

Using ESSER funding to redesign learning spaces.

Since March 2020, federal lawmakers have passed three COVID-19 stimulus bills that together provide more than \$190 billion in emergency relief funding for K-12 schools. The U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) has created the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund to distribute this money to schools.

Spending on learning environments is allowable under at least **four specific use cases** for ESSER funding, as outlined by federal officials:

(1) IMPROVING SCHOOL FACILITIES TO REDUCE THE RISK OF VIRUS TRANSMISSION.

Construction, renovation, and remodeling projects are allowable uses of ESSER funding, as long as these costs are “reasonable and necessary” to meet the program’s purpose, which is to “prevent, prepare for, and respond to” COVID-19.

“This might include renovations that would permit [a school system] to clean effectively (e.g., replacing old carpet with tile that could be cleaned more easily) or create a learning environment that could better sustain social distancing,” USDOE says. (See [“Frequently Asked Questions: Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Programs \[and\] Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Programs,”](#) May 2021, p. 26.) It also includes construction and renovation projects to improve indoor air quality.

For instance, a school system might use ESSER funds to:

- [Build outdoor learning spaces](#)



Outdoor Commons

- **Equip hallways, common areas, and cafeterias to support learning**, so that students can spread out throughout the building



Cafeteria outfitted with Classroom Select® Furnishings

- Add water bottle filling stations, **handwashing** and **hand sanitizing stations**, etc.
- **Upgrade ventilation and HVAC systems**



Classroom Select® Portable Hand Washing Sink



Copernicus Single Student Hand Sanitizer Station



Field Controls TRIO Plus Portable Air Purifier

(2) SUPPORTING STUDENTS’ SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS.

Providing support for students’ mental and physical health, as well as meeting their social and emotional learning (SEL) needs, is a key area of focus for emergency relief aid.

School systems can use ESSER funding “to support students’ social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs ... by implementing **school-wide strategies** ... as well as **targeted assistance** for students who need such supports,” USDOE says. School systems “should also work to ensure that schools are implementing instructional practices that are

culturally responsive and that incorporate **trauma-informed pedagogy** in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.” (See “[Frequently Asked Questions: Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Programs \[and\] Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Programs](#),” May 2021, pp. 29-30.)

A learning environment that is warm, collaborative, and flexible in design, with plenty of seating choices, can support inclusiveness for all learners and help everyone feel safe and welcome.

- [Stools that rock back and forth](#)
- [Help students manage their responses to stress or anxiety](#)
- [Sensorimotor space](#)



Early Childhood Sensory Room



Sensorimotor Room

(3) ADDRESSING STUDENTS' LOSS OF INSTRUCTIONAL TIME DURING THE PANDEMIC.

At least 20% of ESSER III funding must be used to address the academic impact of lost instructional time on students through the use of "evidence-based interventions." Toward this end, school systems could use ESSER funding to create new learning spaces (or redesign their existing classrooms) to support evidence-based approaches to improving student achievement more effectively.

- [Makerspaces](#)
- [STEAM](#) labs
- Other hands-on learning environments can accelerate learning growth as well



Makerspace Environment



Classroom Select STEAM Table

(4) MEETING THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF DISADVANTAGED POPULATIONS.

Addressing the needs of student populations who have been hit especially hard by the pandemic is another important use of emergency funding. These include students from low-income families, racial and ethnic minority groups, English learners, and students with disabilities.

- An [inclusive learning environment](#) can help all students learn more effectively, including those with disabilities.



Chill Corner

The \$190 billion in federal emergency relief aid provides a unique opportunity for schools to redesign their learning spaces to support more effective teaching and learning—and School Specialty learning consultants are available to help.

Are you ready to take advantage? Contact your School Specialty Representative today!