



# New State and Federal Funding for MA Schools – Frequently Asked Questions



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Even before the pandemic, the Massachusetts education system was profoundly unequal. To help address these inequities, Massachusetts passed a new law called the Student Opportunity Act (SOA), which increased funding for our highest-need districts, and required all districts to work with their communities to create plans for improving outcomes for historically underserved students.

Most districts wrote their plans just before the pandemic began. Now, they are revising them in light of COVID and new federal funding that districts received in recent months.

For districts to stand a chance at confronting and addressing long-standing inequities that undermine learning experiences and outcomes for underserved students, local leaders must seize this opportunity to engage in meaningful collaboration and communication with all stakeholders – families, students, educators, and community members – on how they should invest state and federal funds to meet the urgency of this moment. **District leaders need your input.**

This factsheet serves as an introduction to the key streams of new state and federal funding available to Massachusetts schools.

## Student Opportunity Act (SOA)

### What is SOA?

The **Student Opportunity Act (SOA)** is a Massachusetts law passed in November of 2019 that seeks to remedy inequities in opportunity and achievement in the state’s schools. The law commits to increasing state spending in Pre-K-12 education, especially in the highest need districts, over the next several years. Once the law is fully implemented, schools will be receiving more than \$2 billion in additional funding each year (compared to before SOA).

### Why is SOA significant?

Even before COVID-19, **Massachusetts’ education system was deeply unequal.** The pandemic has only made this situation worse. The Student Opportunity Act offers a powerful opportunity to improve education for all students in our state, but especially for students of color, economically disadvantaged students, linguistically diverse students and students with disabilities. It does three things that are really important: Increases funding for our highest need districts, requires districts to have a plan for how they’ll use their new resources, and requires district leaders to engage students, families, educators and community stakeholders in these decisions.

### How can districts use SOA funds? How will decisions about funding use be made?

The law requires districts to develop and implement three-year plans for how they will use SOA funds to remedy learning inequities. Districts have to use SOA funds on **evidence-based strategies** to address inequities in student learning experiences and outcomes. Importantly, district leaders have to work with their local community – families, students, educators, and other community stakeholders – to develop their SOA plans. In these plans, district leaders have to specify the following:

- Which evidence-based programs, supports, and interventions they’ll employ;
- What outcome metrics they’ll use to gauge success; and
- How they’ll increase and measure family engagement over time

## [How much funding is my district receiving from SOA?](#)

Click [here](#) to find out how much new state funding your district is getting this year. Not every district will receive a large amount of new funding, especially not right away.

## [What's happening with the Student Opportunity Act right now?](#)

Districts wrote initial plans for how they would use their SOA money before the pandemic (you can find your district's plan [here](#)). Given how much everything has changed with COVID, DESE is requiring districts to update their plans. **Districts must submit plan amendments by Friday, April 1, 2022 (Monday August 1, 2022 for charter schools)**. Districts have to get input about what they should do with their new funding from students, families, teachers, community leaders and other stakeholders between now and April 1st.

## [How/ When can I weigh in?](#)

School districts are required to get input from students, families, teachers, and other stakeholders on their SOA plans before April 1, 2022 (August 1, 2022 for charter schools). Each district gets to decide how and when this engagement happens. We recommend reaching out to your district right away to ask about opportunities to weigh in. Here are questions you can ask:

- How is our district planning to get input from families and community members about how Student Opportunity Act dollars will be used?
- Will the district be holding meetings or town halls? When, and in what format (virtual or in person)? Will translation be available for families that speak languages other than English?
- Will the district be sending out a survey to families? When? Will the survey be translated into other languages?
- Will the district's draft plan be available for public comment?
- What other engagement opportunities will there be?
- How will the district share what they're hearing from families and community members?

## [Are SOA dollars the only new funding available to schools right now?](#)

No. In addition to SOA funds, which come from the state, districts have also been receiving extra money from the federal government to help address the impact of COVID. Although districts have spent some of this money already, many have lots left to spend. Districts can and should use these dollars to help pay for the evidence-based strategies in their SOA plans.

If your district is not receiving a large amount of SOA funds, ask your district leader if they can use federal funds to help cover the costs of proposed programs or initiatives.

## [What are federal relief and recovery funds called and how much money are we talking about?](#)

Federal dollars for schools to help address COVID impacts are called Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief - or ESSER - funds.

Districts have received three "waves" of ESSER dollars since Spring 2020 (ESSER I, II and III). Many districts have spent their ESSER I and II funds already, but most have not started to spend their ESSER III funds yet.

ESSER III provides **\$1.8 billion** for Massachusetts schools, \$1.65 billion of which goes to school districts (DESE gets to use the remaining 10%). Districts have until **September 2024** to spend these funds.

To find out how much your district got, click [here](#).

# Federal COVID Relief and Recovery Funds

## What are ESSER funds?

Since the pandemic started, the federal government has been providing additional funding to schools to help them deal with the impacts of COVID. These funds are called Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief – or ESSER – funds.

There have been three “waves” of ESSER dollars sent to school districts since Spring 2020 (ESSER I, II and III). By now, districts have largely spent or decided how they will spend **ESSER I and II funds**. Most districts, however, have not started to spend their ESSER III dollars – the latest and biggest wave of funding.

ESSER III includes \$1.8 billion for Massachusetts schools, \$1.65 billion of which goes to school districts (DESE gets to use the remaining 10%). Districts have until September 2024 to spend these funds.

ESSER III funds came from the federal American Rescue Plan Act and are sometimes also called “ARPA dollars.”

To find out how much your district got, click [here](#).

## How much ESSER funding did Massachusetts receive? How about my district?

Massachusetts received \$214.9 million in ESSER I, \$814.9 million in ESSER II, and \$1.8 billion in ESSER III. 90% of each of these amounts was distributed to districts based on the **Title I formula**.

You can look up how much each district received in federal relief funding [here](#).

## How can school districts use their ESSER III funds?

Federal law requires districts to use at least 20% of their American Rescue Plan Act dollars (ESSER III) for evidence-based approaches to address the impacts of missed instructional time (also known as “learning loss,” or “unfinished learning”), such as targeted intensive tutoring, summer learning or summer enrichment, extended school day, comprehensive after school programs, or extended school year programs. Remaining funds can be used in a variety of ways to address students’ academic and social-emotional needs, pay for measures to keep students and staff safe from COVID in school buildings, and support district operations.

## How is my district planning to spend ESSER III funds?

The best way to know is to ask your district. Massachusetts school districts have submitted applications to DESE for how they expect to use ESSER III funds, but most of these applications have not yet been released publicly. What’s more, the spending plans in these applications aren’t final – districts can change their minds.

SOA plan amendments allow districts to use multiple funding streams to support the implementation of evidence-based programs, including ESSER II and ESSER III funds.

## When do ESSER funds have to be used by?

The deadlines for spending ESSER funds are as follows:

- ESSER I funds must be spent before September 30th, 2022. Most districts have already spent the majority of these funds.
- ESSER II funds must be spent before September 30, 2023. Most districts have already committed – made final decisions about – how they will spend the majority of these funds.
- ESSER III funds must be spent before September 30, 2024. Most districts have not yet begun to spend these funds.

## Learn more:

Districts were required to submit funding applications for ESSER III. [Here is the application template](#).

Massachusetts’s state plan for ESSER III was approved by the Department of Education on July 7, 2021. [This is the plan](#) that was submitted on April 21, 2021.