



Theories of Action in ARP ESSER Plans Final Report

JULY 2025

**Center for Connecticut
Education Research Collaboration**

Partner Institutions





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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.





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Executive Summary

This project aimed to understand the theories of action embedded in Connecticut school districts' ARP ESSER proposals. A theory of action is the logic behind how elements of a plan might be connected and thus successful, specifically the objectives, levers, and outcomes of a proposed initiative or change. Objectives are the goals of a proposed change or intervention that usually address an identified need. Levers are the activities and tools to meet those objectives. Outcomes are the measures to evaluate to effectiveness of the proposed change. Taken together in the context of the ARP ESSER plans, these elements offer insight into how school districts in Connecticut think about the process of changing practices and implementing new initiatives. This study investigates these collections of objectives, levers, and outcomes and their resultant theories of actions in both the plans and in situ to better understand how planning practices work and how we might better support district leaders in those processes.

The study had three goals:

1. Identify the strategies proposed across districts for determined priority areas;
2. Create a meta-theory of action per each priority area;
3. Conduct focus groups with district leaders and plan implementers to understand how these theories of action are implemented.



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Key Findings

Planning:

- **Similarity Across District Plans.** Districts across Connecticut, regardless of district demographics, selected similar objectives, levers, and outcomes in planning for ARP-ESSER funds.
- **Initiatives involving student learning offered tight alignment between need, intervention, and desired outcomes.** Districts turned to a set of commonly used interventions often focused on increasing staffing to give students more individualized instruction.
- **Levers for building community and family relationships were more similar across districts than were levers for other priorities.** Most of these initiatives were oriented towards building parents' capacity to attend to school needs (e.g., academic support).
- **Planning for student well-being was the most dissimilar across districts.** There was less alignment between objectives, levers, and outcomes for this priority than others, indicating a lack of options for districts to address their socio-emotional needs.

Implementation :

- **Plans and Corresponding Theories of Action Filled Pre-existing Gaps.** Theories of action and underlying interventions most often included: (1) reinstating or bringing in programs of interest that were not economically feasible previously and, (2) increasing the number of staff.
- **Human Capital was a Key Determinant in Implementation Success.** Districts reported implementing most of their intended interventions. Participants noted that when things were not successful it often had to do with human capital constraints, raising important questions about the efficacy of districts' initial plans.
- **Reported Outcomes were Strong, but Major Needs Remain.** While participants spoke of the benefits, student and school needs continued to grow after the pandemic. With the potential loss of ESSER funds and thus the interventions, many participants felt they were losing a lifeline.
- **Sustainability was a Major Concern.** The responses to questions about sustainability of initiatives were mixed. While investments in new physical or technological resources such as Language Line were sustainable, with the exception of more affluent districts, there were widespread concerns about how to sustain human capital investments.
- **Need to Improve the Planning Process through Support and Oversight.** When asked for feedback for the state, districts noted: (1) appreciation for directives regarding priority areas; (2) a wish for more support for implementation and managing the grant; and (3) a desire for more accountability regarding spending and how it aligned to the outcomes.

Recommendations

- 1. Create a state-sponsored clearinghouse to support district initiatives.** If the state functioned as a clearinghouse to aggregate and monitor proposed interventions, it would be more aware of potential resource limitations and able to guide districts that implement the same strategies.
- 2. Enhance the talent pipeline for Connecticut teachers.** The pandemic further highlighted the need to expand and retain the pool of credentialed K-12 educators and mental health professionals (i.e., counselors and social workers) in Connecticut.
- 3. Provide guidance on grant management.** Future funding initiatives should provide districts with more administrative guidance and clarity about managing these grants.
- 4. Revise state grantmaking policies.** District leaders recommend the state: (1) implement longer timelines for grant applications and spending, and (2) increase accountability regarding how monies are spent.
- 5. Create a mechanism for state-wide support for best practices.** Some strategies implemented at the district level showed considerable promise (e.g., Language Line) and could be adopted more broadly. We recommend that the state create a process for districts to identify these 'best practices' and assist districts in scaling up and promoting equity across districts.

In this report, the terms in the table below are used to describe planning elements and key features of this study.

Term	Definition	Example
Objectives	Stated goals of a proposed intervention often with allusions to existing problems/needs.	Increase instructional time to support stagnating student learning.
Levers	Approaches/practices that were used to meet desired objectives, i.e., how those implementing the plan facilitate change.	Extend the school day
Outcomes	Selected measures to evaluate the implementation of levers and/or effectiveness of objectives.	Increased percentage of students performing at grade level on standardized assessments
Activity	A described initiative in the ARP ESSER plan that includes a bundle of objectives, outcomes, and levers. There may be multiple outcomes or levers per activity based on how districts wrote their plan. In each priority area, districts may have multiple activities listed.	The 188 ARP ESSER plans had 603 activities written into Priority Area 1. A district might write that they want to differentiate instruction (objective), so they implement a tutoring program (lever), and will measure that with student achievement, attendance, and behavior referrals (outcomes).
Theory of Action	A theory of action is the logic behind how elements of a plan might be connected and thus successful, specifically how the objectives, levers, and outcomes of a proposed initiative or change work together.	The theory of action reveals how district believe one element of an activity leads to another. In the example above, tutoring will allow students to get their individual needs met and will thus increase learning which in turn raises achievement scores, increases attendance, and decreases behavior incidents.

Full Report

Introduction

This project aimed to understand the theories of action embedded in the 188 ARP ESSER proposals submitted by Connecticut school districts. A theory of action is the logic behind how elements of a plan might be connected and thus successful, specifically the objectives, levers, and outcomes of a proposed initiative or change. Objectives are the goals of a proposed change or intervention that usually address an identified need. Levers are the activities and tools to meet those objectives. Outcomes are the measures to evaluate to effectiveness of the proposed change. Taken together in the context of the ARP ESSER plans, these elements offer insight into how school districts in Connecticut think about the process of changing practices and implementing new initiatives. This study investigates these collections of objectives, levers, and outcomes and their resultant theories of actions in both the plans and in situ to better understand how planning practices work and how we might better support district leaders in those processes.

The study had three goals. First, we identified the objectives, levers, and outcomes proposed across districts for ARP ESSER Priority Areas 1, 2, and 3 (student

learning, student well-being, and community and family relations). Second, we created a meta-theory of action for each of the three priority areas through an examination of the most frequently proposed theories of action across districts and by education level (elementary and secondary). Finally, through focus groups and interviews conducted with district leaders and plan implementers from a demographically diverse sample of districts, we sought to understand how these theories of action are implemented at the district and school levels. We approached this study under the assumption that such knowledge can help to enhance future planning and implementation for the State Department of Education and its school districts.

PROJECT GOALS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To transform schools and respond to the numerous needs of the COVID-19 pandemic, Connecticut districts applied for ARP ESSER dollars to implement existing and new strategies to support students' evolving needs. As part of this process, districts were asked to engage in planning processes to clarify where they would allocate distributed funds

among five different state priorities, the specific interventions associated with this funding, and the projected outcome of their efforts. The supposition driving this process, as true for many other prior federal and state-funded improvement policies, was perhaps that the inclusion of planning would support the change process and increase the likelihood of success.¹

There is precedent for such a hypothesis as strategic planning matters for quality implementation across institutional settings.^{2,3} Indeed, those within the field have long called on schools and districts to engage in improvement planning calling it an “integral part of every successful ongoing individual school improvement effort.”⁴ Yet despite the fact that the process Connecticut engaged in mimicked many prior efforts aimed at supporting local planning and implementation fidelity, the research on planning for change in school systems remains emergent and/or inconclusive.⁵ If anything, the evidence points to practitioners treating it more as a compliance exercise than a meaningful activity to support improvement efforts^{6,7} and that the plans tend to be of low quality and without adequate supports regarding how to improve them. At the same time, a small number of studies have found that the impact of



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planning on student outcomes is often positive.^{6,7,8,9} Simultaneously, researchers have explored different types of planning approaches in different locations, suggesting a lack of a clear and universal schema regarding the process.¹⁰ In other words, the evidence is not conclusive regarding whether planning processes help build planning capacity or reap the desired outcomes for schools and their communities. Thus, we might view the planning process more as a black box than a window into local practice.

To better identify effective planning techniques, Stevenson and Weiner¹⁰ created a conceptual framework for district level planning with four key components: equity, coherence, capacity, and logic. While the authors argue all the components are important relative to the substance of planning (i.e., what interventions are selected and why and how one approaches change and continuous improvement), logic is fundamental to the “how” of the plan. As the authors explain, this component is grounded in a logic model¹¹ and that a theory of action linking the elements of the plan together (i.e., the resources, activities, outputs, and outcomes) is necessary for a plan to be successful. In other words, “Any strategy, and any strategic plan, should clearly and logically articulate the theory of action, or the anticipated chain of causation, underlying the selected interventions” (p. 13).

Building on this concept of logic modeling and the argument that effective planning requires a sound theory of action, the purpose of this study was to:

a) understand the theories of action employed by districts in the plans submitted for ARP ESSER funds (e.g., Objectives, levers, and outcomes);

(b) explore how the strategies in support of these theories of action were implemented; and

c) identify the infrastructure and human capital needed for planning in this way.

Specifically, our questions were:

1. What objectives and levers do districts use to support Priorities 1, 2, and 3? How do they propose implementation of initiatives and what outcomes do they attach to these initiatives?
2. What do these objectives, levers, and outcomes reveal about district theories of action at both the elementary and secondary school levels?
3. Do these theories of action vary by district demographics, including the extent to which districts serve students in groups disproportionately affected by the pandemic?
4. How do plan developers and plan implementers understand these theories of action and their overall effectiveness? How congruent/incongruent are these perspectives?
5. How did these theories of action stay the same and/or change once districts received funds?
6. What were the barriers and facilitators for the implementation of the theory of action? How did the actual implementation of the proposed initiatives differ from the planned implementation?
7. What are the perceptions of district and school leaders regarding the impact of the strategies? How did actual outcomes differ from the intended outcomes?

Table 1: In this report, the terms in table 1 below are used to describe planning elements and key features of this study.

Term	Definition	Example
Objectives	Stated goals of a proposed intervention often with allusions to existing problems/ needs.	Increase instructional time to support stagnating student learning.
Levers	Approaches/practices that were used to meet desired objectives, i.e., how those implementing the plan facilitate change.	Extend the school day
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Theory of Action	A theory of action is the logic behind how elements of a plan might be connected and thus successful, specifically how the objectives, levers, and outcomes of a proposed initiative or change work together.	The theory of action reveals how district believe one element of an activity leads to another. In the example above, tutoring will allow students to get their individual needs met and will thus increase learning which in turn raises achievement scores, increases attendance, and decreases behavior incidents.

Goal 1: Identify objectives, levers, and outcomes proposed across districts.

Research Questions:

- 1. What objectives, levers, and outcomes do districts use to support student learning, and how do they propose implementing this theory of action?**
- 2. What objectives, levers, and outcomes do districts use to support student well-being, and how do they propose implementing this theory of action?**
- 3. What objectives, levers, and outcomes do districts use to support community and family relations, and how do they propose implementing this theory of action?**

Goal 2: Identify the most commonly proposed theories of action planned across districts and by education level for ARP-ESSER Priority Areas 1, 2, and 3.

Research Questions:

- 1. What do these objectives, levers, and outcomes reveal about district theories of action at both the elementary and secondary school levels?**
- 2. Do these theories of action vary by district demographics, including the extent to which districts serve students in groups disproportionately affected by the pandemic?**

Goal 3. Understand how these theories of action are implemented at the district and school levels.

Research Questions:

- 1. How do plan developers and plan implementers understand these theories of action and their overall effectiveness? How congruent/incongruent are these perspectives?**
- 2. How did these theories of action stay the same and/or change once districts received funds?**
- 3. What were the barriers and facilitators for the implementation of the theory of action? How did the actual implementation of the objectives, levers, and outcomes differ from the planned implementation?**
- 4. What are the perceptions of district and school leaders regarding the impact of the theories of action? How did actual outcomes differ from the intended outcomes?**

METHODS

We conducted this study in two stages. First, we reviewed the 188 ARP ESSER plans submitted by districts in Connecticut to identify the objectives, levers, and outcomes proposed for Funding Priorities 1, 2, and 3¹² and their resultant theories of action. We identified the most frequently used objectives, levers, and outcomes and then disaggregated the plans by district demographics to identify the most prevalent theory of action for each priority area within each district type (e.g., urban, suburban, rural).

Next, we selected 6-8 districts per priority area to explore how each district implemented their plans and their perceptions of whether their theories of action led to expected changes. Here, we focused on the most frequently selected objectives, levers, and outcomes across Priorities 1, 2, and 3 and their associated theories of action. We then conducted focus groups and key informant interviews with district- and school-level administrators and teachers from a sample of districts based on their implementation of a given theory of action. Our sampling strategy was to focus on a particular district location-type (i.e., urban, suburban, rural), for each priority area. This facilitated our ability to understand trends within the group while simultaneously capturing the experiences of different districts from across the state. Beyond providing rich information regarding their understanding of the theory of action and everyday successes and challenges with implementation, focus groups were intended to facilitate cross-district connection, collaboration, and support.

PROJECT PHASES

We describe each of these phases in turn below.

Goal 1: Identify objectives, levers, and outcomes proposed across districts.

For Goal 1, our first step was to develop a data collection matrix to review and collect data from the ARP ESSER plans¹³ including the objectives, levers, and outcomes for three ARP ESSER Priority areas:

1. Learning Acceleration, Academic Renewal, and Student Enrichment
2. Family and Community Connections
3. Social, Emotional, and Mental Health of the Students and of School Staff

We used the framework of logic modeling to categorize and quantify the objectives, levers, and outcomes comprising the theories of change proposed by the districts.

We reviewed the ARP ESSER plans submitted by each district to develop the codes that would enable us to classify the objectives, levers, and outcomes proposed by districts for funding Priorities 1, 2, and 3. First, members of the investigative team reviewed the plans to develop a draft of the codes that would be used for the objectives, levers, and outcomes for each priority area. After reviewing the plans further, the team met to review and finalize the codebooks for each priority area.

Next, the team used that codebook to evaluate every intervention from each district aligned with the associated priority area. There was significant variation in the detail of districts' plans: some districts had one or two lines in total, while others had up to ten. To create stronger interrater reliability, our team coded 50 entries together. We then met and compared coding. When disagreements occurred, our team talked together returning to the data until consensus was formed. Sometimes, it was necessary to revise the codebook to be more aligned with the data. When there were items that did not fit any of the existing codes, the team marked it as "other." Each team member then did some independent coding with a return to joint coding at regular intervals to again ensure reliability. At the conclusion of the coding process, our team went through all those coded as "other" to analyze whether patterns existed and, if so, additional codes were included. When this was the case, these new codes were added to the overarching list of codes and included in the next priority area. We repeated this process using the new and existing codes for the other priority areas as well.

Goal 2: Identify the most commonly proposed theories of action planned across districts and by education level for ARP-ESSER Priority Areas 1, 2, and 3.

The coded data was pulled into an Excel spreadsheet and pivot tables were used to analyze the data to identify the most fre-

quently employed objectives and levers proposed to meet outcomes. After the team examined these data, we obtained district data from EdSight¹⁴ to understand if there were differences in the objectives, levers, and outcomes proposed by the districts. District characteristics included: size of the community, total number of students, percent of students receiving special education services, the percent students who are multilingual learners, and the percent of students receiving free or reduced cost lunch. For 'community size,' which is a categorical variable, we ran descriptive statistics and examined differences in the types of objectives, levers, and outcomes identified by the districts within that category. For continuous variables (e.g., total number of students, percent of students receiving special education services, percent of students who are multilingual learners, and percent of students receiving free and reduced lunch) we divided the data for each characteristic into quintiles and using descriptive statistics examined differences between quintiles in patterns of objectives, levers, and outcomes by these district characteristics. Detailed tables with this data can be found in the appendices.

Using these data, we developed a generalized meta-theory of action for the most frequently used objectives, levers, and outcomes for each of the three priority areas. This theory was then used as a baseline to support cross-district discussion regarding implementation efforts.

Goal 3. Understand how these theories of action are implemented at the district and school levels.

Sample. For each priority area, we planned to conduct remote focus groups for district leadership (planners/policy makers) and school staff (implementers) from up to six districts per priority and per education level. For example, for Priority Area 1, we selected 6 districts to be involved at the elementary school level and 6 districts at the secondary school levels, and two focus groups (district-level leadership and school-level Implementer) for each (3 priority areas x 2 focus groups x 2 school-levels) for a total of 12 focus groups. A total of 32 individuals participated in a focus group or key informant interview. 18 of the participating individuals were district leaders (planners/policy makers) and 14 were school leaders (implementers). All participants were asked to complete a demographic survey, and 17 individuals provided this information, which is summarized in Table 2.

Constructs

Administrators were asked about their understanding of the theory of action including how the planned activity leads to change, whether the planned activity was implemented as intended, if not why, and whether the initiatives led to the intended outcomes. Implementers were also asked how the theory of action was implemented, implementation barriers and facilitators, and whether the objectives and levers led to intended outcomes.

Data Analysis

Focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim and de-identified for data analysis. After careful review of the transcripts, guided by the focus group protocol, the team collaboratively developed themes based upon the questions asked. Using the interview questions as a framework for categorization, codes/themes were then added as they emerged from the data. For example, many of the participants, when asked about feedback they might offer the state regarding the grant process, suggested more oversight and support were needed. As such, a sub-code for feedback became “additional support.” Once coding was completed, narratives were created for each priority area. We then compared across the priority areas for themes and areas of divergence – the team meeting and discussing such findings along the way. The collection of data from multiple informants, iterative data collection process and analysis, and use of two researchers to code transcripts, increased credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings

Study Limitations

Some limitations relate to our ability to meet the third goal of this study, to understand how these theories of action are implemented at the district and school levels.

Potential sampling bias. Despite our repeated attempts to contact selected superintendents and school administrators via e-mails, phone calls, and through our contacts at the CSDE, there was a concerning level of nonresponse in the following subgroups of our sample:

- For priority area 1, we contacted 12 districts with large-urban profiles and 10 participated (80% response rate). Yet, at the school-level, among the four charter high school principals we contacted, none of them participated (0% response rate).
- For priority area 2, we contacted eight districts with suburban profiles to hold key informant interviews and focus groups. Of these eight districts, only four participated (50% response rate). At the school-level, among the five suburban high school principals we contacted, only

TABLE 2. DEMOGRAPHICS OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS (DEMOGRAPHIC SELECTIONS WITH <1 RESPONDENTS OMTTED) N=17

Race/Ethnicity			#	%
Black or African-American, non-Hispanic			4	24%
White, non-Hispanic			12	71%
I prefer not to answer			1	6%
Age			#	%
30-39			2	12%
40-49			7	41%
50-59			7	41%
60 and above			1	6%
Highest Level of Education			#	%
College Graduate			1	6%
Masters Degree			12	71%
Doctoral Degree (e.g., EdD, PhD)			4	24%
Current Role			#	%
District Level Administrator			10	59%
School Level Administrator			7	41%
Job Title			#	%
Assistant Superintendent			1	6%
Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment			1	6%
Associate Superintendent, Elementary, Research, Policy			1	6%
Chief Operations Officer			1	6%
Coordinator of Talent Development			1	6%
Deputy Superintendent			2	12%
Grants Strategist			1	6%
Principal			7	41%
School Superintendent			1	6%
Superintendent of Schools			1	6%
Total			17	100%
Number of Years Experience	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max
In Education	22.29	8.6	6	40
In your current district	11.6	5.83	1	18
Working at your current school	7.86	5.24	2	16

one participated (20% response rate).

- For priority area 3, we contacted 10 districts with a rural-fringe profile and two districts participated (20% response rate). At the school-level, among the seven rural high school principals we contacted, none participated (0% response rate).

Because of the voluntary nature of this selection process and the significant degree of nonresponse among several of our subgroups, our sample does not adequately represent the target population, resulting in exclusion bias. Unfortunately, because we were not able to collect data from the nonparticipants, our results are skewed towards only those who were willing to comply with participation in the study. Given the current level of stress of many public-school educators, it could be that some school leaders are too overwhelmed to participate in something beyond their daily duties and participation was more a function of capacity rather than something more substantive. Regardless, it would be beneficial to conduct a follow-up study to document the reasons for their nonparticipation.

In sum, the low response rates for these subgroups resulted in weak internal validity in our attempt to document how these theories of action are implemented at the district and school levels (goal #3 of this research project). Furthermore, we planned to employ a stratified sample for each focus group to give educational leaders from districts of a similar size and urbanicity the opportunity to collaborate. However, struggles with soliciting participation forced us to coordinate the interviews with some districts individually (key informant interviews) versus holding interdistrict focus groups for each stratified sample. This resulted in a lost opportunity for inter-district learning about how these theories of action were implemented.

Educator Attrition

In addition to the sampling issues above, on more than one occasion we found that the district leadership or school administrators with whom we spoke were not the same individuals as those who created the ARP ESSER plan. In fact, some district leaders were not involved in k-12 public education at the time. Thus, they

explained that they did not have the institutional knowledge to be able to speak to the formation of their district's ARP ESSER plan and the degree to which their district's plan stayed the same and/or changed once they received the funds. They were, however, able to speak to current implementation challenges and successes.



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RESULTS

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Priority Area 1: Student Learning

The coding for Priority Area 1 (P1) Student Learning revealed 603 distinct activities identified by school districts submitting ARP ESSER plans. To further understand districts’ theories of action, we examined the outcomes, and the objectives and levers selected by districts to achieve these outcomes. As a reminder, objectives are the goals of a proposed change or intervention that usually address an identified need. Levers are the activities and tools to meet those objectives. Outcomes are the measures to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed change. An activity is the bundle of objectives, levers, and outcomes grouped together by districts.

For analysis, we focused on the top 4 outcomes identified for Priority Area 1: student achievement, student attendance, teacher performance/instruction, and student program participation (see Table 3), and their associated objectives and levers. Each district might have included multiple activities and thus multiple outcomes for one priority area, hence the higher number of activities (603) than district plans (188). Some districts included multiple outcomes per activity, thus the count of outcomes is greater than the count of activities.

TABLE 3. PRIORITY 1: MOST FREQUENT OUTCOMES IDENTIFIED BY CT SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Outcomes	Occurrences of Outcome
Student Achievement	448
Student Attendance	75
Teacher Performance/Instruction	53
Student Program Participation (recovery)	43

Table 4 includes the 6 levers and 6 objectives most frequently aligned with the most frequently selected outcomes: student achievement, student attendance, teacher performance/instruction, and student program participation. For example, the top levers for student achievement were human capital investment (i.e., the hiring of new or existing staff to fulfill new or existing roles) and increased academic dosage (i.e., more time dedicated to academic learning). The top objectives were increased instructional time and differentiation (i.e., serving students based on need within the classroom or across the school). Some districts wrote their plans using an idea as a lever, while others may have selected that same idea as an objective. For example, increasing a staff to student ratio is included in both the objective column and the levers column. Some districts wrote that an increased ratio was the goal of an initiative, while others wrote that an increased ratio was a lever to accomplish another goal, such as differentiation. In order to maintain fidelity to the plans, similar terms may be listed in multiple categories.

Next, we examine the most frequently selected outcomes, objectives, and levers in the plans separately with consideration for variation across district types, including size of the community, total number of students in the district, percent of students receiving special



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TABLE 4. PRIORITY AREA 1: MOST FREQUENT OBJECTIVES AND LEVERS FOR THE TOP 4 OUTCOMES

Priority Area 1				
Outcomes (Top 4)	Objectives (Top 6)		Levers (Top 6)	
Student Achievement (n=448)	45%	Increase Instructional Time	52%	Human capital investment
	36%	Differentiation	47%	Increased Dosage (academic)
	20%	Increase Staff to Student Ratio	22%	Increased Teacher to Student Ratio
	13%	Professional Development: Teaching Practice	15%	Instructional Material Investment
	13%	Enhance Special Education and EL Supports	11%	Ongoing applied professional development (teachers)
	12%	Increase Math and STEM Proficiency	8%	Increased Dosage (enrichment)
Student Attendance (n=75)	47%	Increase Instructional Time	47%	Increased Dosage (academic)
	19%	Extend Educational Opportunities	36%	Human capital investment
	17%	Differentiation	16%	Instructional Material Investment
	17%	Increase Staff to Student Ratio	16%	Increased Teacher to Student Ratio
	16%	Professional Development: Teaching Practice	15%	Increased Dosage (enrichment)
	11%	Enhance Special Education and EL Supports	12%	Ongoing applied professional development (teachers); Community Networking & Partnerships
Teacher Performance/ Instruction (n=53)	45%	Professional Development: Teaching Practice	49%	Ongoing applied professional development (teachers)
	21%	Differentiation	45%	Human capital investment
	17%	Increase Instructional Time	19%	Increased Dosage (academic)
	11%	Increase Staff to Student Ratio	17%	Instructional Material Investment
	11%	Principal Instructional Leadership	9%	Increased Teacher to Student Ratio
	11%	Increase Reading and Language Arts Proficiency	9%	Leadership capacity building; Cultural competency improvements
Student Program Participation (recovery) (n=43)	63%	Increase Instructional Time	63%	Increased Dosage (academic)
	21%	Differentiation	35%	Human capital investment
	19%	Increase Staff to Student Ratio	16%	Increased Teacher to Student Ratio
	16%	Credit Recovery	12%	Community Networking & Partnerships
	16%	College Access and Career Readiness	9%	Access to Transportation
	7%	Professional Development: Teaching Practice; Extend Educational Opportunities	7%	Increased Dosage (enrichment); Ongoing applied professional development (teachers); Extension services (career and technical training and support) for students

education services, the percent students who are multilingual learners (MLLs), and the percent of students receiving free or reduced cost lunch. While the trends above mostly held true across groups, there was some variation worthy of attention. Full results including the frequency distributions and tables highlighting the similarities and differences across district types can be found in Appendix 6.

Across all district types, the most frequently selected outcome was student achievement. This is not surprising as Priority Area 1 gave specific guidance to districts to focus on academic recovery from COVID-19 disruptions and traumas. The second and third most selected outcomes varied by district-level demographics. Student attendance was the second most frequently selected outcome for larger districts, those situated in cities and suburbs, those with the largest

percentage of free/reduced price lunch (more than 42%), and high percentages of students who are MLLs and receiving special education services. Given that many of these districts likely already struggled with these issues before the pandemic, it makes sense that they would concentrate efforts towards these outcomes.

Smaller districts, rural districts, and those with lower percentages of MLLs and a medium percentage of students receiving free/reduced price lunch (20%-40%) selected teacher performance/instruction as their second most frequently identified outcome. This suggests perhaps that these schools felt that they had a more stable teacher core with stronger practices than the prior group (i.e., good to great). This does bring up some questions about equity and whether and to what degree some further differentiation regarding needs or scope of investment

could have been built into the grant funding process.

Finally, it is worth noting that in districts with a lower percentage of students receiving free/reduced price lunch (less than 20%), the second most frequently selected outcome was student program participation (recovery), indicating that perhaps more affluent districts chose to target specific populations for recovery and could do so given their existing teaching force and generally more stable and higher test scores. We present the objectives and levers next (Tables 5 and 6) and discuss them in concert.

The most common objectives focused on adding additional resources (i.e., time or staff) and the levers aligned to those objectives tended to focus on increased human resources. Specifically, regardless of district demographic profile, human capital investment and increased dosage

TABLE 5. PRIORITY 1: MOST FREQUENT OBJECTIVES IDENTIFIED BY CT SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Objectives	Occurrences of Objective
Increased Instructional Time	227
Differentiation	173
Increased Staff to Student Ratio	104
Professional Development: Teaching Practice	87

TABLE 6. PRIORITY AREA 1: MOST FREQUENT LEVERS IDENTIFIED BY CT SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Levers	Occurrences of Lever
Human Capital Investment	280
Increased Dosage (academic)	234
Increased Teacher-to-Student Ratio	108
Instructional Material Investment	91

were the most frequently occurring levers. These objectives and levers were most focused on filling gaps in personnel and the ability to serve all kids for the right amount of time for their needs which, in some cases, meant extending the school day or year or making changes to the daily schedule. These objectives and levers align with the qualitative findings later in the report and highlight the overwhelming emphasis placed on increasing the pool of staff across contexts.

Capacity building, which can include professional learning and structures to support it like coaching and learning communities was linked to fewer levers and objectives compared to hiring additional staff. This focus on adding staff rather than developing existing staff may be a case of generalized understaffing, and increasing the number of people working for the district was deemed the most important focus. The most common outcomes were focused on increasing student achievement via standardized assessments and attendance. Few plans were oriented to evaluate outcomes regarding whether additional resources influenced other student capacities and/or school climate and professional culture.

When we shift to look at district types, we find that regardless of the percentage of students receiving special education services or those receiving free/reduced-price lunch, districts prioritized adding additional time for students to be exposed to instruction. The widespread nature of this intervention implies a perception that students needed higher levels of academic dosage to support learning. This brings up questions about existing schedules both in terms of the length of the day and the school year and may be worth further investigation in the future.

Overall, we argue that Priority Area 1 was the most coherent in terms of alignment across the elements of the theory of action because of the objectives, levers, and outcomes were logically connected and chosen consistently by the majority of districts, regardless of district type (see Appendix 6). Districts turned to tried and true interventions often focused on giving students more directed and individualized instruction to support

academic needs. As we address more in the qualitative section of the report, the heavy focus on hiring across all districts was challenging both in terms of a depleted pool (size and quality) and in getting teachers, who already felt overwhelmed, to take on additional roles and/or responsibilities. This was particularly challenging for districts that had fewer fiscal resources to begin with. This reality illuminates important implications regarding equity and students' access to high-quality teachers and corresponding learning.

Priority Area 2: Community and Family Relations

The coding for Priority Area 2 (P2) Community and Family Relations revealed 198 distinct activities identified by the school districts. To further understand districts' theories of action, we examined the outcomes, and the objectives and levers most often selected by districts to achieve these outcomes. As a reminder, objectives are the goals of a proposed change or intervention that usually address an identified need. Levers are the activities and tools to meet those objectives. Outcomes are the measures to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed change. An activity is the bundle of objectives, levers, and outcomes grouped together by districts. Each district might have included multiple activities and thus multiple outcomes for one priority area, hence the higher number of activities (198) than district plans (188). Some districts included multiple outcomes per activity, thus the count of outcomes is

greater than the count of activities. Table 7 includes the 4 most frequently occurring outcomes: enhancing perceptions of school and school activities, increasing family participation, improving student attendance, and increasing student achievement. Table 8 includes the 6 levers and 6 objectives most frequently aligned with the top 4 outcomes. The top objectives for perceptions of school and school activities were increased family engagement and enhanced communication and the top levers were human capital investment (i.e., the hiring of new or existing staff to fulfill new or existing roles) and technology infrastructure. Across these theories of action, the focus was on schools communicating to or educating parents more fully about supporting their children's learning at home or about school operations. The theories of actions were less oriented towards parent empowerment (e.g., active participation in governance or sharing their skills and knowledge with the school) or community activism more broadly

Next, we examine the most frequently selected outcomes, objectives, and levers in the plans separately with consideration for variation across district types, including the size of the community, number of students in the district, percent of students receiving special education services, the percent students who are multilingual learners (MLLs), and the percent of students receiving free or reduced cost lunch. Full results including the frequency distributions and tables highlighting the similarities and differ-

TABLE 7. PRIORITY AREA 2: MOST FREQUENT OUTCOMES IDENTIFIED BY CT SCHOOL DISTRICT

Outcomes	Occurrences of Outcome
Perceptions of School & School Activities	68
Family Participation	57
Student Attendance	44
Student Achievement	37

TABLE 8. PRIORITY AREA 2: MOST FREQUENT OBJECTIVES AND LEVERS FOR THE TOP 4 OUTCOMES

Priority Area 2					
Outcomes (Top 4)		Objectives (Top 6)		Levers (Top 6)	
Perceptions of School & School Activities (n=68)	37%	Family Engagement	37%	Human capital investment	
	35%	Enhanced Communication	19%	Tech Infrastructure	
	21%	Building parents skills and knowledge	19%	Parent programming	
	19%	Community-based schooling	16%	Community networking & Partnersh	
	12%	Shifting to an equity mindset (and behaviors)	7%	Capital investments	
	7%	Extend Educational Opportunities	7%	Strategic Planning	
Family Participation (n=57)	40%	Family Engagement	39%	Human capital investment	
	37%	Enhanced Communication	23%	Tech Infrastructure	
	32%	Building parents skills and knowledge	23%	Parent programming	
	19%	Community-based schooling	21%	Community networking & Partnersh	
	12%	Shifting to an equity mindset (and behaviors)	11%	Data-Driven Decision-making	
	11%	Student/Family Wellbeing	11%	Strategic Planning	
Student Attendance (n=44)	32%	Family Engagement	48%	Human capital investment	
	30%	Enhanced Communication	34%	Community networking & Partnersh	
	27%	Community-based schooling	16%	Extension services (career and techr training and support) for students	
	25%	Extend Educational Opportunities	11%	Tech Infrastructure	
	16%	Student Engagement	9%	Strategic Planning	
	11%	Building parents skills and knowledge	7%	Parent programming	
Student Achievement (n=37)	38%	Enhanced Communication	43%	Human capital investment	
	27%	Family Engagement	27%	Community networking & Partnersh	
	22%	Community-based schooling	16%	Tech Infrastructure	
	22%	Extend Educational Opportunities	16%	Strategic Planning	
	22%	Building parents skills and knowledge	14%	Data-Driven Decision-making	
	14%	Shifting to an equity mindset (and behaviors)	14%	Extension services (career and techr training and support) for students	

ences across district types can be found in Appendix 7.

Regardless of demographics, family participation, and perceptions of school and school activities were the most frequently selected outcomes for Priority Area 2. This suggests that increasing family engagement is an issue all districts identify as important and may indicate opportunities for state-sponsored learning, support, and resources in this area.

Across district types, there was some variation in the other outcomes selected. For example, rural districts frequently identified increasing staff involvement/activities to help build community among those working within the school as a primary desired outcome. Such goals indicate that there may be more need in building school infrastructure (i.e., connecting teachers to each other and to their students) for parent involvement in more remote districts than in other districts where such connections and activities may be more the norm.

Increased student attendance was also a frequently cited outcome, regardless of the relative wealth of the district. This was especially true for smaller districts, districts with the highest and lowest MLLs, and those with lower numbers of students receiving special education. The ubiquity of this issue is telling and reflects larger trends regarding post-COVID related school closures. The question is, how relatively effective these activities were across district types and whether and to what degree gaps remain and for whom? At best, we might hope for equal improvement rates so those with the most vulnerable students are not left behind. Taken together with the findings above, it seems

all districts in Connecticut are at least somewhat concerned about family satisfaction with schools and its relation to student engagement.

Priority Area 2 had less variation in objectives than Priority Area 1, indicating the districts selected similar targets and strategies for their work in increasing family engagement. This may indicate the need for the development of a larger pool of strategies for schools to draw from to individualize their community-building approaches. Regardless of the district type, the most frequently selected objectives (see Table 9) and levers (see Table 10) aligned with the outcomes of changing families' perceptions of school and enhancing family participation. The most common objectives selected by districts were family engagement, enhanced communication, and building parents' skills and knowledge. In reading more closely, many of the activities aimed at parents were focused on enhancing their knowledge of and ability to support their children with school-based learning (e.g., math support, homework habits, etc.). There was less focus on soliciting parents' knowledge and how the school might better utilize it. This one-way orientation of learning may indicate that districts are framing parents as needing to be coached and brought into the school more, as opposed to schools learning from parents.

Districts serving more vulnerable populations (i.e. those with higher levels of free/reduced prices lunch, higher percentages of MLLs, and higher percentages of students receiving special education services), selected community-based schooling as an objective. We define community-based schooling districts involving community organizations to augment learning and

TABLE 9. PRIORITY AREA 2: MOST FREQUENT OBJECTIVES IDENTIFIED BY CT SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Objectives	Occurrences of Objective
Family Engagement	56
Enhanced Communication	55
Building Parents' Skills and Knowledge	44
Community-Based Schooling	34

TABLE 10. PRIORITY AREA 2: MOST FREQUENT LEVERS IDENTIFIED BY CT SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Levers	Occurrences of Lever
Human Capital Investment	57
Community Networking & Partnerships	41
Tech Infrastructure	33
Parenting Programming	34

school activities. For example, districts said they would connect their schools to other community agencies to provide wraparound services that were needed but perhaps outside the schools' current capacity. These districts also selected community networking and partnerships as levers, demonstrating alignment between objectives and levers, and hopefully a higher likelihood of implementation. These interventions focused on attending to familial and community deficits (e.g., a lack of quality mental health services and corresponding needs). There were few, if any, interventions that were oriented towards capacity building. Also note, in population dense communities, there may be less community infrastructure available for partnership, perhaps making such initiatives additionally challenging.

Similar to the activities listed in Priority Area 1, human capital investment was the most common lever identified by districts, regardless of demographics, i.e., districts looked to hire new staff to support family engagement. This focus on additive support might be helpful in terms of reducing teacher stress and burnout but raises questions about whether additional programming can solve the issue of low parental satisfaction. In other words, if the problem was not one of capacity but rather orientation, hiring more people – a costly endeavor – may not be the best means of addressing the problem. As an exception, rural districts frequently identified professional development as a lever, indicating they were looking to build the capacity of their existing staff rather than bring in new programming.

Technology infrastructure was also frequently selected as a lever for urban, suburban, and smaller districts, indicating that technology was an important component of the education and outreach identified as objectives. Districts with a medium number of students receiving special education resources, districts with a lower percentage of MLLs, and districts with the highest percentage of free/reduced-priced lunch also identified technology infrastructure as a lever to engage families. This indicates that districts, regardless of demographics, see technology as a mechanism to increase

family engagement and communication – something we saw in the interviews/ focus groups as well.

Taken together, outcomes, objectives, and levers were relatively similar across districts in Priority Area 2 revealing district needs for more family engagement. Districts often framed this endeavor as 'educating parents' and 'bringing them into the school more fully,' and, in doing so, looked to increase satisfaction with the district measured through parent perception and student attendance. Some districts took a more needs-based approach and planned to use levers and objectives that focused on engaging communities outside of the district organization, thus creating more opportunities to reframe the relationship between schools and parents in more asset-oriented ways.

Priority Area 3: Student Wellbeing

The coding for Priority Area 3 Student Wellbeing revealed 274 distinct activities identified by school districts. To further understand the districts' theories of action we examined the outcomes, and the objectives and levers selected by districts to achieve these outcomes. As a reminder, objectives are the goals of a proposed change or intervention that usually address an identified need. Levers are the activities and tools to meet those objectives. Outcomes are the measures to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed change. An activity is the bundle of objectives, levers, and outcomes grouped together by districts. Each district might have included multiple activities and thus multiple outcomes for one priority

area, hence the higher number of activities (274) than district plans (188). Some districts included multiple outcomes per activity, thus the count of outcomes is greater than the count of activities.

The most frequently identified outcomes for Priority Area 3 were student attendance, student SEL, student behavior, and student achievement (see Table 11). Table 12 includes the 6 levers and 6 objectives most frequently aligned with the 4 most frequently occurring outcomes. As can be seen in the table, the top objectives for student attendance were student well-being and professional development and the top levers were human capital investment (i.e., the hiring of new or existing staff to fulfill new or existing roles) and instructional material investment. These theories of action revealed that districts chose from a limited set of best practices. This finding is echoed in the interview data in which school leaders described both limited tools and significant struggles in meeting the increasing socio-emotional needs of students and staff recovering from the trauma of COVID-19 and its rippling effects.

Next, we examine the most frequently selected outcomes, objectives, and levers in the plans separately and in conjunction with one another, as they were more consistent than with other priority areas. Here, we consider variation across district types, such as the size of the community, total number of students in the district, percent of students receiving special education services, the percent students who are multilingual learners (MLLs), and the percent of students

TABLE 11. PRIORITY AREA 3: MOST FREQUENT OUTCOMES IDENTIFIED BY CT SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Outcomes	Occurrences of Outcome
Student Attendance	98
Student SEL	82
Student Behavior	66
Student Achievement	61

TABLE 12. PRIORITY AREA 3: MOST FREQUENT OBJECTIVES AND LEVERS FOR THE TOP 4 OUTCOMES

Priority Area 3				
Outcomes (Top 4)		Objectives (Top 6)		Levers (Top 6)
Student Attendance (n=98)	83%	Student wellbeing	49%	Human capital investment
	15%	Professional development	16%	Instructional Material Investment
	12%	Staff wellbeing	15%	Professional Development
	8%	Build school community	7%	Parent programming
	7%	Family wellbeing	6%	SEL Teams
	5%	Community-based schooling, Student engagement, Differentiation	6%	Increased Dosage (enrichment)
Student SEL (n=82)	82%	Student wellbeing	40%	Human capital investment
	18%	Professional development	20%	Instructional Material Investment
	10%	Staff wellbeing	16%	Professional Development
	9%	Community-based schooling	9%	SEL Teams
	6%	Build school community	6%	Data-Driven Decision-making
	6%	Shifting to equity mindset	6%	Audits/Assessments
Student Behavior (n=66)	79%	Student wellbeing	53%	Human capital investment
	27%	Professional development	26%	Professional Development
	21%	Build school community	18%	Instructional Material Investment
	9%	Increase staff to student ratio	9%	SEL Teams
	8%	Data-based decision making	8%	Parent programming
	6%	Building parents skills and knowledge	6%	Data-Driven Decision-making
Student Achievement (n=61)	70%	Student wellbeing	39%	Human capital investment
	21%	Professional development	15%	Professional Development
	16%	Build school community	13%	Instructional Material Investment
	8%	Increase instructional time	11%	Increased Dosage (enrichment)
	8%	Building parents skills and knowledge	10%	SEL Teams
	7%	Family wellbeing	8%	Ongoing applied professional development (teachers)

receiving free or reduced cost lunch. Full results including the frequency distributions and tables highlighting the similarities and differences across district types can be found in Appendix 8.

Consistent across district types, outcomes indicated that addressing and measuring socio-emotional needs is a widespread concern. The outcomes focused on assessing how students were impacted by interventions by measuring student growth in attendance, well-being, behavior, and academics. The largest districts identified student achievement as a primary outcome more frequently, indicating their need to support student achievement and academic recovery through multiple avenues.

For Priority Area 3, as already mentioned, there was overwhelming uniformity in the selections for objectives and levers across district types. The objectives most frequently used, regardless of district type, were student well-being and professional development, perhaps signifying a sense that teachers in all districts need help in how to meet students' needs in these areas (see Table 13). The levers

most frequently identified by districts were human capital investment, professional development, and instructional material investment, most often oriented toward new SEL curricula (see Table 14). This lack of variability further indicates a potential small pool of best practices on how to attend to the ever-growing SEL needs of students and staff. Additionally, these findings may also indicate the relatively newness of SEL as a priority for schools.

Looking across the objectives and levers in this priority area, there are questions about alignment across each part of the theory of action. For example, while the objectives include professional development for staff as well as staff well-being, there were no corresponding outcomes that measure staff satisfaction, health, or growth. Similarly, while districts frequently selected staff well-being as a key objective, their plans often lacked a lever to directly address that objective and an outcome to measure it. This further emphasizes that districts are struggling to identify best practices for addressing the socio-emotional needs of their staff and how to measure them.

Taken together, and somewhat differ-

ent from the other priority areas, the objectives and outcomes for this priority area were oriented towards capacity building with existing staff and students (professional development and measures of student growth); however, many of the levers used were additive in terms of staff or material. In this way, there is less alignment in these theories of action, further indicating the lack of options or knowledge that districts have to address these pressing problems of socio-emotional well-being.

TABLE 13. PRIORITY AREA 3: MOST FREQUENT OBJECTIVES IDENTIFIED BY CT SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Objectives	Occurrences of Objective
Student Wellbeing	182
Professional Development	63
Build School Community	30
Staff Wellbeing	28

TABLE 14. PRIORITY AREA 3: MOST FREQUENT LEVERS IDENTIFIED BY CT SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Levers	Occurrences of Lever
Human Capital Investment	101
Professional Development	60
Instructional Material Investment	51
SEL Teams	20

Qualitative Results

Having completed the quantitative phase of the research and identified the most often deployed theories of action across the participating districts, we reached out to districts with different demographic profiles (i.e., size of community [urban districts, mid-size suburban districts, districts located in towns and rural-fringe], enrollment size [by quintiles], percentage of students on free/reduced lunch, percentage of MLL students, percentage of students receiving Special Education Services) to better understand how these theories were operationalized at the site level. In the following section, we present our findings stemming from interviews and focus groups with district leaders and then later, school-based leadership as recommended by district leaders for each priority area. Regardless of priority area, findings were relatively similar across all participants regarding plans for sustainability of initiatives and recommendations for improving the planning process. Thus, findings on sustainability and recommendations are combined across priority areas and presented at the end of this section.

Priority Area 1: Focus on Differentiated Instruction

Priority Area 1 focused on initiatives and strategies to enhance student learning. One of the most cited levers used to address this priority was differentiated instruction in the classroom -- instruction customized to meet each student's unique needs. The interviews and focus groups for this priority area targeted 12 districts with large urban profiles. This sample is aligned with our larger sampling strategy to cover different regions for different priorities so we could gather the most diverse overall sample while simultaneously capturing themes specific to the context of a given theory of action. Focus groups or key informant interviews included 10 district-level administrators from 10 districts, along with building leadership from five schools.

Understanding of Theories of Action

District theories of action in Priority Area 1 focused on using differentiation, increasing time in academic learning settings, and hiring staff (levers) to support student academic recovery (objective). Success was measured by raising test scores and attendance (outcomes). Overall, participants' descriptions suggested a high level of consistency between the way the plan was written and translated into action at the district and at the school level -- a reality that may be a function of this work being most connected to the types of interventions frequently implemented in schools. Both groups discussed: 1) instituting new curricula to support differentiation in the classroom; 2) increasing students' time in academic learning settings; and 3) increasing staffing levels to provide in-classroom support and/or coaching to teachers. Additionally, school-based practitioners spoke to a few more nuanced and additional interventions that were needed to help facilitate change (e.g., building school-level data infrastructure to support teachers' data use for differentiation). Again, most of the interventions were continuations of efforts to enhance student academic achievement and this was reflected in the plans.

Across the ARP ESSER applications for funds for Priority Area

1, districts outlined strategies to address preexisting needs exacerbated by educational disruptions during COVID-19 and for which they had ready solutions. For many districts, the ARP ESSER funds enabled them to implement changes that they had wanted but previously did not have the financial resources to implement. Thus, as explained to the research team, the funding enabled districts and schools to enhance support already frequently provided to educators, so that they could better meet the education needs of their students. Across districts, administrators discussed the importance of these enhancements to existing practices and their careful planning, so that the changes would be sustainable. For example, in addition to increasing educational staff, district leaders said they also focused on purchasing curricula to support differentiation, while providing high-quality training and consultation for educators to support their implementation of these new curricula. However, while district leaders spoke of improved educational achievement for their students because of their efforts, they lamented the additional necessary work in front of them to ensure students were proficient in core subjects.

A focus on differentiated instruction in the classroom to meet individual students' needs was an important component of frequently used theories of action in the ARP ESSER plans. This is not surprising as it was also a key area of intervention before COVID. The ARP ESSER funds provided these districts the opportunity to put in place evidence-based strategies to accelerate student achievement and to have the staff to implement them at scale. When asked to discuss their approach to differentiation, leaders said they focused on implementing new curricula that provided guidance and structure so that classroom educators could individualize instruction for their students. For example, one district administrator stated:

 *We introduced new curricula particularly and specifically for [grades] 9 through 11, both in ELA and math... ESSER allowed us to add these additional resources... research-based curriculum that we can now employ...if you have effective curricula, you're still able to use that and differentiate it... based on their need, whether it's MLL, Multi-language learners, or whether it's your special education students, or whether it's just those that are in a tough place.*

Here the administrator makes clear that while they were already working hard to attend to students' academic needs, the ARP ESSER funds allowed them to upgrade the learning tools. It also suggests the belief that curricula are a tool for differentiation. While there is no doubt that curriculum matters, such comments may suggest an underestimation of the human capital, and specifically the skills, necessary for a teacher to actualize this possibility.

As we dug deeper, and positively relative to the point above, we found that many of the districts utilized ARP ESSER dollars to provide comprehensive training and consultation to classroom educators to increase their capacity to 1) implement the new curricula and 2) implement strategies to individualize instruction while presenting a new learning module to increase

academic achievement. A district administrator described the support offered for classroom staff and the anticipated outcomes,

“*We actually added additional coaching for teachers, and the reason why, it's because we felt that it was going to be a really huge lift for the teachers to now have to add these scaffolds to a greater degree. So, how do you both maintain high expectations for students and then provide scaffolds for students to be able to actually reach those standards? And how do you do that while you're planning? And so, then the coaching actually is for the adults to then be able to deliver the scaffolds of differentiation at the school level.*

In this example, the leader draws a direct line between the efficacy of a new curriculum and differentiation for students and coaching for teachers. In this way, we can understand the efforts in this district to be directed as much to programmatic shifts as towards building professional capacity. Given, as we discuss later, the generalized worry amongst grantees about the sustainability of their efforts, such efforts towards capacity building may be the most promising in terms of continuing beyond the timeline of the grant.

Returning to the interventions and building on district administrators' comments, some building administrators described professional development focused on student achievement and differentiation that expanded beyond the classroom. This included holistic training for anyone who interacted with students, including teachers, parents, paraprofessionals, and other staff to make sure that, as one district administrator explains, everyone involved was “...speaking the same language, that we had the same research-based strategies in our toolkit.” Again, such efforts appeared oriented towards building capacity and momentum towards ensuring new approaches would become embedded in practice over time.

These districts also invested heavily in strategies to increase educational time including, but not limited to adding high-dosage tutoring, reducing class sizes to allow instructors more time to focus on individual students, and increasing educational time through the inclusion of summer and extended day learning opportunities. One district administrator explained, “...[we increased] focus on small group interventions. So that is the space where students are able to recover some of that learning loss and focus on the targets that they may need extra or additional support with.” Another noted “we created what we call Acceleration Recovery Academy. We've had after-school programs before, but this was an intense after-school program that had much higher expectations for academics.” Another district administrator indicated that they expanded summer education opportunities through the extension of what was a program for students from elementary grades to include grades K-8 and increased the number of students per grade. In these examples, districts offered more time with teachers or more time to the school day/year to support students in academic recovery. Concerning high-dosage tutoring, building administrators expressed that while they needed to use outside vendors to have the staff to provide this support, the quality of the tutoring varied greatly.

District and building administrators also discussed how they expanded their use of data to guide interventions building teachers' and students' understanding and ability to monitor academic progress over time. For example, while student achievement was periodically reviewed before the pandemic, this further enhanced focus on data provided consistent and real-time information so that educators could modify their approach to meet the educational needs of each student. One building administrator noted, “We focus on those needs for three-to-four weeks progress, monitor them, see how they're doing, stay on top of that, and then continue to shift them where they need to be.” Here, this district is using short learning cycles to monitor progress and adjust accordingly. As part of building capacity around data use, many of the leaders talked about how they created teacher teams with members whom they trained to effectively use data to drive instruction for individual students' needs.

In summary, district and building-level administrators described the need for a multi-tiered approach to increase student academic achievement. A core focus across districts was on differentiating instruction in the classroom to meet the individual needs of students. This was achieved through 1) the implementation of new curricula to support academic differentiation, 2) a focus on professional development through training and coaching to enable staff to implement new curricula, 3) a focus on the use of data to inform individualized strategies and 4) increasing educational time through decreased class sizes and the implementation or expansion of after-school and summer learning opportunities. ARP ESSER funding provided districts the opportunity to put in place strategies they had long wanted to implement but did not have the financial resources to do so. Although many of these interventions were reported to increase achievement, they also presented challenges including the ability to recruit and retain high-quality staff who could consistently facilitate positive experiences and outcomes for all students.

Barriers to and Support for Implementation

District and building administrators highlighted the factors that aided and inhibited the implementation of the planned classroom interventions for differentiation. These factors included choosing interventions that the district and the staff had prior experience implementing, developing district policies focused on instructional differentiation, and clear strategies that the staff implemented. Barriers that impeded implementation included the inability to hire and retain staff, concerns about sustaining new positions established with ARP ESSER funds, and the high level of teachers' stress during this challenging time.

Alternatively, knowing that there was a paucity of skilled educators and consultants available to hire, district administrators spoke about the need to strategically choose strategies that they had the resources, including staff and consultants, to implement. One building administrator noted,

“*...newer staff that had very limited or no experience with a live classroom, teachers came in that student-taught virtually and that is not the same...they actually required significantly more support to understand how [] a real, live classroom, you*

know, how to be effective in that versus online. It was a lot.

In this way, administrators were clear that while they were eager to expand their staff, it created additional challenges that required attention. Moreover, it also slowed their ability to implement their new interventions effectively and/or at scale. Later, too, the lack of highly skilled teachers and other staff would create challenges regarding sustainability.

In this way, administrators were clear that while they were eager to expand their staff, it created additional challenges that required attention. Moreover, it also slowed their ability to implement their new interventions effectively and/or at scale. Later, too, the lack of highly skilled teachers and other staff would create challenges regarding sustainability.

Participants seemed aware of these challenges and the choices that had to be made to successfully implement strategies to support student achievement, including being realistic about their ability to hire qualified staff to implement desired interventions. As one administrator explained,

“We had to, kind of make choices, on, you know...we just had the money that was given to us versus what we'd need to pay people and how much staff we would need just didn't add up. So, there were

some things that we had to sacrifice to make it work.

This need to make sacrifices when hiring staff, whether in reference to number, qualifications, or effectiveness was oft repeated as leaders spoke to the challenges of implementing their desired interventions. Again, such comments bring up important questions regarding the efficacy of large-scale interventions dependent on extending a workforce which is already constricting. It may also point to the repercussions of larger discourses and policies which fail to uplift the true knowledge and skills necessary to teach young people.

Finally, district and building administrators spoke of COVID's impact on the emotional health and wellness of their staff, especially given the transitions and increased responsibilities, under the same expectations for student academic outcomes as were before the pandemic. One district administrator noted, “You know, adults were affected by COVID too, and they were tired, they were broken, they were hurt”.

Taken together, participants described challenges to hiring in order to meet their pressing needs and the plans they put in place to address those challenges. They also described how the trauma of the COVID 19 pandemic impacted adults as well as students, leading to continually unfolding ramifications in need of attention.

Reported Impact

Participants described a slow but positive trend towards improved academic achievement for students due to the initiatives put in place. They also described increased collaboration between teachers as well as more knowledge on differentiation strategies as important changes to practice increased student learning. However, the negative ramifications of the pandemic continue to be acute and broad for students, families, and staff.

Building and district administrators described several strategies for differentiated instruction that led to increased student achievement. These strategies included: professional development, science-based interventions, and staff collaboration in their schools. One building administrator noted the benefit of students receiving individual instruction in the classroom,

“It really brought it to another level, because prior to that... kids would have to be pulled out for small group instruction but [with professional development] this was able to happen right in the moment when the teacher did her instruction, then the assistant could also pull small groups.



Stock Image

In speaking about collaboration one building administrator expressed that a positive outcome of the ARP ESSER funding is that it provided important opportunities for collaboration that did not previously exist,

“...the conversation around collaboration was, had been, and is, the richest I've ever seen in my 27 years! Because we were talking about all kids and their needs, [we] are able to have conversations that transcend identification of a student, [now] it's about what's good for kids. It's not taking the neediest kids and then doing something different; we're going deeper. And being able to collaborate with someone else, who's not in your grade level team or doesn't have the student, works. And so those funds were a godsend, in a sense, because it did allow us that opportunity to do that.

Finally, when reflecting on how academic achievement has progressed for students, many district administrators reported that data are showing that progress is being made, yet at a slower rate than they had anticipated. One administrator stated that although their district was not at pre-pandemic levels, they had made important improvements in increasing literacy and math achievement and graduation rates because of their increased support for differentiated instruction.

District administrators also noted that the multiple impacts COVID had on students also influenced their rate of academic achievement gains. One administrator expressed that “it has particularly impacted adolescents, and everything that happened to such a huge extent, and, I think, larger than anyone has anticipated until you start seeing the data.” And another spoke of the lasting impact on students, “I think the COVID problem is bigger than we all kind of realized. And had a longer lasting impact on our students and families.”

In short, the administrators at both the district and building levels spoke extensively about implementing differentiated instructional strategies focused on improving students' academic performance. Specifically, these strategies included: professional development, science-based interventions, and staff collaboration. Yet, they also noted that the rate of academic improvement has been slower than expected. Administrators felt that the impact of COVID on their students, and in particular adolescents, is much greater than anticipated, resulting in a slower rate of improvement than expected.

Priority Area 2: Focus on Enhanced Communication for Strengthening Family and Community Relationships

Priority Area 2 focused on strengthening family and community relationships, and one of the most cited levers used to address this priority was enhancing communication. These key informant interviews and focus groups targeted eight districts with suburban profiles. Four districts participated in the focus groups or interviews, including four district-level administrators, three elementary-

ry school principals, and one high school principal.

Participants described using ARP ESSER funds to meet pre-existing and exacerbated needs during the pandemic, mostly focused on communicating with parents effectively and efficiently. Specifically, ARP ESSER funds were used to build infrastructure and tools quickly and at a grander scale than previously possible to better communicate with parents.

Understanding of the Theories of Action

In interviewing district and elementary school-level administrators in four districts, we found that with some exceptions (e.g., one district created a “mini-grant” program so that teachers could propose and fund their solutions to support parent engagement, purchasing hot spots and delivering Chromebooks), theories of action were largely driven by needs existing before but exacerbated by the pandemic. This included implementing new programs to meet the pre-existing need to find better ways to communicate with families who spoke languages other than English. This is not to say efforts lacked coherence or forethought, but rather that the selected interventions were more often driven by pre-existing needs or wants rather than being developed in response to COVID-19. As such, the money went to fill a need and these interventions, as we discuss below, were frequently perceived as necessary and effective. Indeed, participants expressed gratitude for the chance to attend to communication needs and felt strongly that the interventions that were selected and implemented – most often those associated with translation services – had served their school and community well.

For example, when asked about why their district identified particular interventions to focus on, several participants spoke about how the influx of monies allowed them to reinstate prior efforts that were previously cut due to funding issues and/or extend existing programs to better serve larger groups of students more deeply. As one district leader explained,

“Many years ago, someone decided they were going to take out counselors for the elementary schools. I don't understand why they did that...but it wasn't working...So [using the ESSER funds] we hired 21 counselors for the elementary schools.

Others remarked that they used the money to further and/or extend currently funded interventions. For example, one of the districts rehired an external company with whom they already had a partnership to support family-school relationships.

Additionally, participants talked about introducing or doubling down on existing technologies (e.g., Parent Square or Language Line – both translation services for communicating with parents) and associated these efforts with longstanding needs and a desire to provide translation services more efficiently and effectively.

This was, as they explained, particularly needed during the height of the pandemic, and remained an area for further work and investment. As one of the building administrators explained,

“It [translation line] was a huge need and I think it was, just because it didn't exist, parents just weren't getting access. I think with the pandemic, there has certainly been improved communication that was needed - just reaching out to families in our SEL initiatives; the fact that students were struggling a little bit more; families were struggling. So, the timing of it [translation line] was great that it came through the funding, but it's always been a need and our district has really had a focus on equity work over the past couple years and just getting an understanding and trying as much as we can to just ensure the same experience for all families. So, coupled with the pandemic need coupled with our equity. The timing of it was just perfect.

Similarly, one of the middle school principals explained that when they transitioned from their previous district two years prior, where Language Line was implemented, they approached their new superintendent about implementing it. As such, they saw the ARP ESSER monies as a helpful means of attending to an existing need.

“The Superintendent and I had talked about it [the Language Line] for, I'd

like to say at least two years, I've kind of mentioned it...saying, “This would be something we might want to look at when the funds came up?...[So when the money came through] We decided to try it and it was originally supposed to be just for my school, which is a middle school, and as soon as I brought it and explain how it was, the Superintendent was like, can we possibly just get it for everybody?”

As participants explained, while the need for translation services had long existed, the pandemic made the situation more dire. Thus, ARP ESSER funds helped to ensure support could move in the right direction.

Human capital interventions (e.g., the hiring of new counselors, multilingual teachers, etc.) were also often part of the mix of desired interventions to support families and were similarly framed as filling existing gaps, worsened by the pandemic, but not necessarily a new need. As one of the superintendents told us, their intervention decisions were largely driven by longstanding but unmet needs. They explained,

“I did hire more ML teachers, multilingual teachers because of my multilingual staff or my student population is going way up...It's gone from 6% to 10% in five years.

There was also a sense among participants that ESSER funds helped implementation happen more quickly and with more teacher commitment. The multiple and extreme needs of the community coupled with the

money helped school administrators to start and scale more quickly than may have occurred under less pressure.

“The Language Line just gives us access at any time really - any parent, if they need, they have instant translation with teachers. So that's definitely been a huge boom to us and...[it would not have happened] unless you tied it to the ESSER Grant...I actually get to see in real time who's using it, how many parents are utilizing it, what languages are being translated, so that's a pretty cool feature.

Principals also mentioned using a web application to help parents access newsletters and other communications funded with their ARP ESSER grants, though seemed less impressed with that tool than the Language Line, and thus the main focus of the conversation remained on Language Line.

Together, digital tools seemed to be cost-effective, generally easy to implement, and directly aligned with a clear need associated with the desired target area. In this way, we might understand these interventions as particularly successful. On the other hand, they are also quite limited in scope given the many ways that districts and schools might build meaningful and productive relationships with families. In this way, the findings suggest a need to better understand how to ensure schools have the basic resources necessary to build relationships (translation services), while simultaneously pushing for those that go beyond these fundamental needs.



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Barriers to and Support for Implementation

In general, because the focus on many of these interventions was enhancing pre-existing services and/or contingent on parents being more readily able to engage with the school via different technologies, participants described few deviations regarding their initiatives. Language Line was also described as easy to use and that it did not require additional staff. With that said, there was some training required to use the tool effectively and participants spoke about providing professional development opportunities for teachers to build their skills. As one principal told us,

“I mean if you want to say a ‘challenge,’ [it] would just be learning the programs. You know, there’s always individuals who don’t like change. They want to do things, but they’re a little afraid of how to [do it].”

While principals tended to agree that implementation went fairly smoothly, given that many of the parents did not speak English, finding ways to share information about the tool and how to use it was more of a challenge than expected. As a principal explained,

“The parent has to, on their own, figure out how to change the language on their end. So, if you already have a language barrier in the first place, how are you getting the instruction to know, ‘I can change to Spanish.’ To know, ‘I can change it to Vietnamese?’ We had talked here in the district, ‘could we do some kind of parent night just to kind of invite families and share with that or open house and I walk parents through that?’ We do have a welcome center now for new families that come in and I do believe that’s part of the process is letting them know how to access communication; that we do have a Language Line; that we do have this technology that will allow you to change the language and what you’re getting.”

Eventually, this principal said that they were able to support parents in this process, often with the help of their child, and parents could now use the tool in a variety of ways and across contexts.

Finally, some of the principals mentioned feeling that communication of the district’s ARP ESSER plan and how to get resources for their school was sometimes haphazard. There was a sense that while some of the school administrators were computer savvy and perhaps paid more attention to district emails, the distribution of resources was largely contingent on the principal being entrepreneurial in the process. While those in the focus group put themselves in that category, there were concerns that not all the schools benefited equally from the new monies with the kids and families being those who would ultimately suffer as a result. As one principal put it, “I think they could have been a little more purposeful instead of just like, ‘Hey, if you want something for your building, put it on this sheet.’” In this way, they said, it sometimes felt like the process had the possibility of increasing inequity instead of mitigating it.

Perhaps somewhat unsurprisingly, the limited complexity of these interventions appeared to create fewer barriers to implementa-

tion. At the same time, human capital, and specifically the principal’s technology skills and ability to advocate on behalf of their school and its community, were perceived as moderators to the school’s ability to access and then successfully implement these resources. Thus, while generally positive, the principals’ experiences regarding the distribution of funds and parental needs does bring up some questions about whether and to what degree the planning tool and a more robust theory of action may have made such training needs clearer from the onset. If so, one might also imagine an even quicker and more effective scale-up effort.

Reported Impact

In general, participants felt the strategies they deployed, such as digital tools and increased staff, had significantly enhanced their communication with parents [“It’s been a game changer for us.”]. In doing so, participants felt they were offering more equitable opportunities for family engagement in school. As one of the principals put it,

“Even though I [the parent] speak Vietnamese, or I speak Portuguese, I can talk to the teacher. I can call; I can speak to my child’s counselor, for having issues at home. I can speak to the secretary, and that’s opening that partnership... We know those partnerships are strong, [and] that’s how kids are successful. So that’s the other facet too. And I feel like I’m part of the school community now, and I feel value that you’re somebody there that can listen to me. Hear me out. Partner with me.”

Beyond the ability to connect with parents more meaningfully at the level of the classroom --“it is absolutely fantastic!” (elementary school principal) -- participants highlighted positive spillover effects via this intervention. Participants spoke about the ways Language Line was an equity tool helping to level some of the barriers parents who did not speak English and were often multiply marginalized (race, ethnicity, immigration status, etc.) negotiate other and even higher stakes issues. For instance, one administrator spoke about how language line was being utilized in students’ individualized education plan meetings such that parents who were often unable to fully participate now had fuller access to these legal proceedings. They explained,

“It is so important to ensure that those families [the ones who do not speak English] have the same access that an English-speaking family has and it allows them to ask questions even in discipline situations. We had a situation where our Police Department had to get involved in a situation with a family and they were just stopping by to check on the family and talk to them. It wasn’t anything, but the parent called me in a panic, ‘Police showed up at our house last night.’ What can we do without the Language Line? I wouldn’t have been able to communicate what that was. So, it really just does give them [parents who speak other languages] the same access any other family has to communicate.”

The principals highlighted how this increased access and opportunity for connection helped to build trust and community. They also spoke about how it helped to enhance the entire school community and educators' ability to effectively engage.

Although the educational administrators we spoke to celebrated these successes, most also perceived continuing challenges with family engagement, particularly in relation to attendance. One district-level administrator said,

“Attendance is still a struggle. And there's multitude of factors, not to blame the pandemic. But it, you know, intensified lots of different things, and it brought on new things. So, I think that's been tough.

As this leader's comments signal, while communication is key, it is not necessarily enough to ensure other desired outcomes come to fruition or to attend to the multiple and compounding issues families continue to face in the post-pandemic era. In this way, while the perceived impact of these interventions was undoubtedly positive, many challenges still lay ahead, and with them, questions about continuing the services after the end of the ARP ESSER grants.

Priority Area 3: Focus on Social-Emotional Learning

Priority Area 3 was focused on 'Social, Emotional and Mental Health of Students and Staff' and one of the most cited levers used to address this priority was focusing efforts on enhancing SEL. These key informant interviews and focus groups focused on 10 districts with rural-fringe profiles. Two districts participated, including four district-level administrators and four elementary school principals.

Participants described a crisis of socio-emotional and mental health for students, families, and staff, which jeopardized student learning. While increasing numbers of SEL professionals in schools was part of every plan, there were not enough potential applicants to fill all of the necessary positions. While both school and district level leaders discussed other initiatives such as new curricula or capacity building professional development, the ubiquitous and urgent SEL needs outpaced the resources and abilities of staff,

causing on ongoing struggle for students and the adults working to support them. When schools were able to hire new, highly qualified staff, participants described the positive impact for their whole community. In this way, the availability of new staff as well as the ability to build that staff into the budget permanently was key to success. This raises questions of equity as more resourced districts were able to hire, retain, and sustain new staff more fully than under resourced districts, as the ARP ESSER funds are temporary. Additional communication, resources, and support from the state on this growing issue of socio-emotional health would undoubtedly be helpful moving forward.

Understanding of Theory of Action

Overall, participants' theories of action to support socio-emotional learning responded to both preexisting needs and new issues related to the pandemic. Participants discussed the overwhelming mental health needs of the student population and their families, acknowledging the struggle of the whole community during the trauma of the pandemic.

Participants described a challenging environment for learning and wellness that combined already somewhat overwhelming pre-existing needs of students with post-pandemic shutdown, and new and exacerbated socio-emotional needs of students and their families. Some participants described their schools as challenging and sometimes even physically dangerous places. One elementary principal described their experiences saying,

“We are noticing that with the lack of birth-to-three services, the social-emotional needs, socialization in general is really lacking. And we're seeing both more social, emotional issues even with our peer model students, not just our [students who are] identified [with special needs]. But we're [also] seeing more significant needs in the identified students.

Unfortunately, the other three participants agreed that students appeared to have significantly more dysregulation and violent behaviors than in the past and that their schools did not necessarily have the resources to attend to these needs. Note

the following exchange:

“Admin #2: I don't even know how to explain these behaviors. Like my PreK - I've been physically beat up during the last two weeks, and they just can't regulate and socialize

Admin #4: I mean, coming out of COVID, just significant distress amongst our population of students, a lot more- 211 calls. More refusals to exit the car, just to come into school. More school avoidance.

Admin #2: I have a little boy who goes under the table and barks every day. I mean, we're halfway through kindergarten and we are still trying to regulate, you get the sobbing, tantrums that just last forever.

The above exchange illustrates the increasing complexity of children's SEL needs. Given that these cases are well beyond what most classroom teachers and para-professionals are adequately trained to, or perhaps should be asked to, deal with, schools must have an adequate number of psychologists, social workers, and counselors on staff. And yet, regardless of ARP ESSER funds, there are simply not currently enough individuals trained for and/or seeking such positions to meet these needs. Moreover, we might imagine that districts with more resources overall may also be those that can best recruit and compensate such individuals in a tight market.

Additionally, all four elementary school administrators described the increased number of students having special needs without necessarily the same increases to the supports to meet these needs. One participant quantified it by stating, “I mean, [our school has] more 504s this year than we've ever had before.” As described here, previous socio-emotional needs grew, while new needs emerged resulting in more students needing support than in the previous year. Systems no longer could manage and support the amount of need during and after the pandemic.

Overall, administrators faced an unprecedentedly challenging environment with more needs than current staff and

programming could address. Strategies included in the theories of action to address these pressing needs included purchasing and implementing new curricula and programs to support student socio-emotional learning, as well as hiring new staff. These new staff were mostly counselors, social workers, and psychologists and were hired to fill pre-existing gaps and as well as fill new roles. As in other priority areas, these strategies mostly focused on adding new resources (curriculum or staff) to fill both old and new highly pressing needs.

When thinking about the role of SEL in larger district strategies, one district-level administrator explained the importance of socio-emotional health alongside academic needs to best support students:

“There were two strategies that we really wanted to employ, one was related to academic acceleration and academic renewal and the other one was social-emotional, like mental health outreach for kids and their families. We saw that there were significant challenges that the kids were facing both academically and socially. It was almost like a 50/50 split between the dollars that we [received] between those two categories that we thought would have the most impact on our kids.

This example demonstrates both the importance of investing in students' academic and well as SEL needs, but also that SEL needs extend to students' families creating another tier of need and work for schools and districts.

In one district, administrators used ARP ESSER funds to implement new programming to engage students and build relationships with teachers and staff. A district-level leader explained that during the summer,

“We created a Connections program, where we pretty much offered everything under the sun for small periods of time - maybe two weeks, maybe three weeks. As an example, our custodian, who has an incredible relationship with our grades three to five students started a Walking

Club and she had a small army of children that would just go out and walk, and that was a club that we used part of the ESSER money to get the students back to [school, with] with each other and not being behind a screen. I found that program to probably be one of our most successful programs for building the community...

She went on to describe additional programming for kindergarteners to engage and acclimate them to school to build community and ease the transition to in-person learning

“That next summer we instituted our kindergarten experience where we invited every single incoming kindergartener to come a week before school started for a weeklong, half-day program, just to be with each other to learn the routines. We invited the families to come in. We gave them bus transportation.

In this district, additional programming to build school community outside of academics was vital in supporting socio-emotional health for students and families.

As mobility among school-level administrators is not uncommon, some of the elementary school principals we talked to came into their leadership positions within the last two years and their district's plans were already set in place before their arrival. Relatedly, principals talked about the autonomy they had to implement the district plans in ways that best met their school-specific needs. Thus, they were more comfortable speaking about the effectiveness of the specific strategies they chose to implement within their schools versus their district's ARP ESSER plan specifically. The strategies school leaders chose to implement also focused primarily on hiring new staff and implementing new SEL-based programs in their schools.

Barriers to and Support for Implementation

When discussing Priority Area 3, district and school-level participants spoke less about supports for implementation than in interviews concerning other priority areas. Instead, they spoke mostly about the challenges they faced regarding implemen-

tation and continuation of new initiatives and staffing. Perhaps the most significant and obvious was the sheer volume of student needs and student learning loss. Participants explained how, after the return to in-person schooling, essentially all students needed enrichment and intervention. Addressing this need continues to be an ongoing process.

As one administrator explained, “The problem was everybody had the learning loss and so everybody like necessarily qualified for intervention.” So, they used part of their ARP ESSER funds for professional development of all teachers in the MTSS – Multi-Tiered Systems of Support model. Thus far, this district has trained all elementary school teachers and was in the process of training middle school teachers. Within the next two years, they planned to train all of the high school teachers in the district as well. Such planning shows that districts with the financial means are continuing to invest in these strategies well after the cessation of ARP ESSER funds both because of their perceived value and the districts' robust fiscal standing.

In conjunction with increased and overwhelming needs, the school-level leaders also expressed that finding and retaining qualified staff was the biggest barrier to implementing their strategies. For example, participants described being unable to fill vacant positions even when the funding was available. This was especially true for school psychologists, counselors, and social workers who were desperately needed to address students' growing SEL needs. In one focus group, three school-level administrators discussed their similar struggles with staffing.

“Admin #1: We've got a district-level social worker that does a lot of work and a part-time position in her building, and we can't find people. Both my psychologist and social worker are out on maternity leave. I don't have a replacement for either one of them.

Admin #2: My psychologist is going out and we have no replacement, so I'm going to have no psychologist. From April to June...there's still only so much work we can do in the school. There's more clinical



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need and we can't get them connected with services.

Admin #3: Yeah, it's much the same here.

Here, the administrators discuss the challenges in adding positions as well as covering the ones that already exist and the impact of understaffing on the socio-emotional health of their students. While staffing was an issue in every priority area and across locations, it was especially acute in the more rural regions sampled here. As such, we might hypothesize that, if there is not a substantial shift in the SEL support pipeline, particularly in rural areas, it is likely that Connecticut public schools will experience even more staffing shortages in the future as the SEL needs of the students become more common and more severe. Additional communication, resources, and support from the state on this growing issue would undoubtedly be helpful moving forward.

Reported Impact

In general, participants were highly satisfied with what they said they were able to accomplish with ARP ESSER funding. In numerous cases, districts said they had found ways to continue the programs, positions, and procedures they implemented to address students' SEL needs. One participant explained,

“*We were able to increase our psychologists and social workers at all of our schools by at least an extra half of an FTE, and those are positions that all of our principals and guidance offices want to keep in the operating budgets... [Our school psychologist] has been a really rewarding position that the students have needed, and [their SEL needs are] not something that we've seen that's gonna go away... Or is this sort of a new normal?*

Here, we see the value of these positions reflected in the district's efforts to maintain funding after ARP-ESSER funds expire and the needs of the students continue.

While participants struggled to fill all the SEL-related positions they needed, when they were able to hire new, high-caliber staff, they felt they were effective in addressing student needs. One elementary school principal explained the importance of ARP-ESSER funding in being able to hire a much-needed school psychologist:

“*We did use [our ARP-ESSER funding] to fund a school psychologist full time...Prior to that, [our budget] only allowed for the basic functions of a psychologist completing the assessments that need to be done for special education. Now, having somebody in here full-time has allowed for there to be some preemotive proactive work, rather than just being reactive.*

This principal went on to describe how this staff member was split between two buildings, both with tremendous needs, and thus was still spread thin. In this way, principals were clear that they felt the new personnel was necessary and that they often still felt unable to serve all students' needs fully.

In general, the elementary school administrators were highly satisfied with the impact that their new staff had made, however, they unanimously agreed that their students' SEL needs are far greater than before and far greater than what their schools can support with the resources they currently have. One participant explained, “But to the frequency, duration, and intensity of it is and then just the numbers - it has been extremely [difficult] this year -- this year's by far been the worst.” In this way, the theories of action in these districts included hiring more staff to meet pressing needs, and yet the needs continue to outpace the staffing possibilities.

Other district initiatives, like the choice activities described earlier and the implementation of MTSS in one district, were also reported as successful in addressing student need. While many of the SEL needs described by participants were significantly exacerbated by the pandemic, one administrator discussed the unique opportunity that ARP ESSER funding provided. The administrator explained,

“*COVID created an opportunity for us, because here we are...wanting to implement things that we know, such as MTSS, could be extremely beneficial [for the whole child]. [ARP-ESSER funding] gave us a reason to do this very quickly, where perhaps the three of us [administrators] may have waited a couple of years until we established relationships... So, it gave that sense of urgency to drive some of these new initiatives.*

Here, the urgency of COVID-related socio-emotional needs and the influx of ARP ESSER funding allowed this district the opportunity to enact a plan they had been considering before the pandemic at a pace and scale they might not have before.

Again, the majority of these interventions added new programs or staff to meet existing but clearly worsened, students' socio-emotional needs. Participants explained that when they were able to implement the proposed programs fully, they were successful in addressing some of the needs. However, as discussed earlier, many districts were unable to bring their plans to full fruition as candidates were limited, and student needs continued to increase. Findings from the plan analysis indicated that districts were also limited in the menu of research-backed options available to them to address the burgeoning crisis of student and community socio-emotional health. Taken together, there is much still to do to adequately meet all students' socio-emotional needs after the pandemic and in our "new normal."

Aggregate Views on Sustainability and Reflections on the Planning Process

With some exceptions that we highlighted throughout the report, participants across priority areas and district demographics provided similar views on the potential sustainability of their efforts and their feedback to the state about the grant process itself. As such, we aggregate their responses and emergent themes below.

Sustainability

Overall, administrators expressed concerns about their ability to sustain their efforts and specifically staffing levels once ARP ESSER funds ran out. This result is of course linked to the heavy emphasis many of the districts put on human capital investments adding to what for many districts was already a tight, and in many places constricting budget "They're (new hires) probably going to get cut for next year because we're facing a looming budget cliff."

With that said, leaders, seeing the positive impacts associated with their efforts, said they were seeking creative ways to sustain aspects of the work. This included suggestions for reallocating funds from other efforts, for example,

“We may have to shift some things in order to fill positions that we purchased, those positions with those funds now that the funds are not there anymore; we're gonna reabsorb those into the climate of the district moving forward- that's a huge struggle right now trying to try to beat that.

Others spoke to better using their Title 1 funds and lobbying their state representatives and local boards to fight for more money. And yet, it was clear speaking to participants that many felt to be facing a "fiscal cliff" and were deeply concerned about the sustainability of their efforts and any progress they had made to attend to the deluge of ongoing challenges they faced.

Exceptions to these sentiments were expressed only by those in more affluent districts where funding was able to be increased to meet new demands or in relation to interventions, like Language Line, which required no additional staffing or intense professional development or change to succeed. In this case, most

implementers said they believed they would and could sustain these efforts moving forward. However, they were also careful to contrast this potential sustainability with other efforts that are more contingent on the additional funds,

“[The end of the grant] doesn't affect us so much on the family engagement part but it does on everything else that we've added: the curriculum and instruction materials; we have more curriculum now in areas that we did not have prior to any of the ESSER funds.

If and on all content and there's a sustainability to that; we have more SEL [needs] now than we've ever had.

Together, these sentiments point to the difficulty associated with spending large sums of money in a constricted timeline and successfully planning to ensure sustainability. Moreover, given that many of the participants reported that their districts had substantial resource needs before the ESSER grants, the likelihood that they would be able to sustain a newly acquired far larger budget seems unlikely. As such, it may be useful for the State Department of Education to give more guidance on how districts can better spread out their grant monies so that they can gradually transfer any additional costs to their operating budget over time.

Reflections on Process

Overall, administrators were generally positive about the rollout of the grants and understanding of the constraints the state itself is under when such opportunities come about. In particular, they appreciated both the structure and flexibility created via the state priority areas and encouraged the state to continue this practice for large grants. As one of the superintendents explained, having "five different buckets" of priorities was great because they "hit on everything [AND]... they all kind of intertwine with one another." Others agreed and expressed gratitude for some framing of the grant.

In terms of improving grantmaking and monitoring processes, some leaders indicated that the time allocated to apply for the funding of different grants was inconsistent and thus difficult to plan for. The time to apply for other grants was often too short (e.g., the SPED Ed. Art bonus grant), while the response time announcing the award recipients was too long. Others noted a lack of efficiency in the process. For example, the state already had a lot of information from the districts, and yet districts were asked to repeat this information in each application. Others also asked for additional infrastructure to support fiscal management of the grants and clearer and more frequent communication regarding how the spend down would occur.

Even at the school level, some administrators called for more clarity and direction on how the money could be used within the district. One participant explained,

“They [the district] kind of just left it up to the building leaders, which was a little ambiguous for us because we had to figure it out for ourselves... Obviously everyone found ways to spend money, but if they [the district] kind of were like

presenting it as, “this is the thing we want you to hit,” it would have been maybe easier for us to nail it down, but they kind of just said, “here’s a Google doc and anything you want with ESSER money, put it in here and you have to justify it,” and that’s what we did.

As a result of this loose approach, another participant explained, it was often the principals’ skills and not need that drove the distribution of resources. As such, some of the schools that may have needed more, received less, and vice versa. As they explained, “I’m sure schools in the district used maybe, you know, 2% and some probably used 200% [of the funding].” Such comments suggest perhaps a need for the state to support not only the implementation phase but also the planning leading to that implementation.

In the context of an unparalleled crisis of a global pandemic and an unprecedented amount of federal funding, district and school administrators did not blame the state for these issues, but still would like to see them resolved moving forward. Another leader explained,

“I don’t know if this was a state issue or a federal issue that we could have spread out the ESSER dollars longer. For example, ESSER 2, I kind of intentionally spent it within the allotted timeline because I would never want to give it back but then I found out there was an extension, but I had already allocated the money.

Additionally, some leaders called for the state to do more to recognize their specific contextual fiscal needs in the future. Specifically, there was a concern that some of the less-resourced districts had a bigger lift in terms of building the necessary infrastructure to effectively support planned interventions. As one of the participants explained, in their district,

“We struggled with the state understanding some of the operational funding that we needed to utilize ESSER for, [our district] had been totally underfunded for, I don’t know how many years... You could contribute millions to [our district] and it would still be behind unless the formula significantly changed, and operations and operational costs were never a part of our regular budget because we just never had any money.

In sum, these perspectives point to the need for the state to provide more consistency in all steps of the grant cycle (e.g., providing adequate time for districts to apply, receive notification of the award, and to spend down the money). Additionally, historically underfunded districts requested the state give more consideration to the severity of their resource needs. And school administrators said they would benefit by having more clarity on how the funds can be most effectively allocated to address the given priority areas.

Feedback for the State Department of Education

The principals agreed that the ESSER funding was invaluable, but there is more the State Department of Education can and should do to preemptively support families with students in early childhood programs because the SEL needs have “certainly exacerbated post COVID-19.” These students were unable to start school in the way other students were able to, and thus may need more support going forward. One administrator explained,

“I believe the birth-to-three, working with families ahead of time, that’s where work [from the state] needs to be done because we’re getting kids that are four-years [old] and they’ve got endless amounts of XY and Z. [Their challenges] could be trauma, could be service needs, it could be anything... And how can we preemptively try to support? That might be something the department I can look into more....because everything is dumped on us, along with other unfunded mandates... and there’s not enough support.

Another principal added,

“The kids who didn’t have the birth-to-three services, didn’t go to preschool, didn’t go to PreK, and now four years later - maybe [not the] majority of our kindergarteners, but a good number are coming in dysregulated, a good number who still have not had preschool experience.

Again, it is worth repeating that these are conversations among elementary school principals in relatively small, affluent communities. And so, it is difficult to assume the intensity of what schools in chronically underfunded, racially, and economically segregated communities in Connecticut are experiencing. Certainly, more relief funds and the support to plan for and implement them would be welcomed by these administrators.

Summary of Key Findings

What follows is a summary of our key findings from the quantitative and qualitative data across the 3 priority areas.

Planning

A high degree of similarity in district planning. Overall, there was a high degree of similarity across districts in their core planning for each of the three priority areas. In general, this was true for different district demographic groups. For example, the top two objectives and levers for the top four outcomes in all three priority areas accounted for over 60 percent of the variance. This shows that in general, districts selected very similar outcomes, objectives, and levers. At the same time, each individual district chose a wide range of objectives and levers, meaning schools were spending money on a lot of different things to meet the same goals. These findings were further supported by our interviews and focus groups with participants who described a strong alignment between the way the plan was written and translated into action at the district and school levels.

Planning for student learning included the most coherent theories of action. All parts of the planning were logically aligned with one another and the desired outcomes. In general, we find that Priority Area 1 (student learning) was the most coherent in terms of alignment across the elements of the theory of action. Specifically, districts turned to a set of commonly used interventions often focused on giving students more directed and individualized instruction to support their academic needs. As also found in our qualitative results, the heavy focus on hiring across all districts was challenging both in terms of a depleted pool (size and quality) and in incentivizing teachers to take on additional roles and/or responsibilities. This was particularly challenging for historically underfunded districts that were able to hire staff but entered the pandemic with prior staffing needs and limited fiscal resources.

Top objectives, levers, and outcomes for community and family relationships were the most similar across the plans. In Priority Area 2 (community and family relations) districts' outcomes and associated objectives and levers were more similar across districts than for the other priority areas. Specifically, only 8% of the districts chose activities that were not the same as the four most frequently identified across all plans (approximately 30% of districts chose activities outside the top four for the other priority areas). While it is possible that these four levers were selected because they are indeed the best possible interventions, it is more likely the case that there is a need to develop of a larger pool of initiatives for schools to draw from to individualize their community-building approaches. Regardless of the district's demographic profile, the most frequently selected objectives and levers aligned with the outcomes of changing families' perceptions of school and enhancing family participation. This participation tended to be oriented towards building parents' capacity to support school needs rather than vice versa. As true for priority area one, the most common lever identified by districts, regardless of demographics, was human capital investment, meaning districts looked to hire new staff to

support family engagement.

Planning for student wellbeing was the most divergent across districts relative to the other priority areas. Somewhat different from the other priority areas, the objectives, levers, and outcomes for Priority Area 3 (student wellbeing) were oriented towards capacity building with existing staff and students (professional development and measure of student growth); however, many of the levers that were used added staff or material. In this way, there is less alignment in theories of action for student wellbeing, further indicating the lack of options districts have with which to address these pressing problems of socio-emotional well-being.

Implementation

Understanding Theories of Action: An Opportunity to Fill Existing Gaps

Overall, participants understood their theories of action in two intertwined ways both focused on increasing resources by:

- Reinstating programs for which there were not previously adequate funds and/or bringing in new programs that were long desired but not economically feasible.
- Hiring new people or extending the hours of existing staff.

As a result, we might understand the process of planning as opportunistic as districts and schools were using plans primarily to attend to existing needs that typically were further exacerbated by the pandemic.

Barriers and Supports for Implementation: Human Capital as Key

Overall, it seemed clear that all districts that participated in the qualitative part of the study implemented most of their intended interventions. This appeared particularly true when these interventions were not heavily dependent on additional human capital (e.g., a new easy to use technology like Language Line). Participants were clear that when things were not successful it often had to do with human capital constraints that included, but were not limited to:

- Current staff being burnt out and/or simply overwhelmed by the pandemic and thus not able to take on additional work, even when additional compensation was offered.
- An increasingly shallow pool of potential staff from which to hire positions.
- New staff lacking the skills and knowledge to do the work effectively.
- Leadership without the technical skills to advocate for their needs or to ensure implementation of new initiatives was effective.

Given that hiring additional personnel and/or extending existing personnel's workloads was often the top identified lever to reach desired outcomes, these findings bring up some important questions about the efficacy of the districts' initial plans. It also

highlights the necessity for district and state-level policies aimed at enhancing teacher pipelines including supporting teachers who are further along in their careers. This may be particularly true for those teachers who have persisted through the pandemic and may be carrying the weight of those events with them every day.

Reported Impact: Plugging Holes in the Dam

Across the districts, participants spoke with enthusiasm about the impact of their interventions and the many benefits to students and families as a result. At the same time, participants also made clear that despite this clear success, the needs only felt to be growing over time. Participants expressed how the effects of the pandemic were far from being in the rearview mirror. Instead, if anything, they felt their jobs were harder than ever before and the needs far greater. As such, the potential loss of ESSER funds and with them the interventions felt less like a return to normal and more like they were losing a lifeline.

Sustainability: Keeping Programs/Losing Staff

The responses to questions about sustainability were mixed. On one hand, when the intervention required an initial cost related to the acquisition of a new physical or technological resource, participants generally expressed the view that they would be able to continue implementation post-ESSER funding. On the other hand, except for those from the more affluent districts with whom we spoke, there were real concerns about how to sustain human capital investments and new hires.

Reflections on Process: Same Structure/More Oversight

When asked about any advice they might provide the state regarding the overarching ESSER planning process, general sentiments included:

- An appreciation for being given directives regarding the priority areas given the scope of the grants.
- A desire for greater support regarding rollout both in terms of implementation and in managing the technical aspects of the grant (e.g., budget, compliance, etc.)
- Requests for more accountability across all districts and how monies were spent, the alignment with the plan, and the associated outcomes.

Of course, such requests require a degree of capacity at the State Department that may or may not be feasible given competing commitments and needs. Such findings however mostly reaffirm the state's approach and offer an opportunity to offer further support in the process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Create state sponsored clearinghouse to support district initiatives. The availability of ARP ESSER dollars enabled districts to implement initiatives and expand staffing; however, issues arose as districts proposed similar strategies including the hiring of staff and utilization of vendors (e.g., online tutoring, coaches/trainers for new curriculum, construction) resulting in vendors being over-taxed and the pool of potential high-quality staff being depleted. In addition, several districts seemed unable to fully actualize their

plans with fidelity due to these issues or had to make do using sub-par resources. Thus, we recommend that the state function as a clearinghouse in terms of aggregating and monitoring the nature of the interventions being proposed and the degree of overlap across district plans. With this knowledge, the state can be more aware of what resources may be limited and give guidance when multiple districts propose implementing the same strategies at the same time. Additionally, this might include tiering future funding opportunities so that the timing of the rollout of strategies/levers across multiple districts is staggered so resources within the state are not depleted. This may also help to better ensure that the districts with the highest levels of need can go first. We also recommend that the state provide districts with a list of vendors that have been vetted and are known to provide high-quality services as well as a list of those who should be avoided due to prior poor business practices. While the pandemic and the large influx of federal funds were unique and thus a limitation of this study and the recommendations listed here, schools, districts, and the state can learn important lessons about statewide initiatives.

Enhance the pipeline for Connecticut teachers and socio-emotional support staff. The pandemic further highlighted the need to expand the pool of credentialed K-12 educators and socio-emotional health support staff in Connecticut. Our qualitative findings revealed that many educators feel overwhelmed and potentially burnt out because of the pandemic. While some districts were able to expand the number of adults in the classrooms early in the pandemic through the NextGen Educators initiative, it is recommended that this work be expanded and include initiatives to retain experienced educators, psychologists, social workers, and counselors throughout the state. This could perhaps be achieved through enhancing district and state policies regarding expectations for teachers and for districts and exploring ways to supplement teacher and staff compensation, provide resources for professional development, and tend to the wellness of Connecticut's educators and socio-emotional health staff.

Provide guidance on grant management. District leaders struggled with the magnitude of ARP ESSER funding and planning for sustainability. It is recommended that future funding initiatives include guidance and resources surrounding the administrative infrastructure needed to manage the grant. Additionally, guidance should be provided for districts on how to gradually integrate new initiatives into their operating budgets to prevent districts from facing significant financial cliffs when grant funding ends. This is particularly important to better ensure that human capital investments can serve to limit or remove inequities in access and outcomes – not exacerbate them.

Revise state grantmaking policies. District leaders appreciated that the ARP ESSER applications included directives and priorities regarding areas for funding as this guidance facilitated their planning. In addition, they recommended that the state implement longer timelines for grant applications and grant spending so that their districts are better able to plan strategies and create tiered implementation to support the sustainability of their initiatives. Additionally, while district leaders appreciated the flexibility

of the ARP ESSER funding, they called for more accountability regarding how monies were spent. Particular attention should be given to the alignment of the objectives and levers implemented with their proposed outcomes and the extent to which their outcomes were reached.

Create a mechanism for state-wide provision of core supports for best practices. Some strategies implemented at the district level with ARP ESSER funds showed promise at being universally effective and sustainable (e.g., Language Line). Thus, we recommend that the state create an open process for districts to identify these 'best practices' and for the state to assist districts in scaling up these practices. This strategy could reduce duplication of core costs for these services and promote equity across districts by creating multiple economies of scale.



Stock Image

ENDNOTES

- 1 VanGronigen, B. A., & Meyers, C. V. (2022). Exploring the association between short-cycle school improvement planning and student achievement in underperforming schools. *Journal of School Leadership*, 32(4), 339-361.
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- 12 We focused on these priorities (student learning, student well-being, community and family relations) that attend to building district, school and teacher capacity to meet student needs – in contrast priorities related to improving building infrastructure or technological hardware because of the more immediate impact on student academic progress.
- 13 Data source: ARP-ESSER plan spreadsheets provided by CSDE.
- 14 https://public-edsight.ct.gov/?language=en_US



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