

# CARES Act Education Funding

Supporting a Trauma-Informed COVID-19 Response

## Information and Tools for Directing Flexible Federal Education Funds to Support Trauma-Informed Classrooms and Systems | May 2020

### **COVID-19 is impacting social-emotional health.**

There are many sources indicating that the COVID-19 pandemic is having a negative impact on social-emotional health. The Time Magazine article from May 7, [COVID-19's Psychological Toll: Mental Distress Among Americans Has Tripled During the Pandemic Compared to 2018](#), reported on a study that found that one in four American adults met the criteria that psychologists use to diagnose serious mental distress and illness, with young adults and those with children showing the most pronounced spikes. Further, the study found that, in April 2020, roughly 70% of Americans experienced moderate-to-severe mental distress, which is triple the rate seen in 2018.

This information underscores the need to ensure that all public systems operate as trauma-informed and equipped to build resilience. The federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act (The CARES Act) authorized flexible resources to states that can be used to ensure school systems are trauma-informed, not only to assist the students, but also the adults involved in meeting educational needs, including parents.

### **Trauma-Informed systems and settings are key to re-stabilizing social-emotional health.**

The [4 Rs – Realize, Recognize, Respond, Resist](#) – are an important component of building trauma-informed settings, according to The National Trauma Campaign. As the world responds to COVID-19, it is important that those responses be trauma-informed to promote healing and recovery. Advocacy to engage state and local supporters of preventing and addressing trauma and building resilience is necessary to influence the direction of flexible federal funds to these activities.

### **The federal CARES Act authorizes flexible funds that could be used on a trauma-informed response.**

On March 27, Congress allotted \$30.75 billion to the U.S. Department of Education's (USDE) Education Stabilization Fund through the [CARES Act](#) (H.R. 748), creating four grant programs; two are highlighted in this document:

1. [Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund \(GEER\)](#)
2. [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund \(ESSER\)](#)

### **Basic facts about the GEER & ESSER federal relief funds**

- The Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEER) and the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) mention "social and emotional support" and "mental health services," respectively, as allowable expenditures.
- The GEER Fund is "an extraordinarily flexible 'emergency block grant' designed to enable governors to decide how best to meet the needs of students, schools (including charter schools and non-public schools), postsecondary institutions, and other education-related organizations." The funds are intended to provide emergency support to local school districts and institutes of higher education that the State deems to have

been most significantly impacted by COVID-19 to provide educational services and support ongoing functionality. Funds are distributed to the Governor's Office after submission of [Certification of Agreement for Funding](#), which reiterates that funds must be used within a year and can also be spent on any authorized activities described in the CARES Act for the ESSER Fund or the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended.

- The ESSER Fund provides the State Education Authority support “to address the impact that COVID-19 has had, and continues to have, on elementary and secondary schools,” and must be distributed to state-identified local school districts within a year.
- The list of allowable uses of funds from the CARES Act is found in Section 18003(d)(1) and is easily accessible through the [GEER Certification of Agreement of Funding](#) on pages 10-11 or the [ESSER Certification of Agreement for Funding](#) on pages 7-8.
- The list of “uses of funds” for ESSER, and therefore for GEER, emphasizes that states can address the unique needs of low-income children or students, children with disabilities, English learners, racial and ethnic minorities, students experiencing homelessness, and foster care youth, including how outreach and service delivery will meet the needs of each population.

**GEER and ESSER Funds permit a trauma-informed COVID-19 response.**

The list of allowable uses for both the GEER and ESSER Funds can be found in the [GEER Certification of Agreement of Funding](#) and is provided here:

1. any activity authorized by the [Elementary and Secondary Education Act](#) (including the [Native Hawaiian Education Act](#) and the [Alaska Native Education Equity, Support, and Assistance Act](#); the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#))
2. coordination of LEAs with State, local, Tribal, and territorial public health departments
3. providing principals and school leaders with the resources necessary to address school needs
4. activities for low-income children or students, children with disabilities, English learners, minorities, students experiencing homelessness, and foster care youth
5. improving the preparedness and responses efforts of LEAs
6. training and professional development for staff of LEAs on sanitation and minimizing spread of infectious diseases
7. purchasing cleaning supplies
8. planning for and coordinating long-term closures (including providing meals, technology, and guidance for carrying out requirements under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act)
9. purchasing educational technology
10. providing mental health services and supports
11. planning and implementing activities for summer learning and afterschool programs
12. other necessary activities

**GEER and ESSER Funds may serve everyone and may also address distinct needs.**

States can direct funds to those public and non-public school districts that are significantly affected by COVID-19 and all children can be served. The law allows for addressing the distinct needs of students who may be experiencing compounded adversities: “low-income children or students, children with disabilities, English learners, racial and ethnic minorities, students

experiencing homelessness, and foster care youth” who, by definition, have experienced the trauma of serious abuse or neglect. Because the GEER Fund can be spent on what the ESSER Fund allows, this population focus can apply to both Funds.

**There is a need to build support among state and local decision makers for trauma-responsive approaches.**

Communications and materials from the USDE tend to emphasize using the funds to address distance learning. For example, in the [USDE letter to state education commissioners](#) on the ESSER Fund they advise, “It’s important to think creatively about new delivery methods and focus on investing in the technology infrastructure and professional development and training that will help all students continue to learn through some form of remote learning.” In its [letter to governors](#), they encourage, “As Governor, you have the opportunity to truly rethink and transform the approach to education in your State and to empower parents, teachers, and local education leaders to ensure all students can access meaningful learning options.” Both letters implore, “Students and their families are depending on your leadership to ensure that they do not fall behind.”

The USDE is guiding state thinking toward the technology needs in response to COVID. Outreach and advocacy are needed to cause state and local leaders to define “thinking creatively” and providing “professional development and training that will help all students continue to learn...” as inclusive of addressing the ability of students, parents and educators to recognize trauma in themselves and others, be equipped to manage its effects, and be connected to additional supports when needed.

**There are approaches, trainings, programs, and services school systems can use to ensure a trauma-informed COVID19 response.**

The ideas and examples listed below offer a starting point for advocates and decision makers to consider the types of programs and approaches that could be supported by the Education Stabilization Fund. This is not an exhaustive list, as there are many excellent resources available. For additional resources, check out [COVID-19 Resources](#).

- Provide teachers and staff with information on stress or trauma-related behaviors for peers and students.
  - [Mental Health First Aid](#) is a course that helps anyone learn how to identify, understand, and respond to someone who may be struggling with an emotional, mental health or substance abuse challenge. Participants report increased confidence in helping to connect individuals to appropriate professional and self-help resources, and an increase in personal mental wellness. This is a 6-hour course that can be completed on-line.
- Designate of identify personnel to select and implement training and implementation of models and strategies for trauma-responsive schools, school systems and school partners. These are specific training programs designed for education professionals that help them identify and respond effectively to the impact of childhood adversity and trauma.

- The Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care offers the [Trauma-Informed Organizational Change Manual](#).
- Trauma Learning and Policy Initiative's [Helping Traumatized Children Learn, Volume 2](#) describes a process that schools can use to become trauma sensitive.
- [National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments](#)
- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)
- Starr Commonwealth offers the [Trauma-Informed Resilient Schools](#) model.
- The [Neurosequential Model in Education](#) – Dr. Bruce Perry
  
- Increase access to mental health support for students.
  - Coordinate with local Mental Health Centers to promote suicide prevention supports, including the distribution of materials that include Suicide Helpline numbers and [texting contact](#).
  - [School-based mental health counseling](#)
  
- Implement and increase strategies to coordinate with child welfare systems to effectively respond to the distinct needs of children involved in child welfare.
  - Child Welfare-Education Liaison – a designated position in a school or school district that coordinates directly with child welfare organizations to address educational needs of children.
  
- Implement long-term strategies that maximize school-based and community-based resources to support children and families.
  - [Communities In Schools](#) – school-based coordinator that brings community resources into schools to empower success for all students by removing barriers for students at risk.
  
- Connect with community partners who can offer peer support groups and make connections to stabilizing resources and support networks.
  - Trained Co-Facilitators – two designated positions in a school or school district that coordinate directly with local coalitions to address the barriers of the children and families and provide a network of positive supports.
  - The [Aha Process, Inc.](#) offers a model for peer support groups.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its related challenges for families – of social isolation, economic insecurity, grief and loss, and elevated mental health and substance use risk factors – warrants a trauma-informed use of federal funds authorized in the CARES Act. Schools are – and will continue to be – on the front lines of opportunities for engagement of students and caregivers and therefore are key partners in supporting child and family safety and well-being. Advocates can help by lifting up areas of critical need for trauma-responsive solutions in the education setting.