

Your Request:

You requested information on states using Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to purchase digital devices and how they plan to continue offering programs and services after ESSER funds are depleted.

Our Response:

States and districts are using federal ESSER funds to expand student access to digital devices and the internet and reduce [digital divides](#) that students may experience. Research completed by [Education Commission of the States](#) and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) shows this has been a frequent area of spending, particularly for the ESSER I funds. When ESSER funds are exhausted, states have used other federal relief funds directed to state and local governments, which includes the Coronavirus Relief Fund, State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund, and the Emergency Connectivity Fund to purchase devices for students and expand internet access. State and Local Fiscal Recovery funds have a later spending deadline than ESSER going until Dec. 31, 2026.

This information request summarizes the different ways states are spending ESSER funds on technology and some of the different funding sources they are using in addition to federal ESSER funds.

ESSER Spending on Technology

In a review of state American Rescue Plan (ARP) [ESSER spending plans](#), Education Commission of the States has identified 43 states and one territory (**Puerto Rico**) that plan to spend a portion of their 10% ESSER set-aside on technology upgrades, digital learning tools and increasing internet access. Some states used funds to offer internet hotspots, while other states purchased online learning platforms to assist districts.

Similarly, the [COVID Relief Data Project](#) from CCSSO has tracked states spending \$1.14 billion in ESSER funds on digital divides and remote learning. As part of this tracking project, CCSSO also found shifting priorities among states across the three rounds of federal ESSER funds. States were more likely to spend their first round of ESSER funding on digital divides and remote learning to address the immediate needs of students early on in the COVID-19 pandemic than later rounds where states shifted to focus on tutoring, accelerated learning opportunities and out-of-school programs, particularly for the ESSER III funds approved through ARP.

Below are some examples of states using ESSER funds to expand digital access.

- **Arizona** is using \$1.5 million in ESSER funds to expand internet access to students in rural communities by extending existing broadband capacity in partnership with [The Final Mile Project](#).
- **Connecticut** dedicated \$43.5 million in ESSER and Governor's Education Emergency Relief funds to purchase devices, hot spots and broadband vouchers for families without internet access as part of their [Everybody Learns Initiative](#).
- **Oklahoma** provided [50,000 free wi-fi hot spots](#) to students in low-income households in 175 Oklahoma school districts using distance or hybrid learning models.
- **Maine** used \$2.8 million in ESSER funds to provide anytime, anywhere learning and resources for educators, students and families with the Maine Opportunity for Online Sustained Education ([MOOSE](#)) learning library.
- **New Hampshire** created a statewide online learning management system, [iLearnNH](#), in collaboration with the University System of New Hampshire and made it available to all educators and families for remote and online instruction with \$6 million in Governor's Education Emergency Relief and ESSER funds.
- **New Jersey** launched [Bridging the Digital Divide](#) grant program to give students and teachers access to remote learning devices and the necessary broadband service. The grant is a one-time \$54 million formula grant using ESSER funds.
- **North Dakota** contracted with Cognia to provide all North Dakota educators access to professional learning content, resources and coaching support through the online learning platform, [LINCspring](#).

Funding Sources

ESSER funds must be obligated by the federal deadline for each round of funding, which are Sept. 30, 2022 for ESSER I, Sept. 30, 2023 for ESSER II, and Sept. 30, 2024 for ESSER III. States have 120 days after the obligation deadlines to spend the funds; this means that states have until January 2025 to spend ESSER III funds. The U.S. Department of Education provided notice that it will [consider requests for extensions](#) up to 18 months to spend obligated ESSER III funds. Given the temporary nature of the relief funding, states have either designated ESSER spending on technology as one-time expenses or will need to determine future funding sources.

Federal Relief Funds

While not sources for ongoing funding, states have directed federal relief to state and local governments to supplement ESSER funds, some of which have later spending deadlines than ESSER. Education is a permissible use for the \$150 billion [Coronavirus Relief Fund](#) approved in CARES and the \$350 billion [State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds](#) included in ARP. The deadline for spending State and Local Fiscal Recovery funds is Dec. 31, 2026. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities [recently found](#) that states have spent 7% of their State and Local Fiscal Recovery funds on education and 7% on broadband. As an example, **New Jersey** [redirected up to \\$44 million](#) in Coronavirus Relief Funds funds to support the state's Bridging the Digital Divide grant program once ESSER funds are exhausted.

In addition, the federal government provided \$7.171 billion in aid in ARP for the [Emergency Connectivity Fund](#). The Emergency Connectivity Fund program reimburses eligible schools and libraries for internet access and connected devices, which includes the costs of laptop and tablet computers, wifi hotspots, modems, routers and broadband. The third application filing window closed on May 13, 2022. The Federal Communications Commission is reviewing and processing applications on a rolling basis. [Congress authorized](#) funds to remain available until Sept. 30, 2030. The Federal Communications Commission may open the program for additional grant applications in the future if all funds are not awarded.

State Funding

States have not yet enacted budgets for the 2024-25 fiscal year in which the Sept. 30, 2024 obligation deadline for ESSER III funds will take effect. This means states have yet to determine whether they will help finance programs that were initially launched entirely with the federal aid. A preliminary review of the [enacted budgets](#) for the seven state examples discussed previously (AZ, CT, OK, ME, NH, NJ and ND) did not identify state dedicated funds to support them in the 2023 fiscal year, but these programs still have federal funds available to support them.

Rather than waiting for federal funds to expire, some states launched programs with braided state and federal funds to sustain them beyond the obligation deadline. **California's** [Expanded Opportunities Grant](#) program offers an example where the state aims to invest billions of dollars after 2024. This comprehensive policy provides funds to local education agencies to expand instructional time in and out of school, accelerate student progress through tutoring and learning hubs, safeguard student health with wraparound supports and to invest in school staff. The state [Budget Act of 2022](#) approved \$4.4 billion to support expanded learning opportunities.

Resources

- Education Commission of the States [Innovative Ways States Are Using ESSER Funds](#) (2022) discusses innovative strategies used by states to maximize impact of ESSER funds.
- CCSSO [How State Education Agencies are Leveraging Federal COVID Relief Funds](#) (2022) offers examples of different state uses for ESSER funding.
- FutureEd [FutureEd State Plan Tracking](#) (2021) comprehensive sheet detailing state ARP ESSER spending plans.
- Education Commission of the States [Broadband Access and the Digital Divides](#) (2020) discusses three unique digital divides that may prompt different policy solutions.