

BUDGET & FINANCE

Schools Used ESSER Funds for After-School Programs. What Happens When the Money Runs Out?



By [Lauraine Langreo](#) — April 11, 2023 ⌚ 6 min read



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School districts across the United States invested some of their federal COVID relief funds into after-school and summer programs to help support their students' academic and social-emotional needs.

In Alaska's Kenai Peninsula Borough, school district leaders used Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to provide summer sessions where students could

explore science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) subjects, as well as individualized help on math and English language arts for those who were falling behind.

Bloomington School District 87 in Illinois is also using ESSER funding to provide full-day academic enrichment during the summer, along with camp-like experiences, such as field trips, hands-on learning, and guest speakers.

And in Fort Worth, Texas, the school district is using its COVID relief funding to provide an online after-school homework and classwork assistance program throughout the school year.

But districts are required to commit their second round of [ESSER funds](#) by Sept. 30, 2023, and the third round by Sept. 30, 2024. As schools head for that fiscal cliff, district leaders are looking for creative ways to continue providing after-school or summer programs or risk scrapping programs that have resulted in positive student outcomes.

Partnerships as a method of sustainability

Partnerships with community-based organizations are one effective approach to sustain these after-school programs, according to experts.

Community-based organizations that already serve public school students—such as the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, YMCA, 4-H, or local children’s museums—are “experts in all of this,” said Nikki Gillani, the after-school resources and support specialist for ACT Now Illinois, a coalition of after-school programs. “They already have their own capacity and their own infrastructure.”

“Partnering is really the most sustainable way of moving forward because you’re not losing those opportunities once ESSER funding runs out,” Gillani said. “That organization will still be there and those opportunities will still be there.”

For example, Bloomington school district leaders knew that in order to provide a successful summer enrichment program, they would need to loop in local organizations.

“We knew that if we pulled 400 students out of our community that would be going to our Boys and Girls Club or our Children’s Discovery Museum camps or going to our Illinois State University for camps, that would actually have a negative impact on our community,” said Diane Wolf, the assistant superintendent of teaching and learning.

So Bloomington created a program that had three parts, Wolf said: One was for the district's needs, which focused on academic enrichment. The second part was for what community partners needed; these partners brought the camps to the school sites and offered afternoon programming. The third was a partnership with Illinois State University and Illinois Wesleyan University, which have teacher preparation programs. The student-teachers in those programs were able to get college credit for working at Bloomington's after-school programs.

"It's given us a better appreciation of all that our community partners bring to the table, and how to look at teaching and learning through a different lens," Wolf said. "For our partners, it's given them a revenue source, along with access to students that may not be able to afford their programming because of the economic status of their family."

As ESSER funding runs out for these after-school programs, Wolf said the district needs to evaluate their impact on students and staff to figure out what level of programming and funding it will need in the future.

So far, the program has been good for students' social-emotional well-being, Wolf said. And teachers have been using it to practice or experiment with new curriculum or teach at a different grade-level than they would normally teach during the school year.

'Blend and braid' funding streams

Another way to sustain after-school programs is to identify other available funding streams from state education agencies and the federal government, Gillani said.

"There's an opportunity to blend and braid those funding streams so you're not fully dependent on ESSER," Gillani said.

The problem with that approach, however, is it might not be enough to run an after-school program of the same size as they were able to with ESSER funding, district leaders said.

With ESSER funding, the Kenai school district in Alaska started a partnership with the local Boys & Girls Clubs of America affiliate and provided a couple of certified teachers from the district, as well as access to progress monitoring tools and other learning resources, so that students attending that club would have access to academic enrichment. School sites also provided academic enrichment, credit recovery, and overnight camps where students could learn about STEM subjects through hands-on experiences.

“Now we’re not doing it anymore,” said Melissa Linton, the district’s curriculum coordinator. “We ran out of money.”

This summer, the district will go back to the level of after-school programming it had before ESSER funding, Linton said: Credit recovery for high school students who failed classes, and an overnight camp for Alaska Native middle school students, which is funded by a federal grant. They’re exploring the idea of continuing the partnership with the local Boys & Girls Clubs of America to offer literacy enrichment during the summer, but so far, nothing is decided, Linton said.

Fort Worth Independent School District’s after-school program director Miguel Garcia said he is “optimistic” that the coalition of city government and district officials will find funding to continue the after-school programs they created with the COVID relief funding. Along with the online after-school homework help program, the district also used ESSER funds to create after-school programs at 16 school sites, in addition to the more than 70 school sites that already had after-school programming.

“I don’t know that 100 percent of the 16 [ESSER-funded after-school programs] will be sustained, but I have a good feeling that maybe half of them will be sustained,” Garcia said.

ESSER funding has given some districts the ability to provide students and families with more resources to improve students’ academic skills through after-school or summer programming, according to district leaders.

“We would not have been able to do this without the ESSER funds,” said Wolf from Bloomington schools. “By funding schools at a level that they can be innovative, it was invigorating to be able to know that we were going to have a sustainable amount of money. I knew how much we were going to have. I knew when it was going to end. I knew what I had to do. I could actually project out a four-year plan.”

“We really need to start looking at” permanently funding schools at a level where they can be innovative around priorities such as after-school programs, Wolf added.

In the meantime, after-school advocates, such as the Afterschool Alliance, are asking the U.S. Congress to increase funding for 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants, which support the creation of community learning centers that provide academic enrichment opportunities during after-school hours for children, said Jodi Grant, the executive director of

the alliance. The increase in funding for the grant was not part of President Joe Biden's proposed budget.

“What we need is every single parent, every kid, every program should be getting their local leaders to see what they're doing,” Grant said. “Because these programs sell themselves. I think that there are going to be cases where local school districts say, ‘Wow, this has made a big difference, and we're going to find the funds to pay for this.’ At the city level, they're going to say, ‘You know what, keeping kids busy is far better than having them on the streets with nothing to do, so we're gonna set money.’ There are states that are putting state dollars into this.”

“This is a time for all of us that truly believe in these programs to be on overdrive to really showcase and broadcast the successes,” she added.



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