

# HOW HAVE SCHOOL DISTRICTS SPENT ESSER FUNDS SO FAR?

*Highlights from ASBO International's ESSER Spending Survey*

In February 2022, ASBO International surveyed more than 150 school finance leaders across 35 states about how their districts have spent ESSER I, II, and III funds from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic through January 2022.

Read key highlights below and access the full report at [asbointl.org/ESSER](https://asbointl.org/ESSER).

## TOP 5 ESSER SPEND CATEGORIES (OVERALL)



### TOP ESSER I SPEND CATEGORIES

Purchasing PPE/Supplies & Training to Mitigate Viral Spread

**71%**

Technology & Broadband Investments

**69%**

District Emergency Response & Planning

**41%**

### TOP ESSER II SPEND CATEGORIES

Technology & Broadband Investments

**62%**

Addressing Learning Loss

**56%**

Purchasing PPE/Supplies & Training to Mitigate Viral Spread

**49%**

### TOP ESSER III SPEND CATEGORIES

Addressing Learning Loss

**54%**

Mental Health Services

**36%**

Supporting Specific Student Populations

**29%**

## MOST POPULAR ESSER SPENDING STRATEGIES

### TO MAINTAIN EDUCATIONAL SERVICES:

- Retaining and recruiting ancillary staff
- Retaining and recruiting instructional staff
- Purchasing curricula, textbooks, and supplies

### TO ADDRESS LEARNING LOSS:

- Expanding summer learning and enrichment offerings
- Adding specialist staff to support students
- Purchasing technology and improving connectivity
- Investing in professional development to address student needs

### TO REPAIR & IMPROVE FACILITIES:

- HVAC repairs and upgrades to improve indoor air quality
- Projects to provide safer drinking water for students
- Repairing/renovating an existing facility or school

## TOP 5 CHALLENGES WITH SPENDING ESSER FUNDS

**Sustainability Issues** (spending responsibly to avert a fiscal cliff)

**Balancing Competing Priorities** (spending quickly vs. strategically to support students)

**Labor Issues** (unable to hire or retain staff to implement programs/initiatives)

**Supply Chain Issues** (product shortages, shipping delays, rising costs, etc.)

**Spend Timeline Issues** (unable to complete larger projects in time, e.g., construction)

# STORIES FROM THE FIELD

## HOW ESSER FUNDS ARE HELPING STUDENTS

"Our focus on spending these one-time federal ESSER dollars is on our students. We have planned, and continue to review our plans, around learning recovery—providing additional staff to support students, providing updated curriculum to support onsite and offsite learning, and new technology bringing our district closer to a 1:1 model with enhanced onsite learning tools as well. We continue to focus on the safety of our students as well by purchasing new desks to provide students with their own learning spaces and are working on improvements around our HVAC systems. Adding a new portable for our high school will also help allow for additional learning spaces for our students."

—**Nine Mile Falls School District, WA**

"We have used and continue to use ESSER funds to support students through a variety of needs, which have pivoted throughout the pandemic. In the beginning, we focused on cleaning, sanitizing, and providing masks to students. We opened schools in August 2020 under a hybrid learning program and used funds to (1) set up new fully functional classrooms with technology, phones, air purifiers, physical barriers, and space to create safe and socially distant learning environments while students were in school and (2) to provide a new laptop to families in PK to 5th grade (who were not on our one-to-one laptop program) for a successful remote learning day. As time moved and we received additional funds, we put this towards adding teaching resources (curricula, materials, and teachers) to classrooms to address learning loss needs. We also found due to the environment we had to provide incentives to employees for excessive time spent supporting their students."

—**Roanoke County Public Schools, VA**

"Our district has been committed to maintaining its mission in providing our students with the best opportunities for academic success. In addition to addressing the various social and emotional wellbeing of students and staff, with the implementation of research-based academic specialists providing intervention to students who are below benchmark, we have seen great academic gains from the start of this current school year to the mid-year benchmark in December 2021. We remain committed to this approach in providing necessary resources to overcome the academic regression that took place during the pandemic for some students."

—**Crane Elementary School District, AZ**

"Our district has utilized funds to increase the ability of students to improve their education in the best environment possible by providing curricula, technology, supports, etc. Our old buildings were repaired and our HVAC units were replaced along with replacing LED lighting at all schools in order to provide the best learning environment possible. We have provided professional development to our staff and purchased Tier I curricula for our schools to be able to provide exceptional instruction. In addition, the funds have helped us keep our schools open through the global pandemic while making sure the students and staff have all of the cleaning supplies and PPE needed at all times. One of our most exciting things is to provide school supplies to all students for the next 3 school years in order to provide some financial relief to our families."

—**Catahoula Parish Schools, LA**

"Our district prioritized the use of ESSER funds to move the district forward and emerge stronger than before the pandemic. Our priorities are: Health & safety of our students & staff; Embracing the opportunity to implement innovative technology and learning systems; Addressing learning loss for our students; Providing additional supports for the social and emotional well-being of students and staff; and Improving our facilities and overall building health."

—**Williamsport Area School District, PA**

Learn more about how school districts are spending ESSER funds to support students at  
[asbointl.org/ESSER](https://asbointl.org/ESSER).

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# Engaging Parents on Stimulus Spending

*Pennsylvania's Upper Moreland Township School District leverages an online simulation tool for community input on ESSER fund allocations.*

By Matthew M. Lentz, SFO, and Chris Adams



PHOTO COURTESY OF UPPER MORELAND TOWNSHIP SCHOOL DISTRICT, WILLOW GROVE, PENNSYLVANIA

*Upper Moreland Township School District engaged community members in deciding how government funding would best serve their children.*

**F**or school districts where parents want a stronger voice in prioritizing the pandemic-related stimulus funds, technology can play an important role in facilitating communication, ultimately making for better decisions.

In a September 2021 poll by the National Parents Union, 51% of 1,006 parents surveyed said they should be included in the process of determining how districts spend federal funding to address challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Echelon Insights 2021). The same percentage felt they knew “not much/nothing at all” about plans for those funds, whereas just 13% said they had heard a lot, indicating a need for further education in the community.

The global pandemic has accelerated the use of online civic engagement tools to help foster conversations about government and school budgets in accessible and constructive ways. In addition to—or in some cases rather than—attending a public meeting, parents can use their smartphones or other connected devices to provide input online and do it on their own time, at their convenience.

In addition, COVID-19 restrictions and social distancing measures have increased acceptance of online civic engagement practices and raised comfort levels with using online software and meeting technologies.

For the Upper Moreland Township School District in Pennsylvania, online public engagement software

provided a new way to reach parents and stakeholders to improve communication, define community priorities for stimulus funds, and learn more about their demographic through data collection.

## **Pandemic Relief Funds: New Challenges with Choices**

Education is among the sectors of the economy hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a report from the Economic Policy Institute, more public education jobs were lost in April 2020 than during the Great Recession (Gould 2021). The effects of classroom closures across the country were ubiquitous; the pandemic widened preexisting gaps for disadvantaged students, exacerbated mental health issues for staff and students, and fueled widespread learning loss, the ripple effects of which have yet to be fully realized.

To date, the U.S. Congress has passed six relief packages aimed at combating economic fallout from the pandemic, three of which include funding for elementary and secondary schools. Overall, from March 2020 through March 2021, Congress funneled nearly \$190 billion in K–12 funding, called ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief), a historic federal infusion for schools.

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## **Although these funds provide a much-needed lifeline for school districts and local governments, they also bring new hurdles.**

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Although these funds provide a much-needed lifeline for school districts and local governments, they also bring new hurdles. Faced with an unprecedented cash influx in response to a never-before-seen pandemic, local governments and community leaders must now determine how to invest the funding smartly and equitably.

The financial holes formed over the past two years represent only part of the picture; students experienced devastating learning loss, slashed budgets created waves of staffing layoffs, and the vitality of school aid programs was threatened. U.S. Treasury Department (2021) guidelines described in the *Federal Register*—while relatively flexible to account for range of usage—urge engagement of constituents and communities in developing plans to use these payments.

## **Challenge Turned Opportunity**

Located north of Philadelphia in Montgomery County, Upper Moreland Township is primarily a residential community. The Upper Moreland Township School District, or UMTSD, encompasses four schools, serves a population of 3,200 students, and employs a little over 200 classroom teachers.

In March 2020, UMTSD, alongside all other Pennsylvania school districts, shut classroom doors for the foreseeable future because of COVID-19. Like the rest of the country, UMTSD faced an uncertain future: no pre-written guidelines for how to proceed in the present and concern over the challenges it would face down the line.

In August 2020, Pennsylvania announced that schools would reopen under new guidelines; going back to the classroom now meant social distancing, mask wearing, and symptom screening upon entrance (Seymour 2020a).

However, the decision to reopen was not uncontested. In a nonscientific poll in Pennsylvania, about 43% of the state residents thought students should “absolutely not” return for in-person learning in the fall; 39% said students “definitely” should, and about 18% were unsure (Seymour 2020b). Nationwide, the Peterson Foundation (2020) found 6 in 10 Americans opposed going back to in-person learning in their states.

The new restrictions produced a challenging environment for daily operations and revealed new needs that stimulus funds could address. Much of the challenge would be finding common ground between those who opposed and those who supported schools’ reopening; thus, stimulus funding needed to satisfy both sides while addressing the core issues at hand.

For UMTSD, ESSER funding represented an opportunity, not an obstacle. In June 2021, UMTSD turned to a company that makes public engagement software and became the first organization to use the company’s new online community engagement tool.

## **Deploying an Online Tool for Engagement**

The online community engagement tool offers cities, counties, school districts, and other agencies the opportunity to quickly and easily customize an information- and graphic-rich interactive page that gathers input from parents and other stakeholders on the allocation of one-time or fixed budgetary expenses.

In the case of UMTSD, the district’s interactive page featured a selection of possible uses for \$2.3 million from the ESSER fund, which mandates public engagement and often documentation of the engagement process. The tool also can be used to allocate stimulus funds from the American Rescue Plan Act and can be created in as little as one hour.

The tool UMTSD built provided users with 11 possible options for using its \$2.3 million in ESSER funding, ranging from improving classroom furniture (\$315,000) to hiring three teachers for two years (\$600,000) and providing intensive inclusion training for staff (\$450,000).

When users logged onto the tool, they saw a selection of 11 tiles with images, dollar allocation amounts, and descriptions providing context for how the money would be used. Users made their selections until all dollars were allocated and then ranked their choices.

A final page requested additional information (optional), including age range, zip code, email address, and physical address, as well as an opportunity to reprioritize selections before submitting. The compiled information provided the district with the community's prioritized funding allocation preferences. See Figure 1 for an archived view of UMTSD's page.

## The Two-Way Street for Public Engagement

School districts have long used traditional back-to-school nights or parent-teacher conferences as communication engagement strategies. For many districts, parent-teacher organizations are the main channel for parent input. These parent-led organizations facilitate outside participation and often are responsible for representing the views of parents or guardians at the school.

Because school budget decisions increasingly seek out structured input from community stakeholders, many districts turned to online meetings, community forums, and online surveys to allow virtual participation during the pandemic.

UMTSD previously used Google Forms as an online survey method; however, it offered no way to track response demographics, as the Google link was passed around. Traditional survey design also rarely shows the impacts of financial trade-offs and often lacks enough specificity to provide useful feedback. One national survey, for example, asked parents to mark more than a dozen options for federal spending as a high or low priority. Almost every item was selected as a high priority.

In contrast, interactive tools emphasize and educate about trade-offs; selecting one item will often result in forfeiting another. Spending selections are also narrowly focused. In the UMTSD example, parents could not mark "school improvements" as a priority; rather, they needed to decide between specific elements within the category, such as investing in personal protective equipment or new classroom furniture. Consequently, the district received fine-tuned feedback that pinpointed those areas for which parents most wanted to use funds, and

the district knew its decisions accounted for both the monetary *and* opportunity costs of a particular item.

The feedback from UMTSD stakeholders also helped refine the district's communication efforts by identifying any disconnects in the community (UMTSD 2021). Because community members who used the online engagement tool provided a residential zip code, the district could pinpoint parts of the community that needed more targeted communications or time. The demographics also provided a way to tie in diversity, equity, and inclusion, an important district goal, as well as the documentation required for ESSER funds—and then some.

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## The district wanted the community to have a broad vision, but emotions can often get in the way of facts.

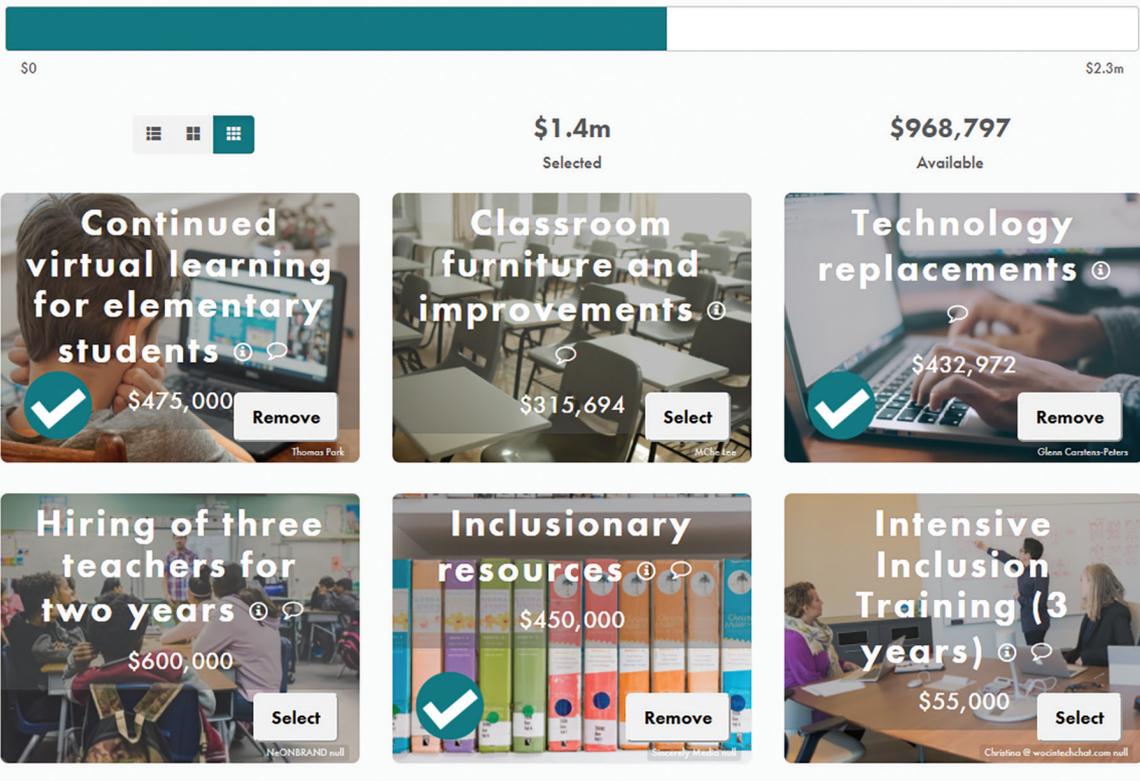
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It was also important for UMTSD to promote dialogue. Meetings became more focused because the resulting data could easily be pulled up as a reference. The district wanted the community to have a broad vision, but emotions can often get in the way of facts. With the online engagement tool, UMTSD could set parameters without handcuffing people.

The data also revealed to educators the low-ranking items that needed more explanation. For example, UMTSD was surprised when its summer school program, which doubles as childcare, ranked as a low priority for funding, revealing a need in the community for more education and increased awareness of this program's advantages. In response to the feedback, the district considered options for the following summer, including offering a virtual summer program that is more flexible.

More broadly, the online engagement tool provided a new perspective for school district leaders. Although other school districts will likely find value in the tool for different reasons, in UMTSD's case, it highlighted disconnects in communication and demonstrated the need for more education about the tough funding allocation decisions faced by school district leaders. With many changes to the landscape of K-12 education precipitated by the pandemic, the district continues to consider the role of an online prioritization portal as part of ongoing budget discussions and other changes to reach the widest range of stakeholders.

# Upper Moreland School District ARP ESSER



**Figure 1.** Archived interactive page from UMTSD tool for allocating ESSER funding.

## Actionable Results

Engaging stakeholders has become more crucial than ever in this era of COVID-19. How districts spend their stimulus funds now will have implications for years to come, representing a pivotal period of change. Alongside the challenges brought on by the pandemic, we are also presented with an opportunity to fill preexisting gaps, invest in infrastructure, and address the issues systematically rooted in our school districts.

However, we cannot move forward in a true and beneficial way without the support of our communities. Online engagement tools continue to improve and offer easy, effective applications, and most important, actionable results for well-allocated stimulus money.

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# Leading Through COVID-19: One District's Success Story

*Learn how one school district was able to maintain in-person schooling during the 2020–2021 school year.*

By Nathan Hoven, EdD



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**E**very school district across the United States and around the world has had to navigate COVID-19, and each district is doing the best it can, given its local situation. The Francis Howell School District (FHSD)—serving approximately 16,500 students in St. Charles County, a western suburb of St. Louis—was no different.

Francis Howell was the second-largest district in Missouri to offer fully in-person school five days a week during the 2020–2021 school year. About 80% of students chose to attend in person at the beginning of the year; the other 20% chose to be fully virtual.

FHSD did not close any buildings during the 2020–2021 school year. Some of the strategies we implemented may help others address challenging situations that arise in the future—pandemics or other events.

## Breaking Down Tasks

After schools were closed in March 2020, we began discussing reopening plans for the fall of 2020. It quickly became clear that our typical committee approach to problem solving would be insufficient. The planning would be too wide-ranging and would cover far too

many details for a single committee to handle. Instead, we opted to form several task forces, each responsible for a major area of reopening schools, such as facilities, instruction, and mental health supports.

We learned quickly that the task force approach could be applied to any number of large-scale problems. The strategy allows us to

- Divide a large task into smaller ones for efficiency.
- Employ experts in a variety of areas to better leverage strengths.
- Revisit pandemic-relevant areas of task force work to determine whether changes need to be made.
- Involve more stakeholders in the process than would be possible with a single committee. We are able to take advantage of stakeholders' time and skills by pairing them with the task force aligned to their specific area of interest and expertise.

Our reopening plans reflected a commonsense approach to solving problems. For instance, early in the pandemic, there was a general lack of knowledge about virus transmission. As the 2020–2021 school year came to a close, we were unsure of how much spread was possible from physical contact with contaminated surfaces. Consequently, we “quarantined” textbooks and other items before handling them.

As the summer progressed, research indicated that surface spread was unlikely. Although we could have continued to promote strategies to avoid surface spread just to be cautious, we decided the practical response was to expend our energy and resources in areas that we believed to be truly beneficial in our district.

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## **A critical factor in our ability to remain open was our robust approach to data analysis.**

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Although it was popular to take some actions for the “appearance” of safety, we believed that focusing our efforts in areas that did not yield helpful results was unsustainable. This belief became our commonsense approach; we focused on strategies we believed would be impactful without distracting window dressing. This strategy continues to serve us well in many areas unrelated to COVID.

### **Adapting on the Fly**

Throughout the pandemic, all school districts had to be ready to adapt on the fly. We informed our stakeholders



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early in the process that the dynamic nature of COVID was likely to cause direction changes so they would be prepared for sudden adjustments when circumstances dictated. We needed to establish that expectation because it was so atypical of our usual planning processes. It was also important to show stakeholders that we made changes because we were willing to change based on circumstances, not because we didn't plan well.

Masking was perhaps the most noticeable example of our willingness to adapt. During the summer, our requirements ranged from no masking, to masking all adults as well as students third grade and up, to a mask requirement for all students and staff members.

We cannot claim that everyone always agreed with our decisions, but they did understand our need to adapt procedures on the basis of the latest information. The conversation around masks continued as we prepared for the 2021–2022 school year.

### **Analyzing the Data**

A critical factor in our ability to remain open was our robust approach to data analysis. Early in the pandemic, we discussed in depth the COVID data in our communities: positivity rates, transmission rates, new cases, and so on. However, we lacked a way to capture and track the data specific to our schools.

We first had to determine the information that was necessary for us to truly understand the COVID reality for our schools. We began tracking details about the positive cases, starting with the name of the person testing positive, the names of their close contacts, where the positive case originated, and more. We then began



tracking the next layer of data: did any of the close contacts eventually test positive?

Our nonstop analysis of the data helped us make critical decisions. When the number of positive cases began to increase, we paid close attention to whether cases were related and whether the virus appeared to be spreading in our schools. When the data suggested that the cases were largely unrelated and the result of exposure outside the school setting, it helped us decide to keep schools open.

**One of the main elements of our pandemic navigation strategy became our mantra: act, but don't overreact.**

**Stressing the District Mantra**

One of the main elements of our pandemic navigation strategy became our mantra: act, but don't overreact. We wanted everyone to know we would do everything we could to keep students and staff members safe while remaining in school if possible; however, we were prepared to close buildings—even the whole district—if we believed it was necessary.

Twice, some buildings exhibited elevated COVID cases. After we examined the data and scrutinized the details, we concluded that it was safe to keep those buildings open because we were not seeing noticeable spread among the school population.

This mantra—act, but don't overreact—paired well with our practical approach to decision making and was made possible by our robust data collection and analysis. Although this approach was all spurred by a global pandemic, we intend to continue handling situations



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with this mindset. We believe a certain amount of luck allowed us to remain open all year, but we also have no doubt our approach to the situation contributed greatly.

Our next step is to reflect on the pandemic-related changes and to determine which changes to keep, such as virtual options for many activities. Zoom meetings, virtual parent-teacher conferences, and virtual courses are all good things that developed out of necessity but also suggest long-term benefits. Every school district and business is likely to have its own list of positives. Determine what changed for the better in your organization and plan to make that change permanent.

The pandemic is not over; however, by now, schools have found their own way to navigate the craziness. I hope that some of what I have shared can be generalized to situations beyond pandemics in ways that can help others work through major issues that arise. I know it has shaped our future approach.

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# Air Quality Monitoring Using ESSER Funding

*New Rochelle Schools are welcoming ESSER-funded solutions designed to ensure that health and safety standards are met in the classroom*

By Jeremy McDonald, PE, CEM, LEED AP



STOKKETE/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

**T**he 10,000-student New Rochelle (New York) School District has taken extensive precautions to provide healthier indoor air for its students and staff. In addition to using high-end MERV 15 filters, cleaning air ducts, and applying surface-cleaning products, the district has installed technology designed to augment its heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning (HVAC) systems to continuously disinfect the air.

As COVID-19 demonstrated the ability of invasive elements to evade detection, these modifications became

imperative. Health and well-being are priorities for the New Rochelle school system, where a healthy mind and body are recognized as significant factors in student success.

## **ESSER Funds for Healthier Buildings**

Being pragmatic in deciding to invest money wisely, the district used Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund money to improve the air quality across the school system.

Under ESSER, state education agencies award subgrants to local education agencies to address the past and present impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on elementary and secondary schools across the United States.

Specifically, the new elements installed within the New Rochelle School District's HVAC system included an Internet of Things-enabled monitoring feedback loop that detects particulate matter, gaseous and other harmful volatile organic compounds, and toxic elements in real time. These monitoring capabilities allow the district to purify the air so unseen elements—such as microbial organisms and toxic gases like formaldehyde—do not go undetected.

The sensors also actively monitor concentrations of oxygen, ozone, carbon monoxide, and carbon dioxide so the quality of breathable air is maximized.

Simply put, the indoor air quality (IAQ) installation makes the invisible visible so the system's purification processes can be activated to remove toxic and unwanted elements from the air. The process is dynamic in nature; feedback directs the purification (ionization) intensity to maintain ideal IAQ conditions.

### Third-Party Validation Testing

The greatest challenge schools face with indoor air quality is being unable to easily determine whether the upgrades are making a difference. The only way to accurately assess effectiveness is by testing the air before and after installation and collecting data that make the invisible visible. To solve the problem, the district hired a third-party engineering firm to test and evaluate the product before the district purchased the technology.

The outcome of the evaluation validated the new installation and its effectiveness in reducing airborne contaminants in spaces that are occupied by students, teachers, and school staff alike. Further, the study showed that no harmful by-products were produced. Currently, all 10 schools within the district have been equipped to continuously disinfect the air. In addition, IAQ monitors provide measurements for each school in real time.

### Return on Investment

From an investment standpoint, the initiative is a win-win for each school in expenditures and ongoing potential costs versus the goals achieved in delivering and ensuring improved air quality.

When used in conjunction with air-handling systems and unit ventilators, the cost of the new installation is a fraction of other IAQ technologies available on the market. Because the new installation meets the guidelines of the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and



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**Simply put, the indoor air quality (IAQ) installation makes the invisible visible so the system's purification processes can be activated to remove toxic and unwanted elements from the air.**

Air-Conditioning Engineers that allow a school to reduce outdoor air by up to 50% while maintaining the same or better indoor air quality, schools with air-handling systems can reduce energy costs. Additionally, very little equipment maintenance is required.

Investments like this offer schools help to pay for any recurring costs from IAQ upgrades.

### Preventing Learning Loss

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed air quality issues that had been putting the health and safety of our students and teachers at risk for years. The disruption to normal activities continues today, but public school systems such as New Rochelle are welcoming solutions that are designed to ensure that health and safety standards are met in the classroom.

Going forward, we expect continued discussion around the topics of children, risks, and how much we need to do to prevent generations of lost learning and the negative consequences of childhood education setbacks.

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# Grow Your Own Educator Workforce: Cultivating the Talent Within

*One district's efforts to replenish the teacher pipeline and diversify the workforce from within.*

By Andrea Dixon-Seahorn, EdD, and Dee W. Rosekrans, PHR, SHRM-CP



COURTESY OF LIBERTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN MISSOURI

Students in the first cohort of Liberty Public Schools' Grow Your Own Teacher program are returning to LPS as classroom teachers for the 2023-2024 school year.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, educators have witnessed an exodus of professionals from the field, leaving human resource departments to wonder how they will fill vacancies, given the limited supply of new teacher candidates.

Liberty Public Schools (LPS) has grappled with the reality of what our future workforce will look like should a large percentage of our teaching staff retire or resign. In recent years, LPS has been proactive in replenishing the teacher pipeline and diversifying the workforce. For our district, based on recruitment and

retention data trends, that has meant designing a Grow Your Own Teacher (GYOT) program with a focus on current high school students of color who aspire to become educators.

## So It Begins

Our journey began after the launch of a statewide campaign by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MO-DESE) for school districts to create local Grow Your Own Teacher programs. The

goal was to encourage at least two graduating seniors from each high school to enter the education field.

From the onset, Robert Vogelaar, LPS's assistant superintendent of human resources (now retired), was actively involved at the state level in these convenings where ongoing discussions about the concept of Grow Your Own Teacher were gaining momentum.

At this time, one of us, Andrea, joined the LPS staff as chief equity officer. Andrea had come from MO-DESE's Office of Educator Quality, where she codeveloped the state's *Grow Your Own Resource Guide*.

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## The goal was for LPS students of color to obtain their teaching credentials and return to teach in the district.

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At the district level, we held in-depth conversations about how to take this initiative to scale as a workforce development strategy. As a source of inspiration, our early efforts to build a more diverse teacher pipeline gained community recognition with a 2017 Response to the Call Award from Clay County African American Legacy Inc.

As a result, the district established a GYOT Steering Committee comprised of school leaders from its two high schools; the Education Internship Program coordinator; the director of college, careers, and community partnerships; and the director of compliance. We (Dee as human resources director and Andrea as chief equity officer) were cochairs.

### Guiding Principles

The guiding principles of the GYOT program were to highlight the education profession as a viable career choice for LPS students of color and to award a financial incentive to be applied toward college tuition. The GYOT Steering Committee researched programs and learned more from other districts that had already launched successful GYOT programs across Missouri, such as Columbia, Fort Zumwalt, and Raytown.

The steering committee aligned its work with district priorities as outlined in our strategic plan and prepared a board presentation to share a rationale, the student application and selection process, program requirements, financial projections, and mentorship guidelines. The

goal was for LPS students of color to obtain their teaching credentials and return to teach in the district.

For high school students, the rigorous application process entails the following:

- Completing an actual LPS employment application.
- Achieving a minimum 2.75 grade point average.
- Earning a minimum score of 18 on the ACT.
- Submitting three letters of recommendation.
- Writing an essay.
- Interviewing with the GYOT Selection Committee.

To receive the financial incentive, a student must be a full-time college student (at least 12 hours per semester), have a minimum 2.75 grade point average, and be enrolled in a teacher education program. Students meeting these requirements receive \$2,500 per year for four years (\$10,000 total) to be applied toward tuition at the college or university of their choice.

Upon completion of the teacher education program requirements, a student is expected to teach in Liberty Public Schools for a minimum of three consecutive years, starting the first semester immediately following graduation.

The board of education unanimously approved this GYOT program, which received financial support in the form of loan forgiveness for each cohort of four students, two from each high school, in the amount of \$40,000 over four years.

We are in our fifth year of the program's implementation and look forward to the first cohort returning to LPS as classroom teachers for the 2023–2024 school year. Financial support from the Liberty Education Foundation will further this work.

### Expanded Efforts

The original GYOT program design has inspired LPS to expand its teacher recruitment and retention efforts to include Teacher Ambassadors, the Lead Lab, GYOT Hard-to-Fill, and the Paraprofessional-to-Teacher program. A three-year ESSER grant funds the first three initiatives.

**Teacher Ambassadors** were created to empower a cohort of teachers to provide support, modeling, and inspiration to fellow teachers (retention) and potential future teachers (recruitment). Teacher Ambassadors' commitment to the profession can be a powerful factor in influencing other teachers to examine their commitment level.

Being a Teacher Ambassador is a unique opportunity to give back to the profession by supporting colleagues, helping them appreciate their impact, and encouraging students to pursue a career in education.

A Teacher Ambassador's ideal qualities include a two-year commitment to teaching in Liberty Public Schools

in this capacity, a willingness to connect and work with middle and high school students, and demonstration of innovative and effective teaching practices through project-based learning, learner agency, AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination), and dual-credit and advance placement courses.

Summer workshops, book studies, career fairs, survey development, and partnerships with university education programs are a few of the stipend-paid activities for Teacher Ambassadors.

Overall, the impact of the Teacher Ambassador program's retention efforts will be measured by postworkshop surveys, exit interviews, and survey responses focused on a teacher's sense of belonging. Recruitment efforts will be measured by the number of students visiting university education departments, the number of students in grades 7–11 participating in Educators Rising activities, the number of students declaring a major in education, and the number of LPS students hired as LPS teachers.

The **Lead Lab** program is geared toward teacher retention. It will be a yearlong professional growth experience designed to support educators in refining their leadership skills for amplified success in their current role. The Lead Lab will support professional growth through experiences such as personal development exercises, vision planning, action planning, and communication strategy development.

Throughout the year, participants will have the opportunity to engage as a community of practitioners in various experiences, such as leadership conferences, topic studies, and monthly or quarterly networking. Lead Lab participants will gain exposure to a variety of leaders at various levels within the organization. Because this program is intended to support teachers in developing their leadership capacity in their current role, participants are not required to have an administrative degree.

All PreK–12 classroom teachers with a minimum of five years of teaching experience are eligible to participate in the Lead Lab. Teachers are selected through an application process that includes a leadership statement and administrator endorsement. Evaluation of the Lead Lab includes monitoring the number of participants and retention data. Survey data will also be collected to assess the benefits of the program and its impact on work satisfaction, as well as on future career plans.



COURTESY OF LIBERTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN MISSOURI

*Members of the GYOT student cohort share ideas and experiences, learning from each other.*

**GYOT Hard-to-Fill** is patterned after the original GYOT program. It adds one more position to the GYOT cohort and includes two unique twists: (a) the GYOT Hard-to-Fill is open to all graduating seniors who meet the required qualifications and (b) the teaching opportunity is limited to secondary science, secondary math, or PreK–12 special education.

The **Paraprofessional-to-Teacher** initiative is designed to identify, recruit, and encourage current LPS classified staff members to complete a four-year education degree leading to a full-time teaching position. This strategy has already made it possible to fill vacancies in those challenging subject areas.

## It Takes a Community

The most important lesson we have learned in planning, developing, and implementing our Grow Your Own Teacher program is that it takes the full support of the larger community, the board of education, the superintendent, and district and school leaders to make it all happen.

Our district designed a series of robust Grow Your Own Teacher programs that meet a variety of needs as we cultivate and grow a diverse and dynamic workforce for the promising years that lie ahead. By tapping into the talents of students and staff in the LPS community, we are maximizing the fullest potential of our greatest asset: human capital.

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# How We Responded to the Pandemic: The Good, the Bad, and the Sustainable

*School business professionals sit down with a risk management specialist to share their experiences during the pandemic.*

By Mert Woodard, SFO; John Morstad, CSRM, SFO; Merle Hastert; and Tom Strasburger



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**A**s we all know, the pandemic created significant challenges for district administrators, from figuring out how to deliver virtual learning for students and teachers to cleaning and sanitizing buildings, introducing new resources, equipment, and supplies, and more.

One thing the pandemic did was open school district leaders' eyes to the good and the bad with regard to policies, processes, and programs. The four of us—school business professionals from Minnesota and Kansas and a risk management expert—came together to share some of the key takeaways from our responses to the pandemic via a Q and A.

## Introductions First

**Mert Woodard:** I began my school business career in 2014 with Minneapolis Public Schools, an urban district serving more than 30,000 students. At the height of the pandemic, I moved to Wayzata Public Schools, a smaller district of about 12,000 students, located in an affluent suburb of Minneapolis, where I became the director of business services.

**John Morstad:** I am the former director of business services for Orono Public Schools in Minnesota. I have been working in education for the past eight years—the past five, including the pandemic year, were in Orono

Public Schools as executive director of finance and operations. Orono is a district of 2,800 students in the western suburbs of the Minneapolis–St. Paul metropolitan area of Minnesota. Previously, I worked for 18 years in the private sector.

**Merle Hastert:** Olathe Public Schools is a district of 30,000 students in the southern suburbs of Kansas City. I've been with the district 16 years. My current responsibilities include oversight of district risk management functions, workers' compensation, and banking activities, as well as serving as the treasurer to the Board of Education.

**Tom Strasburger:** I have been working for over 20 years to support the education community in areas related to school safety, compliance, and the social and emotional well-being of staff and students. I have been a member of ASBO International's Risk Management Committee since 2005, helping provide quality learning sessions for annual conferences and have presented internationally at numerous education conferences. Currently, I am president of strategic alliances for PublicSchool-WORKS, a provider of complete school administration software and online safety and regulatory compliance programs for K–12 schools.

## Leadership during the Pandemic

**Tom:** Merle, could you please share your perspective on leadership during the pandemic and the approach your district took?

**Merle:** In addition to the numerous “process” or “procedural” changes that occurred during the pandemic, our district worked to gain some perspective on how our “people” responded.

First, let's talk *staff*.

Staff had a strong need for direction to overcome the growing feeling of uncertainty in the workplace. Effective leaders provided staff the necessary calm and order by displaying subtle reassurances that their jobs were secure. They did so by simply being visible—by being available and answering questions whenever possible and by continuing to perform daily tasks despite unexpected interruptions.

It was a good time to initiate more direct contact with employees. Information sharing on a one-to-one basis was critical. It was not a good time to dictate—best practice was to empower staff to share in decision making.

District leaders made an extra effort to meet with team members on a personal level. It was a time to break away from the traditional role of jobs being performed uniformly. As an example, our payroll department's work schedule was modified to allow for alternating

work schedules, as it wasn't feasible to have the entire department gone at one time, nor did we want everyone working side by side.

In addition to alternating time in the office, some staff members worked totally remotely. It was a new concept for us at that time but has since become a serious consideration to retain and attract employees in the future.

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## One thing the pandemic did was open school district leaders' eyes to the good and the bad with regard to policies, processes, and programs.

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Awareness was a key component to driving performance. As things were happening quickly, the opportunity to show appreciation “on the spot” was much more effective than waiting for a special occasion. “It's the thought that counts” was never more important than during the pandemic.

It was a good opportunity to observe those who rose to the occasion and, as important, those who struggled—and why. Thinking about the future and understanding who you want at the table, who will be able to lead.

There were also some interesting *leadership* habits across our district.

With the early uncertainty the pandemic posed on a personal level, it was imperative that effective leaders did not turn inward when leadership was needed most. To move the district forward, leaders were forced to get out of their own lockdown.

It was important to be visible, to get real-time front-line information, to understand what was happening. Examples include visiting the schools that were distributing sack lunches via drive-through lanes, going into classrooms to assess what “fully spaced” seating arrangements looked like, and getting on school buses to evaluate optimum seating.

Leaders should not rely on secondhand information. With the increased workload, it was imperative not to assign all tasks to senior leaders. Young leaders were assigned responsibilities imperative to the successful performance of the district, as well as for their own growth.

It was an opportunity to see which leaders rose to the top and who were the next generation of leaders in the district. During the pandemic, as personnel and

processes were ever changing, it was a perfect opportunity for leaders to press “restart” and reestablish good leadership habits that may have become stagnant. As examples, being available, having direct and timely communication with staff members, developing clear objectives, seeking input from all team members, recognitions.

## The Importance of Cleaning

**Tom:** What are your thoughts on cleaning and its effect on staff and the schools?

**Mert:** In Wayzata, we learned that educating and engaging the community really matters. Investing in additional custodial staff or enhanced sanitation techniques is great, but without effective communication, the effect might be minimized. Once students, families, and staff members were made aware of the specific efforts to ensure clean and safe facilities, they had confidence to return to in-person instruction.

We also learned that capital investments made before the pandemic paid dividends during the pandemic. For example, many of our restrooms were designed so that they can simply be sprayed down rather than cleaned manually by staff. This process made for more efficient cleaning and will reduce operational costs over time.

**John:** We received limited federal relief funding. However, Orono used technology to increase efficiencies and improve sanitization of our facilities during the pandemic. We used some of our limited funds to purchase autonomous floor scrubbers to free up custodial time previously spent driving floor scrubbers. By automating some fairly monotonous processes, we were able to capture additional time that our custodians could use to focus on high touch-point cleaning in critical areas while maintaining prior cleaning expectations.

The second area we focused on was limiting contact points; by installing automatic soap and paper towel dispensers in all restrooms, we eliminated potential touch points.

## Indoor Air Quality

**Tom:** John, what challenges did you face and what initiatives did Orono implement with regard to indoor air quality?

**John:** Orono was fortunate in that we had completed a very large indoor air quality project between 2009 and 2011 to upgrade all air-handling units in each school building. Consequently, we already had modern systems with better flexibility to manage air-handling needs. That



capability allowed us to focus on educating the community to better understand the air filtration systems we were already using. Our education campaign helped explain the difference between residential systems and commercial air handling.

We adjusted our system programming to ensure that we were using 100% fresh outdoor air when children were present in our buildings. Many people simply did not know how frequently air turned over in each classroom, averaging once every 6 to 10 minutes, which is considerably better than residential homes.

## Transportation Challenges

**Tom:** Transportation was a very difficult challenge. What did you learn?

**Mert:** Our district recently reconfigured all 13 of our school sites with separate lanes for buses and other vehicle types, which proved to be invaluable during the pandemic when social distancing on buses was very difficult. Our high school campus has abundant parking, allowing us to encourage families to drive their students to school or for students to drive themselves when applicable, which alleviated the concern of overcrowding on buses.

During the pandemic, we learned that there is room for improvement in our use of technology related to student transportation. Cameras are installed on all buses, which provides historical data; however, we are exploring implementing solutions that provide real-time information. We are also exploring the use of smaller vehicles, such as passenger vans, to mitigate the impact of the nationwide bus driver shortage.

**John:** Orono has a robust open enrollment population of around 33% of all students. That leads to an increased amount of vehicle traffic on our main campus,

which accommodates four school buildings on the same block. To handle those vehicles—as well as the additional vehicles required to maintain social distancing on buses—we needed a better way to manage parent pickup time.

We again turned to technology to help solve the problem. We invested in a radio-frequency identification (RFID) system that reads a signal from the student's pickup vehicle as it enters the pickup area and transmits that information to each classroom, telling the teacher which students were in each boarding group and when they needed to be released. This system made the pickup lines much more efficient and reduced large clusters of kids waiting for their rides.

We were also looking into the potential for expanding the RFID system to identify when students get on or off buses and for scanning lunch payments.

## Finance

**Tom:** What lessons did you learn about finance during the pandemic?

**John:** The biggest finding related to finance was how to prioritize the new funding streams to maximize the value of the funds. As a district that received limited federal relief funding, we had to be very thoughtful about our spending. We focused on infrastructure improvements to technology, since it was clear a virtual environment would need to be maintained into the future. Among the many categories, educating our community was paramount.

The general narrative across the country was that schools received a windfall of funding. In Minnesota, districts received federal funding ranging from less than \$50 per pupil to over \$5,000 per pupil. Communication with the local community is critical to promote awareness of the local financial impact, particularly if you are asking your community for additional funding in the near future.

**Mert:** Something we quickly learned during the pandemic was that the needs of our district were drastically different from many of our surrounding districts. For



example, our district is fortunate enough to have specific local tax revenues in place to meet our technology needs, so we didn't struggle with distance learning devices for students like many other districts across the country did. However, as a district that experienced significant growth in recent years and planned for continued growth before the pandemic, the one-time pandemic-related enrollment loss meant that our student-to-staff ratios were out of balance. To mitigate that imbalance, we are using our federal pandemic relief funds, which is somewhat unique.

As previously mentioned, community engagement and education are vitally important. It's up to district leadership to ensure that the appropriate message and accurate information are shared with students and families so that the context behind financial decisions is understood.

**Tom:** Thank you all for sharing your experiences and lessons learned during the pandemic. We encourage readers to reach out to us for more information.

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