

COVID-19 Pandemic and School Improvement: Early Implementation of ESSER Funding

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Abstract

Purpose: We continue to learn more about the response to the pandemic across sectors. As schools were one of the areas significantly impacted, this article seeks to understand the early responses to the pandemic from State Education Agencies (SEAs). **Design/Methodology/Approach:** This qualitative study explores State Education Agency's actions surrounding receipt of the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) designed to mitigate the impact of to the COVID-19 pandemic on schools. The survey data was collected from 26 state education agencies. The themes were elucidated via open, axial and selective coding. **Findings:** The analysis identified various efforts underway across state education agencies. However, the findings paint a picture of challenges that existed across state education agencies during the COVID-19 pandemic as they were attempting to assist and support the implementation of school improvement while navigating the new Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding. As the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates long-standing disparities, this article highlights actions by state education agencies during the early implementation of ESSER. **Research limitations/Implications:** The findings of this paper may be used as guidance tool for policy makers and educational planners regarding the ongoing recovery efforts from the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings have direct implications for current practitioners, parents, community, and legislators.

Keywords

Education Policy, Federal Policy, School Funding, K-12 Policy

1. Introduction

UNESCO (2020) reports that 87% of the world's student population is affected by COVID-19 school closures. UNESCO is launching distance learning practices and

reaching students who are most at risk. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, the virus was referred to as the “great equalizer,” as many thought the disease posed an equal threat to Americans and the rest of the global population (Galasso, 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Mein, 2020). The researchers referenced the “great equalizer” as the COVID-19 pandemic impacted every community. However, by many measures, the COVID-19 pandemic compounded the ongoing public health crisis of structural racism in the United States (Laster Pirtle, 2020). Data shows that the coronavirus pandemic proved to be the “*great amplifier*,” as it has exposed and exacerbated existing inequities experienced by Black children, adolescents, and families throughout the country (Gaynor & Wilson, 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Mein, 2020). The pandemic proved to support long-standing and deeply embedded inequities, resulting from structural racism present in a wide range of the country’s institutions and policies, from schools to housing to employment, which continue to devastate the health and life experiences of communities of color (Paradies et al., 2015; Phelan & Link 2015; Bonilla-Silva, 1999). Moreover, the education system has been affected by several challenges ranging from changes in the education curriculum to closing down the education system due to widespread pandemic diseases (Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2015). We continue to learn more about the response to the pandemic across sectors. As schools were one of the areas significantly impacted, this article seeks to understand the early responses to the pandemic from State Education Agencies (SEAs). In doing so, this article reviews survey data of SEAs during the early implementation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Pandemic and Achievement

As widely reported, many school districts were forced to temporarily close schools in spring 2020 during the COVID-19 crisis. This marked one of the largest disruptions to education in history, forcing more than 1.6 billion children out of school in the United States and affecting 95% of school-aged children worldwide (United Nations, 2020; Kaffenberger, 2021). As schools closed their doors, it forced my students into remote learning as it was widely reported that seventy-seven percent of public schools and 73 percent of private schools reported moving some or all classes to online distance-learning formats in early 2020 (U.S. Department of Education, NTPS, 2020-2021). Furthermore, large-scale evidence from the U.S. consistently shows that the pandemic disproportionately impacted the reading and math achievement of students who are classified as Black, Hispanic, American Indian or Alaskan Native (AI/AN) and those from high-poverty schools (Kuhfeld et al., 2023). Kuhfeld and colleagues leveraged large-scale data on over 5 million third through eighth graders in over 16,000 public schools across the U.S. They found gains in math and reading during the 2020-21 school year for Black and Hispanic fourth to eighth graders were lower, on average, relative to White and Asian students (Kuhfeld et al., 2023). Moreover, a survey of education researchers in November 2020 predicted that large increases in achievement gaps between low- and high-

income students (from a pre-pandemic gap of 1.0 SD to 1.30 SD in math and 1.25 SD in reading) in elementary school would be observed by spring 2021 (Bailey et al., 2021). Lewis et al. (2021) showed that, although the average student demonstrated positive gains in math and reading during the 2020-21 school year, students were still behind typical (pre-pandemic) averages by spring 2021.

Pandemic Impact. Although families of all racial and ethnic groups have been adversely affected by COVID-19, data suggest that Black families bore a disproportionate burden, with significantly higher rates of COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations, and COVID-19-related mortalities (Mackey et al., 2021; Paulson et al., 2021). A systematic review of data on COVID-19 rates showed that Black Americans had a 1.5 - 3.5 times higher risk for infection and were 1.5 - 3 times more likely to be hospitalized compared to White Americans (Mackey et al., 2021). As the pandemic unfolded in 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that Black Americans represented 33% of COVID-19 hospitalizations and 34% of COVID-19 deaths, despite being 13% of the U.S. population. A national study of COVID-19 mortality and distribution showed that for every 1% increase in the Black population, there was a 2.12% increase in COVID-19 mortalities (Aneale et al., 2021). A report by the Thurgood Marshall Institute entitled *Beyond Learning Loss: Prioritizing the Needs of Black Students as Public Education Emerges From a Pandemic*, presented evidence that while all students experienced serious disruptions to their health and educational experience, the focus on learning lossless, which refers to declines in student academic performance, overlooks the ways in which the public school system has historically underserved Black students (Kajeepeeta, 2024). As a result, the report states that a return to normalcy will not serve Black students (Kajeepeeta, 2024).

3. Inequality in Achievement

The academic achievement gap between poor and non-poor students is well-known. The school closure brings difficulties for students, families, and teachers in developing countries. Students from poor families with lower educational levels and children with poor learning motivation suffer the most during the coronavirus (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020). As such, achievement gaps are believed to have been widened due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Historically, students with disadvantaged backgrounds face many barriers to performing as well in school compared to students from a more advantaged background, further amplifying socioeconomic inequality in society (Berliner, 2006; Condrón, 2011; Dragoset et al., 2019). One such area of focus has been centered around funding as there has been a significant focus on school funding to help underperforming schools and students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Jackson et al., 2015). Funding inadequacies and inequities tend to be aggravated when there is an economic downturn, which typically translates into problems that persist well after recovery is underway such as the case during the pandemic as COVID-19 pandemic which resulted in an economic fallout as tens of millions of people lost jobs (Allegretto et

al., 2022). During the pandemic and subsequent years, the opportunities to learn during the pandemic and virtual learning space varied across schools and communities. For many reasons, students may not have been given ample opportunities to engage in a learning environment conducive to learning (Gross & Opalka, 2020). In response to the pandemic, congress set aside approximately \$30.75 billion to mitigate the impact of the pandemic through recovery. This paper is designed to understand the extent to which state education agencies (SEAs) leveraged the administration of the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds (ESSER) to: 1) Ensure that most effective and efficient use of the funds to mitigate the disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic; 2) Achieve sustainable improvement in the performance of districts and schools most impacted by the COVID pandemic; 3) Enhance the state education agency ability to systemically support district and school improvement in the future. The funds were established to support all schools and states were not provided guidance surrounding prioritizing schools in any given community, including historically underserved communities. This article will focus on the effective and efficient use of ESSER funds to mitigate disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic for all schools. Furthermore, this article will highlight the leveraging of federal resource allocation of ESSERs funds to contribute to the continuous improvement of policy, programs, practice and outcomes in districts and schools.

4. Methods

Data Sources and Data Collection

The data collected for this study included self-reports to an online survey (See Attachment A). The questions were designed to answer the following research question.

- 1) What were state actions to support schools during the early years of COVID and ESSER funding?
- 2) How were state actions aligned to recovery of schools most impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic?

While the primary purpose of this study was to understand how ESSER dollars are being used for recovery, this paper reports the substantive findings with a focus on the qualitative data provided by state practitioners.

Instrument

Data collection was done through Qualtrics an open-source solution that allows researchers to design and implement interactive online experiments. The instrument consisted of a series of 15 yes or no questions. The “yes/no” format encourages the respondent to look at every item because an answer is required for each. This should reduce primacy effects. For example, Smyth et al. (2006) found higher levels of item reporting and longer response times with “yes/no” questions compared to the equivalent “mark all that apply” questions. Furthermore, Smyth et al. (2006) demonstrated that the “yes/no” format takes longer to complete and seems to encourage deeper processing of the response options. Moreover, it is generally

assumed that the “yes/no” format will lead to more complete information and reduced response order effects than the “mark all that apply” format or other similar formats (Dillman, 2000; Sudman & Bradburn, 1982). Specifically, state practitioners were asked to report on priorities, capacity, and decision-making around ESSER funds. The factor variables twenty—two items were organized into three sections. The three sections were as follows:

1) Effective and efficient use of ESSER funds to mitigate disruptions from COVID-19.

2) Leveraging federal resource allocation of ESSER funds to contribute to continuous improvement of policy, programs, practice and outcomes in districts and schools.

3) Enhancing the SEA’s ability to systemically support district and school improvement in the future.

Several definitions were provided including the following:

- Providing Incentives to schools and districts for enacting improvement strategies and demonstrating results—resources, recognition, rewards.
- Extending Opportunity for change—removing barriers, encouraging innovation, showcasing exemplary initiatives.
- Building Capacity to enact and sustain change—providing tools and information, training, coaching, consulting, professional learning.

Each section of the questionnaire was followed by an open-ended question to elicit practitioners’ comments. Additionally, the participants were encouraged to provide name of state prior to answering responding to the questions. IRB approval occurred through Howard University.

5. Survey Distribution

The Survey was hosted and distributed through Qualtrix. State leaders overseeing ESSERs funds were contacted to respond to the survey. All 50 states were asked to participate, and 26 states responded to the survey. While recruiting strategies included state leaders who oversaw school improvement efforts at the state level, state education agencies had the discretion to identify the right individual to respond. State leaders were contacted electronically through e-mails. Furthermore, the nature of the study was limited to research design and response to request for participation. However, to ensure trustworthiness in the study triangulation, experts’ opinion and peer review methods were employed. Further research is necessary to bring the exemplary practices of other state education agencies that have been thoughtful in their approach to funding schools during the COVID-19 relief recovery period.

6. Findings

6.1. Effective and Efficient Use of ESSERs Funds to Mitigate Disruptions from COVID-19 Pandemic

Little evidence existed of intentional planning by state agencies to support schools

around school improvement. For example, of the twenty—six responding states, only one state agency had a process in place for determining the type and extent of support a school/district received to assist in its use of ESSERs funding. At the time of the survey no state reported to providing direct supports to districts or schools receiving ESSERs funds to enact initiatives paid for by ESSERs. Moreover, at the time of the survey, few states coordinated with other offices or departments within the state agency to provide direct supports to schools, districts, or both receiving ESSERs funds to enact initiatives paid for by ESSERs; and, only a handful of the responding states reported to have a process for measuring the impact of initiatives enacted in schools and/or districts that were paid for by ESSERs funds (See [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. State practices to support and develop rocesses.

Actions	Number of States
State had a process for determining the type and extent of supports a school/district receivers to assist its use of ESSERs funding	1 state reported yes
Offices or Departments across state agency coordinate to provide direct supports to schools, districts or both receiving ESSERs funds to enact initiatives paid for by ESSERs	8 states reported yes
State Office has a process for measuring the impact of initiatives enacted in schools and/or districts that are paid for by ESSER funds	9 states reported yes

6.2. Leveraging Federal Resources Allocation of ESSERs Funds to Contribute to Continuous Improvement of Policy, Programs, and Practices and Outcomes in District and Schools

According to respondents, several states reported to have identified which schools were in communities most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, there were several states that reported to allocate ESSER resources to support Title I schools located in communities impacted by COVID through either formula, discretion, or both. Furthermore, a small number of states reported to identify, collect and/or share promising practices in schools and/or districts enacted and paid for by ESSER funds. However, only a few states reported to have a process in place to identify promising practices of districts and schools outside of ESSER funding. Similarly, only a few states reported to have a way to track the distribution of ESSERs resources to communities most impacted by COVID. For additional details, please see [Table 2](#).

Table 2. State practices to identify, track and collect impact.

Actions	Number of States
State identified which schools were located in communities most impacted by COVID-19 pandemic	14 States reported yes
State identified, collected, and/or shared promising practice in schools candor districts enacted and paid for by ESSER funds	4 states reported yes

Continued

State had a way to track the distribution of ESSERs resources to communities most impacted by COVID	7 states reported yes
State had a process for identifying promising practices across schools and districts receiving ESSER funds	9 States reported yes
State had a process for identifying promising practices of districts and schools regardless of funding during the pandemic	6 States reported yes

6.3. Enhancing the SEA's Ability to Systemically Support District and School Improvement in the Future

The findings indicate a mixed response to support for districts throughout recovery and moving beyond the pandemic. For example, when asked if the state agency provides incentives to schools and districts to enact strategies across the states' lowest-performing schools that have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, several states reported yes. Incentives were described as resources, recognition, or rewards. The examples provided to the states were such items as wrap-around services for students, incentives for effective leaders or teachers to work in high-poverty schools, or other incentives. Furthermore, the survey asked about extending opportunities for change and building capacity. Extending opportunity for change was defined in the survey as removing barriers, encouraging innovation, and showcasing exemplary initiatives. Building capacity to enact and sustain change was defined as providing tools and information; training, coaching, consulting, and/or professional learning. According to the participants, several states reported to provide incentives to schools and districts to enact strategies across the states lowest performing schools that were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. A larger number of states to provided professional learning opportunities to states leaders to improve their own capacity to support schools and districts most impacted by the COVI9-19 pandemic. While no states reported to provide opportunities for schools and districts to learn from each other during the pandemic there were few states that reported that their state provided opportunities for schools and districts to learn from other schools and districts prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey also identified that several states adjusted their methods of delivery of capacity-building opportunities for districts and states due to the pandemic. Finally, the survey identified that half the respondents adjusted their accountability measures and expectations due to the pandemic. Furthermore, of the participating respondents, few states reported to make significant changes in the way it supports district and school improvement due to the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic (please see [Table 3](#) for more details).

Table 3. State practices to incentive and build capacity.

Actions	Number of States
Provided incentives to schools and districts impacted by COVID	3 States
State provided professional learning Opportunities for State Leaders to build internal capacity during COVID	12 States

Continued

State provided opportunities for schools and districts to learn from each other during pandemic	0 States
State adjusted its method of delivery of capacity-building opportunities for districts and states due to pandemic	11 states
State adjusted its accountability measures and expectations due to the pandemic	13 states
State made significant changes in the way it supports district and school improvement because of lessons learned from COVID	5 states

7. Discussion

As the nation's schools continued to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic across many fields, educators across the nation turned their attention back toward sustaining efforts to improve opportunities for all students. This article is designed to better understand how COVID funds were being used by states to support schools and districts during the pandemic and to better understand whether those early efforts were aligned to Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). In many cases, we have learned that the pandemic furthered dismantled already existing achievement gaps expanding racial disparities. Per reports around the pandemic, the alarming racial disparities in rates of infections and deaths from COVID-19 among Black Americans, as well as the economic, educational, and health inequities they experience, highlight the historical legacy of social and structural inequality in the United States (Egede & Walker, 2020; Gaynor & Wilson, 2020; Kim et al., 2020) These societal injustices have put communities of color more at risk of being harmed by the COVID-19 virus itself and more vulnerable to its adverse societal impacts (Gaynor & Wilson 2020; Wright & Merritt, 2020). These disparities have a significant impact on educational achievement that cut across racial lines. As such, as we seek to continue to understand the impact in education, we must also understand the historical disparities that existed prior to the pandemic. This study does not offer a strategy that sought to close the historical gaps that existed as the nation responded to the pandemic. It will be important that the education community seeks to mitigate not only the impact of the pandemic but also take account of the historical disparities that existed prior to the pandemic.

Perhaps one of the most significant results of the pandemic is the need to clearly prioritize those schools and communities, not only most impacted by the pandemic, but have historically been under resourced or marginalized systemically. Responding to the pandemic must include actions at the state, federal and local levels through policy, legislation and funding to truly mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education but also takes history into account. Part of the solution must include re-imaging school funding. The most recent, comprehensive studies indicate that school funding and student performance are strongly related. Numerous other studies have confirmed the relationship between student achievement and indicators of teacher quality, including education, experience, and ability. Schools looking to improve teacher quality would likely need signifi-

cant resources for training and education of their existing workforce or for recruitment and hiring of additional high-quality teachers. These research findings collectively show both great opportunities and significant challenges for policy-makers seeking to improve academic achievement among low-income students. The best evidence suggests that providing additional funding to school districts and targeting resources to cost-intensive strategies of proven effectiveness can significantly enhance educational success, particularly for poor children. However, the resources necessary to close the poverty-based academic achievement gap are substantial. Policymakers and researchers will be challenged to identify the most effective use of scarce resources to improve the quality of public education and provide low-income children with the opportunity to achieve academic success.

8. Conclusion

The findings indicate a mixed response by state education agencies in their effort to support school districts in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic through the receipt of ESSER funding. Consequently, the findings of this study shed light on some of the common challenges that existed during the early rounds of ESSER funding to support recovery. Notably, the most significant results of this study point to the need to clearly prioritize those schools and communities, not only most impacted by the pandemic, but have historically been under-resourced or marginalized systemically. Furthermore, the study identifies a need for actions at the state, federal and local levels through policy, legislation, and funding to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education—that includes re-imagining school funding given that most recent, comprehensive studies indicate that school funding and student performance are strongly related. The findings of this paper may be used as a guiding tool for policy makers and educational planners. Finally, this paper may further have direct implications for school boards, teachers, principals, school leaders, parents, and community members.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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