

Statement on Using the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds for Family Engagement

Summary

Recently, the American Rescue Plan was signed into law. This legislation included the [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief \(ARP ESSER\)](#) Fund “to help safely reopen and sustain the safe operation of schools and address the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the Nation’s students.” A portion of these funds may be used to “address any needs arising from the coronavirus pandemic, including any activity authorized by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.”ⁱ

[The Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center](#) encourages Local Education Agencies (LEAs) throughout Ohio to consider the significance of family engagement to student and school success and plan thoughtfully to include strategies that maintain and improve family-school partnerships in their ARP-ESSER plans and application.

In this document, state and local school leaders will find background information and related policies about family engagement in education in Ohio, and our recommendations for LEAs use of ARP ESSER funds.

Background

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the partnership between families and schools became even more critical as an effective and essential strategy to navigate uncertain times. Further, the critical nature and benefits of family engagement are well-documented by many years of research and have been cemented as requirements in Title I of [the Every Student Succeeds Act](#), notable in Section 1116. As noted in the summary of this document, a portion of ARP ESSER funds are available to address, “any activity authorized by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act”, which includes family engagement.

Family engagement is linked to benefits for students, teachers, and families.

- Teachers and educational leaders are more effective in their work, have greater job satisfaction, have increased confidence in their own performance, have higher expectations for their students, and demonstrate a better understanding of family and student needs.ⁱⁱ
- Students from early childhood through high school, have higher test scores, greater confidence in their abilities, greater self-motivation, better attendance, and a more positive attitude towards school.^{iiiiv}
- Families feel more supported, have increased confidence in their child’s progress, can support learning at home in new and diverse ways, have increased trust in their child’s teacher, and have better conversations with their children.^{vi}

In Ohio, family engagement is also a component of [Ohio’s Standards for the Teaching Profession, Standards for Principals, Standards for School Counselors, Standards for Superintendents](#)^{vii}, and the Early Childhood [Step Up to Quality Rating System](#).^{viii} The importance of working with families is also woven throughout all five tenets of [the Ohio Department of Education’s Whole Child Framework](#): that students be healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged.^{ix}

The bottom line is that family engagement is a fundamental and essential component of nearly all the work that schools do and can be supported by ARP ESSER funds.

Our Recommendations

With Ohio's ARP ESSER application now open via the Ohio Department of Education's Comprehensive Continuous Improvement Plan (CCIP), districts and schools can consider and plan for how family-school partnerships can be integrated into their plans to address needs exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Below are five recommendations on how to integrate family engagement into your plans:

1. Invest in strategies for regular and multiple forms of two-way communication.

Creating opportunities for families to communicate with the school is crucial for building trust and informing appropriate and responsive school programming. School leaders can choose systems to invite and emphasize reciprocal communication and evaluate its impact and effectiveness. Leverage ARP ESSER funds to implement systems of communication that fit the needs of your families. Access [professional development](#) on communication strategies and tools so all staff can implement meaningful, supportive 2-way communication with families.

2. Staff a full or part-time position dedicated to building district or school-wide effective family engagement that supports the learning and well-being of all students.

Engaging families and the community as required by both federal and state legislation and guidance and establishing lasting partnerships with them requires the time and attention of a dedicated employee. Employing a cultural broker, family and community liaison, or other staff that can dedicate their time to establishing trust and partnerships with all families can have benefits for students, teachers, and families. According to research, [staff in positions that bridge cultural \(and other\) gaps build the capacity](#) of both school personnel and families, create welcoming spaces to build relationships among families and between families and the school, and provide opportunities for family voice to shape decision making. Remember these funds do not last forever, so use this period to establish the position as you consider other federal, state or local resources to fund this position and maintain its benefits permanently. For specific questions about funding staff, [please contact the Ohio Department of Education's federal program office](#).

3. Invest in school counselors and other staff who can work with families and students to support mental and behavioral health.

Before we can support students towards academic or development goals, we need to ensure that students feel safe and supported at school and in their community. Research on positive childhood experiences indicates that those who report more positive childhood experiences are more likely to have better mental health, a lower risk of depression, and healthier relationships in adulthood. These experiences happen both at school and at home.^x To ensure that students have mental health supports and positive supportive experiences at school and home, invest in school counselors and similar positions, as well as professional development for staff on the topic to ensure all students are supported and safe.

4. Leverage funds for appropriate translation and interpretation services for families.

Families have always been integral partners in education and the COVID-19 pandemic has only amplified their importance as partners in learning at home and effective/responsive school planning. To benefit from the skills and knowledge of all families and to communicate clearly with partners, consider arranging reliable services for translation and interpretation so all can engage with the school.

5. Support learning at home.

Family engagement in a child's education happens in many places, but most of all at home. Consider providing families with tools and technologies they need so their child has equitable access to learning. Whether it's Internet access, adaptive technologies for students with disabilities, books, learning games, or other necessary tools, there are gaps we can close in access to the tools of learning that can reduce gaps in learning opportunities.

Conclusion

Ohio's ARP ESSER application is now open via the Ohio Department of Education's Comprehensive Continuous Improvement Plan (CCIP) and a portion of those funds may be used for "any activity authorized by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act." Family engagement has clear and documented benefits for students, teachers, and families and is at the center of many state and federal initiatives. In view of this, The Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center encourages LEAs to consider integrating strategies to maintain and improve family-school partnerships in their ARP-ESSER plans and application.

For more information about the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center and our resources to advance effective family-school-community partnership, please visit, www.ohiofamiliesengage.osu.edu.

End Notes

- ⁱ U.S. Department of Education. (2021, May 11). *American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief*. <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/american-rescue-plan/american-rescue-plan-elementary-and-secondary-school-emergency-relief/>
- ⁱⁱ Potochnik, T., Romans, A. N., & Thompson, J. (2016). We made a promise: School-community collaboration, leadership, and transformation at Promesa Boyle Heights. Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute for School Reform.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Epstein, J. L., Sanders, M. G., Sheldon, S. B., Simon, B. S., Salinas, K. C., Jansorn, N. R., ... & Hutchins, D. J. (2018). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action*. Corwin Press.
- ^{iv} Froiland, J. M., & Davison, M. L. (2014). Parental expectations and school relationships as contributors to adolescents' positive outcomes. *Social Psychology of Education*, 17(1), 1–17.
- ^v Shumow, L., & Schmidt, J. A. (2014). Parent engagement in science with ninth graders and with students in higher grades. *School Community Journal*, 24(1), 17–36.
- ^{vi} Chen, M., Anderson, J. A., & Watkins, L. (2016). Parent perceptions of connectedness in a full-service community school project. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 25(7), 2268–2278.
- ^{vii} Ohio Department of Education (2019). *Educator Evaluations*. <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Teaching/Educator-Evaluation-System>
- ^{viii} Early Childhood Ohio (2016). *Step Up To Quality: Program Standards*. <http://earlychildhoodohio.org/sutq/Program-Standards.stm>
- ^{ix} Ohio Department of Education. (2021, May 10). *Ohio's Whole Child Framework*.
- ^x Christina Bethell, Jennifer Jones, Narangerel Gombojav, Jeff Linkenbach, Robert Sege. "Positive Childhood Experiences and Adult Mental and Relational Health in a Statewide Sample: Associations Across Adverse Childhood Experiences Levels." *JAMA Pediatrics* (First published online: September 9, 2019) DOI: 10.1001/jamapediatrics.2019.3007