

EDTA ESSER Guide to Funding

Elementary and Secondary Education Relief funding (ESSER)—new opportunities for funding theatre education

Adapted from the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) Guide, ESSER Funding Toolkit 2021–COVID Relief Funding in the Music Classroom

The Elementary and Secondary Education Relief act (ESSER), signed into law March 12, is the third round of federal funding intended to help education stabilize their budgets after deep cuts prompted by the pandemic. ESSER III includes \$126 billion for K-12 education.

For perspective, consider that each school district that receives Title I-A funding will receive around eight times their annual Title I-A allocation in ESSER III funds. This is in addition to the funds from ESSER I (\$13.2 billion) and ESSER II (\$54.3 billion), which have already been issued to states and school districts for distribution. [A table](#) created by the National Conference of State Legislatures includes state-by-state allocations for all three stimulus packages. States must use their allocated funds by September 30, 2024.

How can ESSER funds support theatre education?

The law identifies 15 types of spending as allowable uses of ESSER funds (see the list at the end of this guide), the first of which is “any activity authorized by the ESEA of 1965” and other federal education laws. This means that if funding an activity is authorized under any well-rounded education program (which includes the arts), such as the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant authorized under Title IV-A of ESSA, then that purchase would be allowable with ESSER funds as well.

New guidance from the U.S. Department of Education explicitly states that ESSER funds can also be used for “other activities that are necessary to maintain operation of and continuity of and services, including continuing to employ existing or hiring new LEA and school staff.” This includes theatre and other arts

educators. For secondary schools, where staffing is contingent on enrollment numbers in specific courses, ESSER funding may allow arts educators to remain employed using the federal funds while the programs are rebuilt post-pandemic.

For ESSER III funds, local education agencies must use at least 20% of funds to address learning loss through evidence-based interventions that respond to students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Theatre education's inherent support of students' social and emotional well-being of students—whether through distance learning or in person—can help make a strong case for funding theatre related activities under this set aside.

What are some COVID-19 related ESSER allowable funding examples that can support theatre education?

ESSER funds can also be used to support theatre instruction while mitigating the spread of COVID-19. Here are potential purchases or payments these funds may support, identified with the relevant use number from the statute list of 15 types of eligible funding.

- Masks; bell covers for musical brass instruments; plexiglass dividers; or other protective equipment for use onstage or in the theatre classroom.

Allowable under #3, #5

- Training for theatre educators on strategies to conduct in-person theatre instruction safely (see EdTA's [Recommendations for Reopening School Theatre Programs](#)).

Allowable under #6

- Sanitation supplies for all technical hardware--microphones/headsets, sound and light boards, lights, rigging—costuming, props, shop tools, and all surfaces in the control booth and auditorium.

Allowable under #7

- Purchasing devices for internet connectivity, laptops, and/or supplemental software that would allow for instruction and assessment virtually.

Allowable under #9

- Paying for additional instruction, such as through an adjunct teacher, private lessons instructor, or full-time teacher, to provide remediation in theatre.

Allowable under #11

- Afterschool and summer learning programs to accelerate theatre learning and support social and emotional learning.

Allowable under #11, #12

- HEPA filters for the theatre classroom and rehearsal spaces to increase the amount of clean air and the number of air changes per hour (ACH)

Allowable under #13 and #14

- Paying for theatre educators where enrollment numbers have dropped due to COVID-19.

Allowable under #15

- Purchasing materials to set up theatre classrooms with physical distance between students such as masking tape or outdoor tents and/or purchasing equipment, such as a media cart, to make the theatre classroom mobile.

Allowable under #15

ESSER questions you may have

How are ESSER funds distributed to schools?

ESSER funds are allocated to school districts using the Title I funding formula found in the Every Student Succeeds Act. The funds, however, are NOT considered Title I funds, and do not have to follow Title I funding restrictions. *There are no programmatic Title I or other restrictions to these funds, so long as they are used for one of the 15 allowable activities listed in the statute.*

My school is not a Title I school. Can I still access these funds for my theatre program?

If your school district receives Title I funding for *any* of its schools, it will receive ESSER funding. ESSER funding is not tied to Title I schools, so it can be used for programs at all schools within the district. You will need to make the case for the funds (see below) and understand that there will be other requests that may be prioritized above yours. If you are not in a district eligible for Title I funds, your best

pathway for federal funding support may be through Title IV-A. See the EdTA's companion Guide to Title IV-A Funding to learn how you might access those dollars through your district.

I teach at a private school. Will private schools have access to these dollars?

All three rounds of ESSER funding provide a form of equitable services that allow for non-profit private schools to obtain ESSER funds. Under ESSER I, a school district that receives funds must provide equitable services to students and teachers in non-public schools. ESSER II creates a separate program of Emergency Assistance for Non-Public Schools under which non-profit private schools may apply to the state department of education to receive services or assistance. Under ESSER III, a state department of education provides funding to non-public schools that enroll a significant percentage of children from low-income families and are most impacted by COVID-19.

How flexible are ESSER funds and can they pay for theatre teacher positions if those positions have been eliminated or under threat of elimination?

ESSER funds can be used to support activities and staff which normally would not be fundable from federal dollars, such as theatre education positions (even if those positions were paid for with local and state funds in the past). ESSER funds are meant to be extremely flexible to fit the needs of the local school district in support of schools reopening, and to support students during and after the pandemic.

Who determines how the funds are spent in my school district?

If you work in a school district that has Title I schools, your school district will receive an allocation of these funds. To see an estimate of what your school district will receive, visit this [web page](#) created by Whiteboard Advisors. Your district's federal programs administrator or Title I Director will most likely be the person submitting the application for these funds to your state department of education. They will need to prioritize the needs that will be funded by these dollars.

What sorts of things should I ask for from ESSER funds to support my theatre program?

Start by reflecting on the basic needs of your program, particularly those things that are a result of the pandemic. Here are some questions to get you started:

- Do you have a need for additional personal protective equipment to help students return to theatre classes and performance in person?

- Do you have need for such things as additional scripts, textbooks, or shop tools, so students do not have to share them, to create a safer learning environment?
- Do you have needs for ways to reach and engage students who have not been successful in virtual or hybrid learning situations, such as instruction by a supplemental theatre educator or teaching artist?
- Do you have ideas on summer learning opportunities that can include theatre – both for students already engaged in your programs and for those who haven't been participating?

All of these are examples of theatre program needs that fit the parameters of ESSER funding and may be part of what a district could support out of ESSER funds. You may also want to use the [EdTA 2016 Opportunity-to-Learn Standards for Theatre Education](#) to fully assess the needs of your school district's theatre education programs.

How do I make an ask on behalf of the theatre education programs in my district?

Ask for a meeting with your district's Federal Programs Manager or the person in charge of building your school district's ESSER funding request to discuss the needs of your theatre education program for the fall and your ideas for summer learning. You may also want to invite your principal or other administrators engaged in your theatre program to this meeting. Be prepared to provide evidence as to your needs, including research to back up any mitigation strategies and costs you are suggesting. A good resource is the [International Performing Arts Coalition Aerosol Research Study](#).

What if I'm told no?

As you work with your federal programs' person or staff in your district, remember that they are working to balance needs in all subject areas and across all the district's schools. While the needs for theatre and other arts education may not be a priority for ESSER funding right now, it is important to see if your needs can be on the list in case funding becomes available later. And remember: You can also ask if your needs would qualify for Title IV-A funding, particularly under the well-rounded education section of that law.

The 15 types of allowable funding under ESSER III

1. Any activity authorized by the ESEA of 1965, including the Native Hawaiian Education Act and the Alaska Native Educational Equity, Support, and Assistance Act (20 U.S.C. 6301 et seq.), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq.) ("IDEA"), the Adult Education

and Family Literacy Act (20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq.), the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 (20 U.S.C. 2301 et seq.) (“the Perkins Act”), or subtitle B of title VII of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. 11431 et seq.).

2. Coordination of preparedness and response efforts of local educational agencies with State, local, Tribal, and territorial public health departments, and other relevant agencies, to improve coordinated responses among such entities to prevent, prepare for, and respond to coronavirus.
3. Providing principals and other school leaders with the resources necessary to address the needs of their individual schools.
4. Activities to 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.
5. Developing and implementing procedures and systems to improve the preparedness and response efforts of local educational agencies.
6. Training and professional development for staff of the local educational agency on sanitation and minimizing the spread of infectious diseases.
7. Purchasing supplies to sanitize and clean the facilities of a local educational agency, including buildings operated by such agency.
8. Planning for and coordinating during long-term closures, including for how to provide meals to eligible students, how to provide technology for online learning to all students, how to provide guidance for carrying out requirements under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1401 et seq.) and how to ensure other educational services can continue to be provided consistent with all Federal, State, and local requirements.
9. Purchasing educational technology (including hardware, software, and connectivity) for students who are served by the local educational agency that aids in regular and substantive educational interaction between students and their classroom instructors, including low-income students and students with disabilities, which may include assistive technology or adaptive equipment.
10. Providing mental health services and supports.

11. Planning and implementing activities related to summer learning and supplemental afterschool programs, including providing classroom instruction or online learning during the summer months and addressing the needs of low-income students, students with disabilities, English learners, migrant students, students experiencing homelessness, and children in foster care.
12. Addressing learning loss in local educational agencies among students, including low-income students, children with disabilities, English learners, racial and ethnic minorities, students experiencing homelessness, and children and youth in foster care.
13. School facility repairs and improvements to enable operation of schools to reduce risk of virus transmission and exposure to environmental health hazards, and to support student health needs.
14. Inspection, testing, maintenance, repair, replacement, and upgrade projects to improve the indoor air quality in school facilities, including mechanical and non-mechanical heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems, filtering, purification and other air cleaning, fans, control systems, and window and door repair and replacement.
15. Other activities that are necessary to maintain the operation of and continuity of services in local educational H.R. 748—287 agencies and continuing to employ existing staff of the local educational agency.

Additional resources from our colleagues at NafME

Editable [Free ESSER worksheet planning tool](#) with areas of funding to help craft a funding request for staffing, supplies, computer/software/textbooks and other classroom related resources. While much of the worksheet is music specific, it's editable, so you can add theatre needs, such as technical hardware.

[State Information Center](#) that includes details for all 50 states and the District of Columbia, including legislative dates and deadlines, certification policies, relevant COVID-19 information, and state advocacy contacts, including those responsible for ESSER funds and Title IV A.

[“How to Access Education Relief Funds to Support Music Education”](#) webinar with a detailed overview of the funding process, all of which is equally applicable to theatre education. Special state-based insight is provided by Marcia McCaffery, New Hampshire Department of Education Arts Consultant.