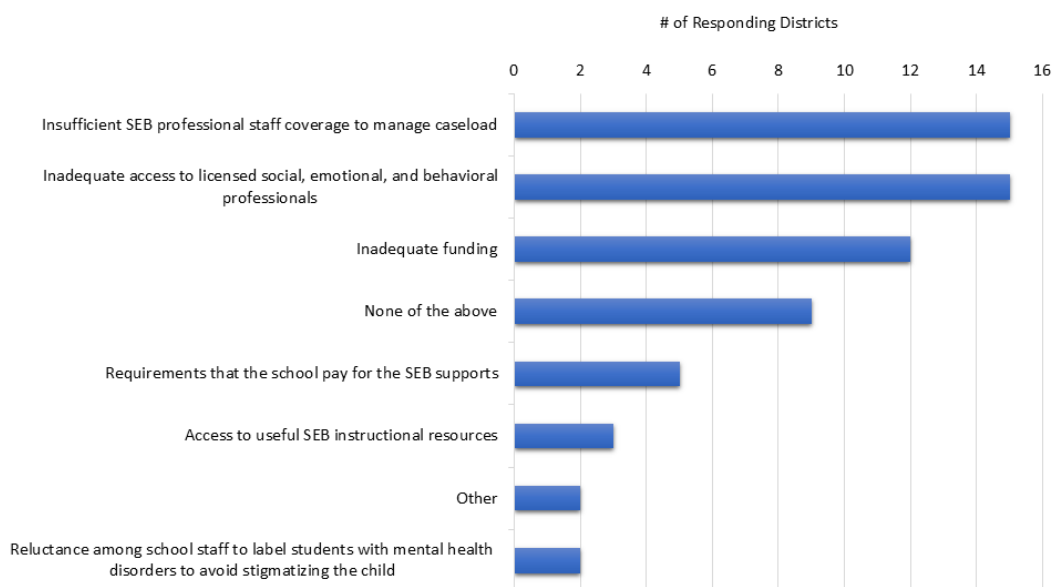
Reported District Services & Challenges Related to Staff

To help students cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, most districts (27 out of 30) reported hiring new staff to focus on student social, emotional, and behavioral well-being (Figure 11).

District leaders reported numerous benefits offered to staff in response to the pandemic during the 2021-23 and 2023-24 school years. Across these two school years, the most common benefit that leaders reported offering to staff was social, emotional, and behavioral-related professional development (n=21). District leaders also noted that professional development

Figure 9. Students who sought out individualized supports to address social, emotional, and behavioral needs since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (2019-2020) (n=31)



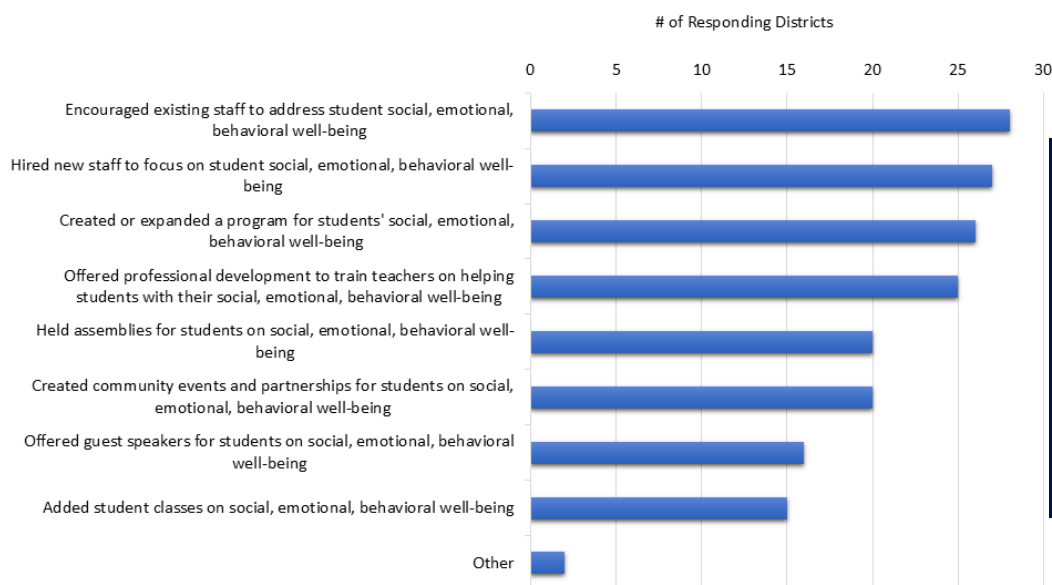


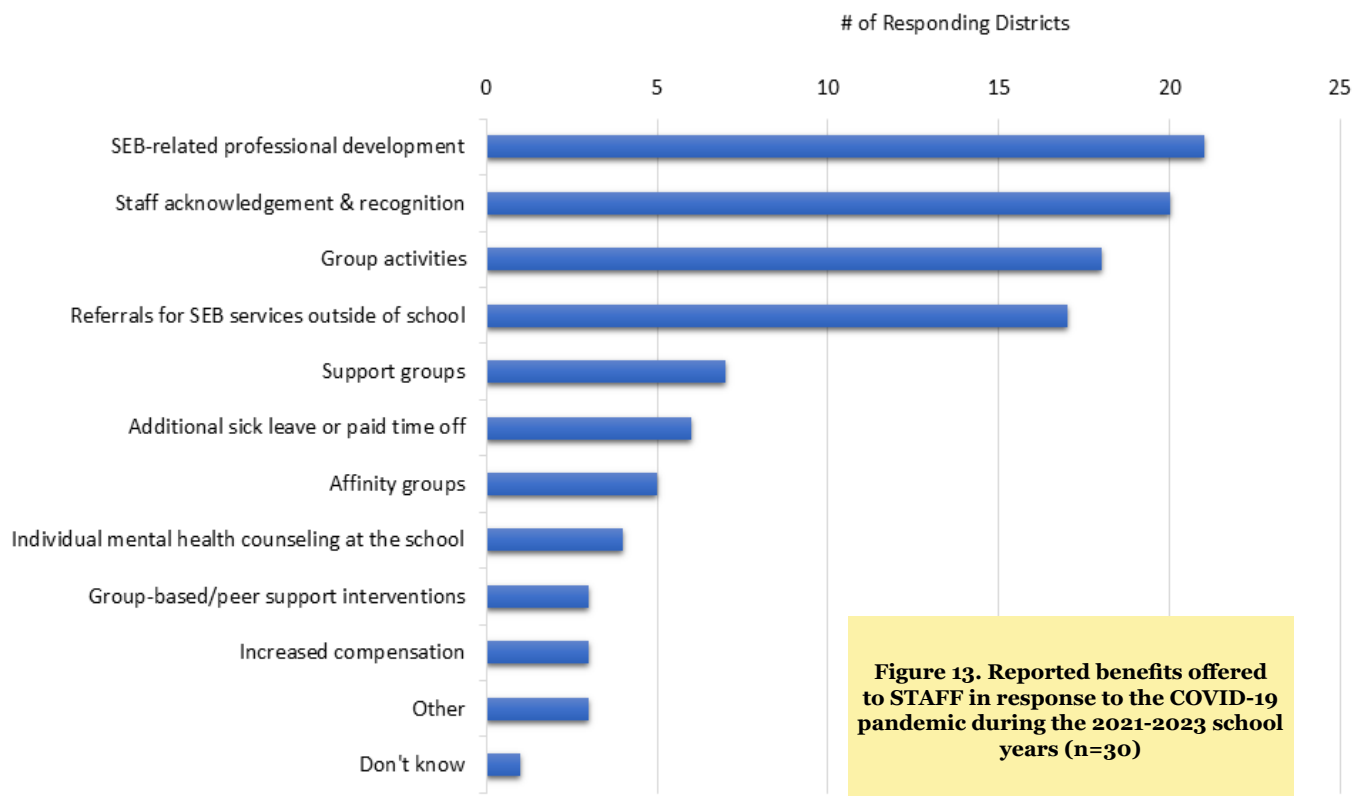
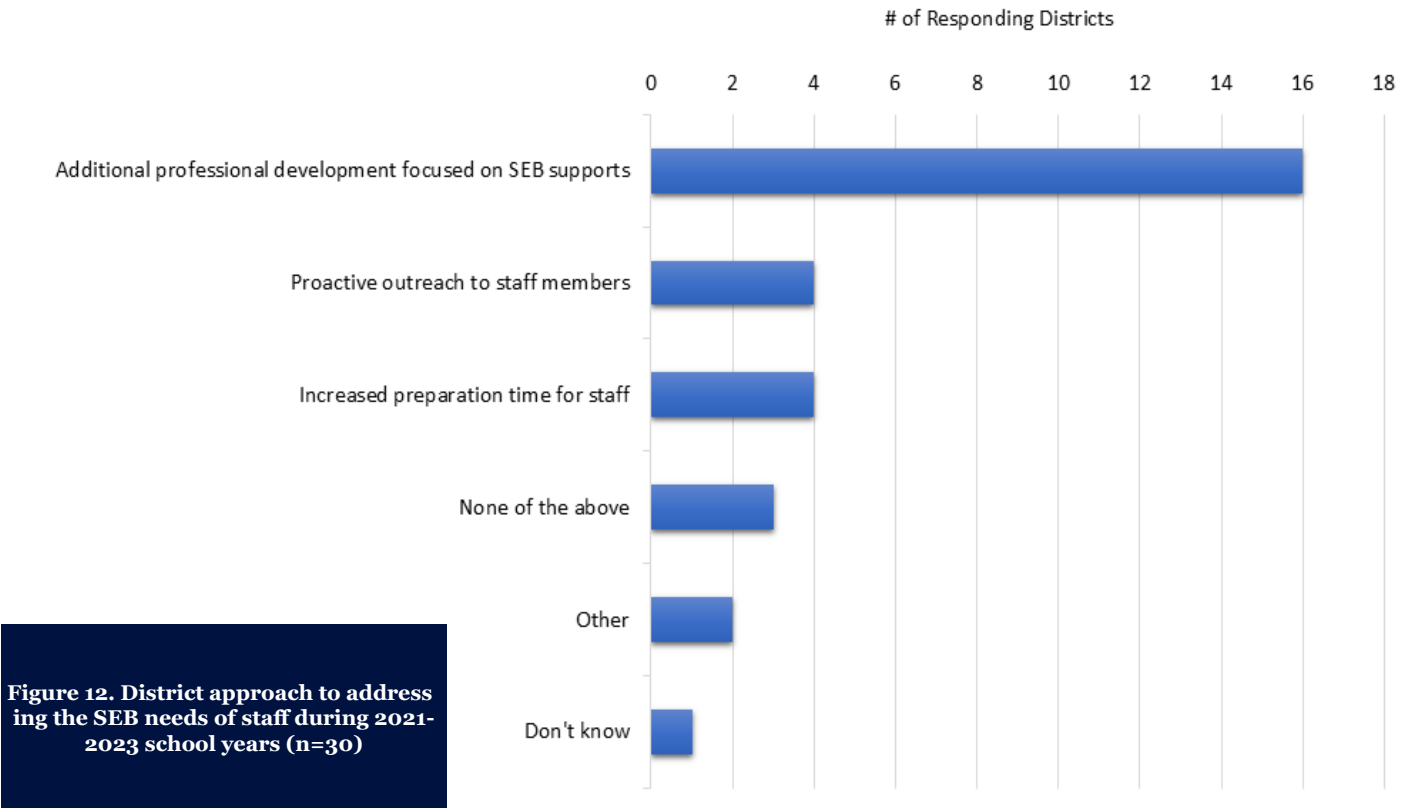
experiences were the most common approach used by educators (53%) during this same time frame. Some other benefits offered to staff were staff acknowledgment and recognition, group activities (n=20; e.g., yoga classes, meditation, walking club), and referrals for social, emotional, and behavioral services outside of school (n=17; see Figure 12 & Figure 13). This same pattern was found for the 2023-24 school year.

Staff Concerns

Though efforts to support staff were evident, district leaders also noted some increase in staff concerns. For example, 63% of district leaders reported that staff had expressed concerns about themselves or other colleagues exhibiting social, emotional, and behavioral issues had increased since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Table B51). Additionally, 83% of districts noted staff expressing concerns that students exhibiting intense social, emotional,

and behavioral challenges (e.g., depression, anxiety, trauma, etc.) had increased (Table B52). The most common challenge noted by leaders for implementing social, emotional, and behavioral supports for the 2023-24 school was staffing. Specifically, 15 (47%) districts indicated that they had inadequate licensed professionals for implementing these practices and the same percentage indicated having insufficient staff to manage such programming (Table B41).





Part 3: District Leader Interviews, Understanding Socio-Emotional Supports in Practice

METHODS Procedures

The investigation of socio-emotional supports in practice included three school districts that received ESSER funding during the COVID-19 pandemic to support the socio-emotional wellbeing of students, educators, and administrators. Based on the findings of the ARP ESSER plan review (Part 1) 20 potential districts were initially identified as having qualities and practices of interest about which the team would like to learn more. Qualifications for being included in this original district list included:

- 1. Alliance District Status
- 2. Proposed ARP ESSER Spending on Priority
- 3. The district has not been over sampled for other CCERC projects, as provided by the CCERC administrative team.

The qualitative research team invited district leaders from the original list of 20 districts to participate in interviews. This process yielded leadership representatives from three school districts that agreed to share their experiences and perceptions of socio-emotional learning implementation across their school districts during both the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns and transitions

back to in-person learning. District representatives were invited to discuss how their districts implemented socio-emotional supports for students, teachers, administrators, and families. School district personnel were recruited based on their present role as district-leader representatives (e.g., superintendent, assistant superintendent, coordinator, educator), and their reported knowledge of the social, emotional, and behavioral supports provided in the school district since fall 2021. Interviewers were the primary agents of data collection, allowing researchers to gather insights and perspectives from participants.

The interview protocol was developed by the research team, building upon the survey provided within the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) School Pulse Panel data dashboard. This survey includes questions related to providing social, emotional, and behavioral support in schools: school context, reported implementation, SEL programming, educator support, equity, and parent and family engagement. The interview protocol included questions addressing:

- 1. School Context: Understanding the unique environment and challenges within each district that shape the implementation of socio-emotional supports.
- 2. Reported Implementation of Student Supports: Gathering detailed information on how districts are

actually implementing the planned socio-emotional supports for students, identifying both successes and barriers.

- 3. SEL Programming: Exploring the specific social-emotional learning programs in place, how they are being utilized, and their impact on student outcomes.
- 4. Reported Implementation of Educator Supports: Investigating the socio-emotional supports provided to educators, recognizing the critical role they play in fostering a supportive learning environment.
- 5. Parent and Family Engagement: Examining how districts are involving parents and families in the implementation of socio-emotional supports, ensuring that these efforts are collaborative and community-focused.
- 6. Equity in Implementation: Assessing how districts are addressing equity in their implementation of socio-emotional supports, ensuring that all students have access to the resources they need.
- 7. Successes in Socio-Emotional Learning: Highlighting the successes in supporting the socio-emotional learning of students, teachers, and administrators, providing models of best practices that can be replicated or adapted in other districts.



📷 (Stock Photo)

The interview invited school district representatives to share district practices and processes within schools spanning the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years. The interview yielded insights related to districts' contexts prior to the availability of ESSER funding, critical changes in practice, and outcomes that have reverberated across districts since the funding has concluded.

The research team initiated outreach to school district leaders in early 2024. Invitations for participation were sent to these districts, and ultimately, leaders from three districts responded affirmatively, agreeing to participate in interviews. These interviews were conducted between April and June 2024, allowing the team to collect detailed insights on how SEL programs and supports were implemented during the pandemic and the return to in-person learning. Interviews were conducted virtually according to the school leaders' preferences and took place between April and June 2024. The virtual format provided several advantages, including flexibility in scheduling and increased accessibility for district leaders, many of whom were managing significant responsibilities. Conducting the interviews online allowed participants to engage from their own settings, reducing travel time and logistical barriers, which might have otherwise delayed or limited participation. This approach also ensured that interviews could be conducted efficiently without compromising the depth or quality of the responses. The use of a virtual platform enabled the research team to maintain consistency in the interview process. Researchers used a semi-structured interview protocol, ensuring consistency across responses while allowing for flexibility in discussing each district's unique experiences. This process provided valuable data on the evolution of SEL practices and the impact of ESSER funding from Fall 2021 through the end of the 2022-2023 school year. The interviews also illuminated the long-term effects of these supports and the challenges of sustaining them post-pandemic.

Sample

Interviews (N= 6) were conducted with representatives in diverse leadership roles from three districts. In the consortium district, two individuals were interviewed: an assistant superintendent and an executive director. The rural district had a single interview with the superintendent. The city district included three interviewees: the superintendent, an assistant superintendent, and a pupil personnel staff member. This approach ensured representation across various roles and district types. Demographics for each of the districts are provided below.

Consortium District (8,942 students):

- A group of districts that collaborate to share resources and offer specialized programs, such as magnet schools, to provide students with more educational opportunities.
- Predominantly Hispanic (42.7%) and African American (31.0%), with 4.8% Asian and 15.7% White students.
- 66.0% of students qualify for Free or Reduced Lunch (FRL), 8.7% are English Language Learners (ELL), and 20.3% are Students with Disabilities (SWD).

Rural District (3,224 students):

- Covers a large, sparsely populated area, often facing limited resources and long travel distances, but strives to provide quality education for students in remote locations.
- Majority Hispanic (72.7%) with a smaller proportion of African American (3.2%), White (21.0%), and Asian (0.7%) students.
- Higher FRL rate at 74.2%, ELL at 31.6%, and SWD at 19.8%.

City District (6,392 students):

- Serves an urban area with a diverse population, offering a broad range of educational programs, but faces challenges like overcrowded schools and varied student needs.
- High Hispanic representation (51.7%) and African American (29.9%), followed by White (10.4%) and Asian (4.0%) populations.

- 67.1% FRL, 16.5% ELL, and 22.4% SWD.

ANALYSIS

The qualitative data analysis process began with data familiarization, where researchers immersed themselves in the collected data to gain a deep understanding of its content and context (Saldaña, 2015; Saldana, 2016). During this phase, the researchers began to identify patterns, themes, and significant points that informed the subsequent stages of analysis. Initial impressions were documented, and the researcher began to organize data segments that were relevant to the research questions. This phase set the foundation for a systematic and rigorous analysis by helping the researchers become intimately acquainted with the data (Saldaña, 2015).

Following familiarization, the researchers engaged in coding, where the data was systematically organized into categories. Coding involved labeling segments of data with descriptive or conceptual tags that captured the essence of the content (Saldaña, 2015; Schram, 2006). These codes included a mix of deductive, pre-determined codes based on existing theories or literature and inductive codes that emerged from the data. The process was iterative, often requiring multiple rounds of coding as the researchers refined and revised codes to better capture the nuances in the data. As codes were developed, they were grouped into broader categories that represent the main patterns or concepts emerging from the data.

Finally, the analysis proceeded to the interpretation and theme development phase, where the researcher synthesized the coded data into meaningful themes and narratives that represent analytical constructs that offered deeper insights into the research questions.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that may impact the generalizability and scope of its findings. The small sample size of three districts limits representation of the broader educational landscape in Connecticut. This narrow scope may not fully capture

the diversity of district experiences, particularly those with differing demographics, resources, or geographic contexts. Additionally, the voluntary nature of participation introduces selection bias, as districts that opted in may have unique motivations or perceived success with implementing socio-emotional learning, potentially skewing the findings toward more favorable outcomes. The reliance on self-reported data from district leaders through semi-structured interviews is another limitation, as it may not fully reflect the experiences of teachers, students, or families. Leaders’ accounts may also be influenced by social desirability bias, emphasizing successes while downplaying challenges.

The study faced several sampling limitations that impacted the breadth and depth of participant representation. Responses rates were low for interview participation, due to limited availability of district personnel as well as competition from other CCERC projects also looking to recruit participants. In addition, many of the personnel who were instrumental in developing or implementing ARP ESSER plans were no longer in their positions due to the temporary nature of pandemic-re-

lated funding. Once funding ended, these positions were terminated, resulting in a loss of institutional memory in some cases, limiting the study’s access to key individuals with first-hand knowledge of the implementation process. These limitations underscore the challenges of conducting comprehensive research in a constrained and competitive environment while highlighting the importance of strategic planning to mitigate such barriers.

Despite these limitations, the study offers meaningful insights into the implementation of socio-emotional learning (SEL) strategies during a critical time. The qualitative data from district leaders provides a nuanced understanding of the challenges and successes associated with SEL initiatives in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The semi-structured interview approach ensured consistency while allowing flexibility for participants to share their unique contexts, contributing valuable perspectives on equity, educator support, and community engagement. Furthermore, the study’s focused time frame captures pivotal transitions during the pandemic, offering practical insights that can inform future SEL implementation and highlight

strategies for sustaining such initiatives post-pandemic.

FINDINGS

The findings highlight school districts’ concerted efforts to support students and staff during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing a holistic approach to well-being alongside academic success. To sustain these efforts, districts utilized federal funding to hire social workers and family engagement specialists, ensuring ongoing support for students, families, and educators. Despite these advancements, challenges such as funding constraints and a regression to pre-pandemic mindsets have complicated efforts to maintain a balanced focus on academic and emotional well-being, underscoring the need to sustain the progress achieved. Below are discussions of district-wide socio-emotional supports, supports for students and families, support for educators, professional learning, staffing, and challenges to sustaining practices.

Table 6: Implemented Socio-Emotional Supports

District	Quote
City	...we had our advisory class that weekly had a social emotional lesson aligned to the CASEL standards. This was something that one of our social workers was involved in developing the curriculum, but then it was shared with the entire school. So it wasn't just, "Here social workers are doing social emotional learning," the entire building would do it.
Rural	Most of them were Zoom based because of where we were with COVID-19. But they were doing yoga, they're watching a yoga instructor and doing yoga at home in their living rooms. We were doing these special contests and team building things and wellness checks and just... We also, through [grant funded project], we had the mood meter and all the work from Yale. So we were trying to embed that with our teachers and our leaders and our staff members. So we really were actively engaged in trying to support them through the pandemic, but also in what we were already working on through the SEL lens.
Consortium	So one of the primary things we did with the ESSER funding, and we're continuing to do so, is ensure that we have staff in place to support the social emotional well-being of our students. So we were intentional about hiring additional social workers for the buildings. As I'm sure you'll hear from other districts, with the ESSER funding running out, the decision we had to make was whether or not we were going to retain those supports. Fortunately, we're in a place where we are able to retain those supports, because we believe that removing those additional social workers would be at a severe detriment to our students.

District-wide Socio-Emotional Supports

The school districts in the sample implemented socio-emotional supports in various ways. For example, the city district created a curriculum for social-emotional learning (SEL) based on CASEL standards, developed by school mental health professionals and applied by all school staff. During the pandemic, activities like yoga, contests, and wellness checks were offered virtually, with a focus on staff and student well-being, using tools like the Yale-developed mood meter, a CASEL approved SEL program.

District representatives described the implementation of socio-emotional supports brought forth through hiring and utilizing mental health professionals to develop approaches to best support the socio-emotional needs of students, teachers, and staff, despite funding ending.

District representatives described a district-wide shift in focus toward wellbeing and reified perceptions of the relationship between socio-emotional wellbeing and academic excellence. During the pandemic, these districts adopted a more holistic approach to supporting administrators, teachers, staff, and families, balancing academic

achievement with personal well-being. This approach included modeling restorative conversations, reflecting on interactions, and fostering intentional relationships within the school and community.

Additionally, while a focus on academics remained a priority, there was a significant focus on addressing social-emotional needs, ensuring the support extended beyond academic discussions and school improvement.

Table 7: Impact of the Pandemic on Well-Being

District	Quote
Consortium	...post-pandemic, our approach to both the way we support administrators, teachers, all staff, and families is a much more holistic focus on both this balance of academic achievement and fulfillment of the whole person... we are modeling restorative conversations and conferences in every way we can, we are being more reflective in how we interact with each other, whether it be adult-to-adult, adult-to-child, school-to-family. We're much more intentional in thinking about our interactions with each other and the community.
City	I think people definitely stepped up academically, but in terms of delivering a variety of services in this unique kind of situation. But social emotional, I think we weren't just sitting talking about things that related to academics and school improvement...

District-wide Socio-Emotional Supports

During the COVID-19 pandemic, school districts in the sample implemented a range of supports to address students' social, emotional, and academic needs, focusing on socio-emotional well-being alongside academic success. Supports included implementation of a curriculum based on CASEL standards for social-emotional learning (SEL) and incorporating activities such as yoga, and wellness checks to promote mental health. This approach emphasized a holistic balance of academic and emotional development, integrating restorative practices and community-building activities. Additionally, districts provided a range of socio-emotional and academic supports, with a strong emphasis on SEL and restorative practices to help rebuild community and address trauma.

Leaders placed a strong emphasis on restorative practices and socio-emotional learning (SEL) to rebuild community and improve student well-being. One district prioritized daily SEL programming, such as Second Step (CASEL approved SEL curriculum), especially for younger students who faced isolation during virtual learning. Another District similarly shifted its focus to SEL over academics, incorporating trauma-informed approaches like yoga, wellness checks, and activities through a grant funded program to support students' emotional recovery.

One district strengthened its restorative practices, applying a more strategic, tiered approach to both proactive and reactive student behavior management. SEL programming, like Second Step, was prioritized daily, especially for younger students who had

experienced isolation, helping them rebuild social skills. Another district similarly emphasized SEL over academics, focusing on trauma-informed approaches and integrating activities like yoga and wellness checks through grant funded project. The consortium district expanded its tiered support systems, especially for students needing more intensive interventions. Post-pandemic, additional social workers were hired to provide both mandated and non-mandated services, allowing for broader student access to necessary mental health resources. Likewise, the city district implemented a caseload approach to capture the needs of students and families.

Two districts emphasized culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices post-pandemic. The consortium district integrated a trauma-informed lens in its professional development and restorative practices to better

support students’ diverse needs. These efforts were designed to build community, improve school climate, and create a less punitive environment. The rural district shifted staff performance measures to focus primarily on SEL, ensuring students received the support they needed to navigate pandemic-re-

lated trauma. Supporting families was also crucial in supporting students. The consortium district utilized ESSER funds to enhance resources like family engagement specialists and provide essentials such as food and technology (e.g., hotspots). The rural district conducted

surveys to understand family needs and delivered hotspots, but acknowledged challenges in reaching all families during the height of the pandemic. Both districts recognized that families were struggling alongside students, and proactive engagement became a critical part of their strategy.

Table 8: Students

District	Quote
Rural	Well, I know that COVID allowed us the opportunity to invest in some professional development that I don't know the district would've been able to afford necessarily. So I feel like we are getting at some of our SEL opportunities. For example, we trained the [district] staff in project-based learning, which doesn't sound like it's necessarily directly linked to SEL, but we've allowed our students to do these project-based opportunities linked to social emotional development and their feelings about certain things.
Rural	We really had our primary focus. We even wrote all of the SLOs as they talk about in the evaluation process, the Student Learning Objectives. We really shifted them all to SEL. There wasn't really an academic focus, it was really about what can we teach? How can we support their development and where they are in response to this, it was basically trauma. We were experiencing some kind of trauma and what can we do to support kiddos at every level and the staff and the leaders and everybody to get us through whatever this strange period is.
Consortium	I will say that our efforts, both during the pandemic and post-pandemic, have really focused on strengthening our restorative practices approach. And so, we have done a significant amount of training with multiple stakeholder groups post-pandemic on applying a more strategic restorative lens to both our tier one, as well as our reactive approaches to student behavior, in terms of direct SEL programming, at our elementary schools, we have always, for many years, we've been using Second Step as a primary resource for our schools.
Consortium	Whether it be families with food insecurity or families with limited technology resources, ESSER funds were able to be utilized, and it's great for a district to say, We were able to purchase hotspots.
City	We also had all of our non-certified staff members, so our paraprofessionals, our tutors, our family support specialists. What we did, I remember... I pretty much oversee all things pre-K through five, and we basically would divide and conquer. We would take those staff members and we would divide them up and give them caseloads. So they were responsible for outreaching to the family, not necessarily through this platform that we're using, but phone call, checking in. "What do you need? How can we get you connected to the resources that are available to you?

Districts in the sample described using return data and observational feedback from the community to monitor effectiveness of offered supports. The consortium district views student retention as a key indicator of success, noting that families returned to the schools post-pandemic because they felt supported and valued. Additionally, the rural district expanded its “new arrivals” program, particularly the

SLIFE (Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education) program, to better support the growing population of new students from specific regions, ensuring their academic success.

Support for Educators

District leaders optimized opportunities to maintain connection with teachers and administrators through check-ins and

supports that allowed for the wellbeing of teachers and staff as they navigated the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic for themselves and their families. One participant described prioritizing time to check-in consistently with staff, but the opportunities have not been sustainable since the return to in-person schooling.

Table 9: Support for Educators

District	Quote
Consortium	We never stopped check-ins. Because we have to remember that the adults, like the staff members and even us, we were experiencing it as well, whether it was our own illness or our own children that were ill. So just having that grace and that flexibility and allowing them the space to do what it was that they needed to do.
City	... we used Wednesdays as this sort of weekly social emotional check-in. And there was a different thing happening on Wednesdays where we had more time than we do now in our current calendar with the teachers and leadership team.

The excerpts above highlight various efforts made by educational leaders to support staff well-being, especially in the context of the pandemic. Leaders in the sample discussed a few key initiatives to support staff. They described efforts to understand trauma for adults as well as students. The pandemic broadened awareness that both students and staff experienced trauma, regardless of race or economic status. Leaders recognized the importance of supporting not just students but the whole community, including the adults who support students who are struggling. Similarly, leaders described a holistic support approach. Post-pandemic, leaders described a shift from a purely academic focus to a more holistic support model. This included prioritizing social and emotional learning (SEL) for both staff and students, as well as encouraging reflective interactions and restorative practices in meetings and conversations. This also

included regular check-ins with administrators and staff, which became essential to maintain connection and support. Flexibility was given to staff, especially those with health concerns, by allowing remote work or individualized accommodations.

Professional Learning

During and after the pandemic, districts placed significant emphasis on supporting professional learning to enhance the well-being of both staff and students. Leaders recognized that trauma was not limited to specific socioeconomic or racial groups, which shifted their approach to supporting educators and students. Districts implemented reflective practices, encouraging staff to consider how their actions impact students and families, and fostering a holistic focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) alongside academic achievement.

Schools also began integrating restorative practices and community-building activities, creating a more thoughtful and supportive environment for both staff and students. In terms of concrete support, districts used funding to add professional learning days focused on community building and staff well-being. Additionally, regular check-ins with administrators and staff ensured ongoing support throughout the crisis. Funding for COVID-19 also provided an opportunity to invest in as training staff in project-based learning, which, while not directly linked to SEL, allowed students to engage in projects tied to social-emotional development. Despite these efforts, some leaders expressed uncertainty about how well these initiatives addressed the challenges staff faced, acknowledging the widespread strain on both adults and students during the pandemic.

Table 10: Professional Learning

District	Quote
Rural	Well, I know that COVID allowed us the opportunity to invest in some professional development that I don't know the district would've been able to afford necessarily. So I feel like we are getting at some of our SEL opportunities. For example, we trained the [district] staff in project-based learning, which doesn't sound like it's necessarily directly linked to SEL, but we've allowed our students to do these project-based opportunities linked to social emotional development and their feelings about certain things.
Consortium	When we came back from the pandemic, we actually added in a day ... Where prior to the beginning of the school year, and I'm not going to get the numbers, but let's say we used to have three days before kids came back, we added a fourth day. We used that fourth day for pure community building and encouraging

Staffing

The districts in the sample prioritized sustaining staffing levels to support student well-being, particularly by retaining social workers and other specialists beyond the pandemic. Recognizing the critical role social workers play in supporting students, the district chose to keep these positions, despite the financial strain, as removing

them would have significantly impacted students. ESSER funding has also been utilized to bolster family support, including the hiring of family engagement specialists in schools, allowing for increased resources and communication with families. Finally, to address disparities in learning caused by the pandemic, the city district hired “acceleration specialists,” focusing on literacy for elementary students.

These positions, transparently set as temporary, were funded for three years, and the consortium district is now in the final year of this initiative. While grants like ESSER have helped maintain essential staffing and resources, there are growing concerns the district leaders about how to sustain these roles moving forward as funding diminishes.

Table 11: Staffing

District	Quote
Consortium	...the decision we had to make was whether or not we were going to retain those supports. Fortunately, we're in a place where we are able to retain those supports, because we believe that removing those additional social workers would be at a severe detriment to our students.
Consortium	So I'll also say that, again, not specifically with the ESSER money to fund these positions. So we have family engagement specialists, family and community engagement specialists that every school has one of these positions, and what the ESSER funds allowed us to do, is provide above and beyond resources to the families that we weren't necessarily providing before.
City	There was a core group of certified teachers that we did actually hire, and we called them the acceleration specialists. It was a very specific COVID related role at each and every elementary school specific to literacy to help to bridge those achievement gaps that we knew that our children were experiencing because of their interrupted learning. We had established that as being a three-year position. We currently right now are at year three with that position, so we've been very transparent with those particular staff members.

 (Stock Photo)

Challenges to Sustaining Practices

The interviews highlighted a challenge in sustaining some effective practices after the pandemic. One district leaders decribed disintegrating collaborative community efforts, while another described staff members returning to pre-pandemic ideologies, despite efforts to maintain a focus on social-emotional learning (SEL).

During the pandemic, there was a heightened focus on SEL, equity, and supporting families, with educators and leaders fully engaged in addressing both academic and emotional needs. However, post-pandemic, some district leaders described a noticeable return to traditional discipline expectations and academic priorities. This regression posed a challenge for leaders aiming to sustain the progress made in SEL and holistic support, especially as

external pressures—such as state accountability measures—emphasize academic outcomes over SEL, complicating efforts to maintain a balanced focus on student well-being. This finding echoes researchers’ findings related to the benefits of continued delivery of socio-emotional supports for K-12 students as an avenue for continued connection, community, and opportunities for school success (Cipriano & Strambler, 2024; Sandilos et al., 2022).

Table 12: Challenges to Sustaining Practices

District	Quote
City	So, I think that some of the community collaborations that were happening, so as the superintendent in [my district], I would attend a weekly meeting that had members from the fire department, the police department, the State University, and the medical facilities in town. We would meet and have this emergency management meeting to just go over what’s happening on a weekly basis. And I feel like we don’t do that anymore, but I loved that meeting, because we had discussions and it was always about, do you have everything you need? What’s happening over here? Here’s a situation that arose that this is how we solved it... And I found that to be so valuable and wanted to know why it ended. Why are we not staying connected in this way? I really found it to be quite a valuable tool. I don’t know if we could pull it off now that we’re back to normal every week, but I think it should be happen- ing regularly. And that was one of the things that I really wished we could have continued, because to me it was like I said, really valuable.
Consortium	Well, I think we were all thrust into addressing it, because we were all home. We were all dealing with our own individual families, so I do think that, during pandemic, it was kind of in your face. I mean, there’s no other way to say it, right? We were all struggling with our own familial issues, and children being home and parents that we maybe couldn’t see for a long period of time. Unfortunately, and I’m just going to say I’m sorry, unfortunately, I do feel like many of our staff have gone back to pre-pandemic ideologies and mindset. And so, that continues to be the struggle of the work that we do with our administrators that seeps down to the schools. I think that, much like society has gone back to pre-pandemic mindset in many ways, I think that many of our school staff have gone back to that pre-pandemic-

This dissolution of practices and mindsets build during the pandemic has left some leaders feeling a sense of loss, particularly in relation to the collaborative and human-centered approaches that emerged during the pandemic. The continuing challenge now lies in balancing the focus between academic success and the holistic well-being of students, ensuring that the valuable lessons learned during the pandemic are not forgotten as the education system navigates a return to normalcy.



(Stock Photo)

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the themes presented here from interviews with district leaders in three districts provide insight into how socio-emotional supports during and after the pandemic are understood and implemented in different districts in Connecticut. The findings underscore the importance and challenges of adopting a holistic approach to education that equally prioritizes socio-emotional well-being and academic success. The pandemic brought to light the deep connection between mental health and learning across school communities, prompting districts to implement various socio-emotional and academic supports for students, teachers, and administrators. According to participants, programs based on CASEL standards (Skoog et al., 2024) for social-emotional learning (SEL), along with wellness checks, yoga, and restorative practices helped schools address trauma and rebuild community connections. These efforts helped both students and staff navigate the emotional challenges brought on by the pandemic while fostering a supportive and inclusive school environment. Participant experiences reveal that shifting to a more balanced approach that prioritizes both socio-emotional wellbeing alongside academic achievement, can help schools better meet the diverse needs of their communities while ensuring wellbeing and academic success.

Support for educators was equally crucial to participants, as leaders acknowledged that staff well-being directly influences student success. The use of ESSER funds allowed for enhanced professional development, a focus on community-building, implementation of trauma-informed practices, and staff reflection. According to district leaders, regular check-ins and flexibility for educators were essential in providing ongoing support, particularly during the transition back to in-person learning. However, the interviews reveal that despite these initiatives, many educators continued to face substantial stress and uncertainty regarding the sustainability of these efforts. This highlights the need for continued investment in staff well-being

and professional growth, ensuring that educators are equipped to support both themselves and their students in the post-pandemic educational landscape. Although the districts reported making considerable progress in addressing the immediate needs of students and educators during the pandemic, the interviews also revealed the ongoing challenge of sustaining these efforts in a post-pandemic landscape. Family engagement and maintaining essential staffing, including social workers and mental health specialists, were key priorities that helped bridge the gap between school and home life. However, as the post-pandemic period has shown, there is a risk of losing the progress made in addressing the socio-emotional needs of students and staff alongside a focus on academic achievement. Moving forward, the state, districts, and schools must remain committed to a balanced approach that integrates socio-emotional learning with academic instruction, ensuring the long-term well-being and success of the entire school community.

In response to the challenges posed by the pandemic, schools implemented a range of support systems for students, educators, and families, prioritizing socio-emotional well-being alongside academic success. Districts adopted CASEL-based social-emotional learning (SEL) programs, incorporating activities like yoga and wellness checks to promote mental health. A holistic approach to education emphasized restorative practices, community building, and trauma-informed care. Educators received support through regular check-ins, flexibility, and professional development, while districts focused on family engagement and maintaining essential staffing. Despite these efforts and primarily due to a lack of time and resources, leaders faced challenges in addressing widespread stress, as the post-pandemic period saw challenges in sustaining holistic support systems.

IMPLICATIONS

Findings from this mixed-methods project provide insights regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the types of social-emotional proposed and implemented supports during and following the

pandemic, and the potential effectiveness of those strategies on the well-being of students and faculty/staff. This work is important given the majority of Connecticut districts (77%) that submitted ARP ESSER plans indicated intent to use funds specifically for social, emotional, and mental health of students and staff, and over 80 million in funding was expected to be directed toward social, emotional, and mental health of students and staff throughout Connecticut. The importance of providing additional support during the pandemic for social-emotional learning also aligns with prior research suggesting the role of school resources and leadership for such implementation. For example, Zieher et al. (2023) found that during the pandemic, one of the strongest predictors of teachers implementing social and emotional learning practices with students was receiving guidance and support from the district or school.

One key implication is that funding to sustain support for advancements made through ARP ESSER funds is needed; this finding was revealed across each project arm. Connecticut school and district leaders voiced concerns about what happens next in relation to their capacity around social and emotional programming for students and staff, especially since hiring of staff was a key strategy used by districts used to support students. Pre-pandemic findings from a national survey of district administrators reported that nearly half of administrators desired to use a more proactive approach to identifying and supporting student social, emotional, and behavioral needs (Chafouleas et al, 2024). ARP ESSER funding may have contributed to reducing that tension in that, nationally, over 2,700 districts reported using ARP ESSER spending to enhance mental health supports (Arundel, 2023). School and district leaders need pathways to ensure continued proactive and preventive solutions. Examples such as forming partnerships and braiding state and federal funding have been noted as potential opportunities to sustainability (Duncan & Syverson, 2022; Hoover, 2024). The emphasis on sustainability and other recommendations are also relevant to new revisions to the Connecticut School Climate Policy that requires all school boards

to adopt approaches that support the learning environments and social-emotional well-being of students. (Connecticut Association of Board of Education, n.d.)

With this consideration, three main themes organize the implications of findings across project arms: **(1) WORK FORCE, (2) STUDENTS, and (3) IMPROVING DATA SYSTEMS**

(1) WORK FORCE

Ensure sustainability of staffing

Sustainability should drive decisions regarding initiative implementation. Leaders should proactively establish plans to evaluate outcomes and identify continued resource needs beyond time-limited grant funds, particularly staffing resources.

- Findings from the ARP ESSER plan analysis indicated over half (52%) of districts intended to use funds to enhance workforce capacity, with the majority of strategies prioritizing hiring staff (63%) more so than skill-building (32%). Survey results indicated that district leaders struggled to secure adequate licensed professionals for implementing and managing intended practices to support social-emotional supports. As the funding period comes to a close, a central concern is sustainability of staffing that was secured. District representatives interviewed noted wide variation in plans, with some reporting plans to sustain staffing levels given recognition of their critical role in supporting student well-being whereas others described plans to discontinue those supports as intended for a specific post-COVID period.

Clear communication across the district community (families, school personnel, leadership) is needed around the intentional planning for the sustainability or discontinuance of funded positions.

- Some district representatives interviewed noted that uncertainties regarding continuation of some positions could fuel early staff departures, and thus, it is important to be transparent about staffing plans (temporary nature of position, intent to maintain) to reduce additional staff transitions.

Make social-emotional supports a core component to professional learning (Skoog-Hoffman et al., 2024)

Ensure that all staff continue to receive ongoing comprehensive professional learning on high quality social-emotional supports that are useful for students as well as their own well-being.

- Training should include practical strategies for fostering emotional resilience, peer relationships, and mental health awareness (Gimbert et al., 2023).
- District wide training can incorporate trauma-informed care, whole student and staff community building, and holistic support that extends to the collective school community, including students, teachers, staff and administrators (Gimbert et al., 2023).

Ensure school leaders are well-versed in high quality social-emotional practices and models for integrating content in their setting.

- School leaders serve as important models, yet many district leaders surveyed reported finding it challenging to find the time to focus on those social, emotional, and behavioral issues. District leader knowledge and beliefs have been suggested as an important lever to engaging in more preventive social, emotional, and behavioral approaches (Chafouleas et al., 2024). It is therefore important that professional learning and supports also include administrators as key decision makers.

Provide specialized training in trauma-informed education, as many students and staff may continue to experience pandemic-related traumas.

- Training should include strategies to both respond to the challenges that many students and school staff continue to face related to trauma and loss; as well as opportunities to build a community of support for teachers, staff and administrators as they navigate the sequelae of experiences of their own pandemic-related trauma or loss (Brown & Haynes-Thoby, In Press; Harper & Neubauer, 2021; Wilson & Hover, 2024).

Prioritize employee wellness

Strengthen structures for cross-setting and cross-agency coordination in ensuring a continuum of employee wellness supports

- Findings from the survey indicated that 63% of district leaders reported staff expressing concerns with themselves or other colleagues exhibiting social, emotional, and behavioral concerns had increased since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The wellbeing of school leaders has been shown to both impact teacher interpretations of classroom behaviors, and access to optimal school functioning (Sandilos et al., 2022). Leader functioning can directly influence the impact of those served (Bloom, 2023). As such, the wellbeing of school leaders can support student social-emotional wellbeing and influence leader's ability to interpret student wellbeing.
- Intentional intra-district collaboration can aid in the maintenance of the burgeoning paradigm shift that considers the whole person, including teachers, staff, and district leaders in their continued work to best support their students.

(2) STUDENTS

Continue enhanced focus on social and emotional well-being of students

Survey findings revealed that, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (2019-20), 88% of districts reported an increase in the percentage of students who sought social, emotional, and behav-

ioral supports, (Table B20).

- The ARP ESSER plan analysis found districts that allocated a higher percentage of funding to Priority 3 had lower chronic absenteeism in both 2021-22 and 2022-23.
- Investments in the implementation and maintenance of socio-emotional learning has been shown to positively impact students' wellbeing across domains, including mental health, academic success, and functioning (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2022).

Put in place better structures for evaluating implementation of SEL practices

- The ARP ESSER plan analysis suggested that districts indicated they planned to or did include plans for evaluating implementation, but the scope and quality of implementation is unclear

Continue delivery of more intensive social-emotional supports for students receiving special education services, and attend to disproportionate gaps for other sub-groups (SES, EL status, race, ethnicity).

- Survey findings revealed that, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (2019-20), 88% of districts reported an increase in the percentage of students who sought social, emotional, and behavioral supports, (Table B20). specifically pertaining to students with Individualized Education Program (IEPs) or 504 plans (Table B38).
- Related, survey findings suggested that many districts saw gaps in social, emotional, and behavioral skills between demographic groups in their districts and worked hard to reduce those gaps throughout the 2021-23 and 2023-24 school years. Some of the gaps that districts focused on closing were racial and ethnic gaps, income-related gaps, and English learner status gaps. However, in both years, the majority of districts (46% in 2021-23, and 45% in 2023-24) focused heavily on closing the social, emotional, and behavioral gaps present in special education. (Tables B28-B32)
- In interviews, district representatives described efforts to engage and support students, especially those that experienced greater risks to wellbeing. Building connection, community, and opportunities for school success will benefit continued delivery of socio-emotional for K-12 students, including for students receiving special education services, under-resourced students, and marginalized students (Cipriano & Strambler, 2024).

(3) IMPROVING DATA SYSTEMS

Strengthen district guidance on ways to evaluate social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes.

- Findings from this project were limited given the few or more indirect indicators of social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. Indicators such as exclusionary discipline (suspension) do not offer insight into positive, preventive success. Although attendance is certainly a critical indicator, it does not directly measure social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. Districts also struggled to define indicators for measuring or evaluating social, emotional, and behavioral success, with about a quarter of the indicators noted within the ARP ESSER plans not specific enough to be coded.
- Strive to identify and include a state-wide indicator and high-quality common measure of social-emotional functioning.

Again, in this project, it was challenging to rigorously assess the effects of social-emotional-behavioral programming on student outcomes given that not all districts collect data on social-emotional student indicators and those that do, do not use the same measures. As consistent with recommendations by the Connecticut Trauma-Informed School Mental Health Taskforce (2019), it could be helpful to explore a range of potential types of measures. One approach would be the use of teacher report measures on student behavior such as the DESSA (Aperture Education), which is currently being piloted and has the potential to be expanded. Another approach would be student-report of their health behaviors and conditions, such as the YRBS (Youth Risk Behavior Survey) or of their learning environments, such as school climate surveys. A third type of measure to consider would be those that directly measure students' social and emotional skills. These types of assessments ask students to respond to certain stimuli or solve social problems presented in vignettes as ways of testing and scoring their abilities. SELweb is an example of such a measure that is computer-based and available for students as young as 5. Each one of these measures has strengths and limitations and the best type of measurement to use depends on the type of outcomes intended to be assessed (e.g. student perceptions, student behavior, or student skills). Importantly, chosen indicators/measures should have strong evidence of reliability and validity, and are implemented and scored in the ways the measure developers intend.

Taken together, substantial consistency in findings across the different parts to this project were found and point to the challenges that schools have faced and continue to face with regard to social-emotional needs. Districts used consistent messaging that strategies for addressing social-emotional needs must include a "whole school" approach, meaning supports across key groups (i.e. students and employees). Findings suggested many districts prioritized using ARP ESSER funds to deliver social-emotional

supports, using a diverse array of strategies that were generally well-aligned with best practice recommendations. Participants voiced concern regarding what happens next as ARP ESSER funds come to a close, with a clear message that continued funding is needed to sustain and continue advancing the work around students, the work force, and data systems.

References

- Alliance Districts. (n.d.). CT.gov - Connecticut's Official State Website. <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Alliance-Districts/Alliance-and-Opportunity-Districts>
- Barrientos, J. (2022, June 6). Innovative Ways States Are Using ESSER Funds. Education Commission of the States. <https://www.ecs.org/innovative-ways-states-are-using-esser-funds/>
- Bloom (S.L. (2023). A biocratic paradigm: Exploring the complexity of trauma-informed leadership and creating presence. *Behavioral Science*, 13(1), 355 – 377. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs13050355>
- Brown, T.T.C., & Haynes-Thoby, L. (In Press). Grieving out loud. *Journal of Trauma Studies in Education*.
- By The Numbers: How districts are spending ESSER funds. (n.d.). K-12 Dive. <https://www.k12dive.com/news/how-districts-are-spending-esser-funds/639588/>
- Cipriano, C. & Strambler, M. (2024). On SEL and Equity. In Durlak, J., Domitrovich, C., & Mahoney, J. (Eds) *Handbook of SEL Theory, Research, and Practice: The Evolution of a Field* (2nd Edition).
- Cipriano, C., Strambler, M. J., Naples, L., Ha, C., Kirk, M. A., Wood, M. E., Sehgal, K., Zieher, A. K., Eveleigh, A., McCarthy, M. F., Funaro, M. C., Ponnock, A., Chow, J., & Durlak, J. (2023). Stage 2 Report: The State of the Evidence for Social and Emotional Learning: A Contemporary Meta-Analysis of Universal School-Based SEL Interventions. <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/mk35u>
- Chafouleas, S. M., Cintron, D. W., Koslouski, J. B., Briesch, A. M., McCoach, D. B., & Dineen, J. N., (2024). District administrator perspectives of current and ideal approaches to identifying and supporting student social, emotional, and behavioral needs. *Frontiers in Education*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1291898>.
- Chafouleas, S. M., Cintron, D. W., McCoach, D. B., Briesch, A. M., Dineen, J. N., & Koriakin, T. A. (2024) Exploring factors associated with district approaches to identifying and supporting student social, emotional, and behavioral needs, *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 23:1, 78-96, DOI: 10.1080/15700763.2022.2099904
- Connecticut Association of Board of Education. (n.d.) The Connecticut School Climate Policy. Retrieved October 2, 2024, from <https://wp.cga.ct.gov/cwcseo/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/The-Connecticut-School-Climate-Policy-.pdf>
- Connecticut Trauma-Informed School Mental Health Taskforce (2019). Recommendations from the 2019 Symposium on Trauma-Informed School Mental Health 2.0. Retrieved October 3, 2024, from <https://plan4children.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Trauma-Informed-Mental-Health-Legislative-Briefing-Handout-final-10-25-19.pdf>.
- Connecticut State Department of Education Biennial Report on the Operation of Charter Schools in Connecticut. (2022). https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Charter-Schools/Biennial_Report_Operation_of_CharterSchools.pdf
- Connecticut State Department of Education (3 June 2021). Connecticut's American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act, 2021: Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) guidance: Reimagining schools to transform students' lives. Retrieved from <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/COVID19/COVID-19-Resources-for-Families-and-Educators/ARP-ESSER>
- Durlak, J. A., Mahoney, J. L., & Boyle, A. E. (2022). What we know, and what we need to find out about universal, school-based social and emotional learning programs for children and adolescents: A review of meta-analyses and directions for future research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 148(11–12), 765–782. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000383>
- Gimbert, B., Miller, D., Herman, E., Breedlove, M. & Molina, C.E. (2023). Social emotional learning in schools: The importance of educator competence. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 18(1), 3-39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19427751211014920>
- Harper, G.W. & Neubauer, L.C. (2021). Teaching during a pandemic: A model for trauma-informed education and administration. *Pedagogy in Health Promotion: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 7(1), 14-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2373379920965596>
- Hoover, S. A. (2024). Investing in School Mental Health: Strategies to Wisely Spend Federal and State Funding. *Psychiatric Services*, 75(8), 801-806. doi: 10.1176/appi.ps.20230553. Epub 2024 Apr 3. PMID: 38566559.
- Sandilos, L.E., Neugebauer, S.R., DiPerna, J.C., Hart, S.C., & Lei, P. (2022). Social-emotional learning for whom? Implications of a universal SEL program and teacher well-being for teachers' interactions with students. *School Mental Health*, 15(1), 190-201. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-022-09543-0>
- Skoog-Hoffman, A., Miller, A. A., Plate, R. C., Meyers, D. C., Tucker, A. S., Meyers, G., Melissa Kay Diliberti, Schwartz, H. L., Kuhfeld, M., Jagers, R. J., Steele, L., & Schlund, J. (2024). Social and Emotional Learning in U.S. Schools: Findings from CASEL's Nationwide Policy Scan and the American Teacher Panel and American School Leader Panel Surveys. Rand.org; RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1822-2.html

U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. (n.d.). School Pulse Panel. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved November 8, 2024, from <https://ies.ed.gov/schoolsurvey/spp/>

United States (2021a). Supporting child and student social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/students/supporting-child-student-social-emotional-behavioral-mental-health.pdf>

Wilson, T. & Hover, A. (2024). Creating consistent learning environments with trauma-informed practices, *Childhood Education*, 100(4), 44-49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2024.2377057>

Zieher, A. K., Cipriano, C., Meyer, J. L., & Strambler, M. J. (2021). Educators implementation and use of social and emotional learning early in the covid-19 pandemic. *School Psychology*, 36(5), 388..



ct.gov/ccerc

CCERC Administrative Team

Ajit Gopalakrishnan

Co-director

Chief Performance Officer, CSDE

Dr. Morgaen Donaldson

Co-director

Associate Dean for Research, University of Connecticut

Dr. Alexandra Lamb

Project Manager

Postdoctoral Research Associate, University of Connecticut

Steering Committee

Dr. Eric Loken

University of Connecticut

Dr. Betsy McCoach

University of Connecticut

Dr. Kayon Morgan

University of Hartford

Dr. Michael Strambler

Yale University

Dr. Tricia Stewart

Western Connecticut State University

Dr. Christopher Trombly

Southern Connecticut State University

Dr. Wesley Younts

University of Hartford