

Testimony to: Senate Education Committee
From: David Williams, Chief of Staff
Tuesday, January 17, 2023
Re: ESSER Funding Usage in NWRESD Service Area

It goes without saying that the last three years have presented a unique challenge for the education system. While many institutions have struggled to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, I might argue that, after health care, education was faced with the biggest challenge. How to deliver a predominantly place-based service remotely, and then, how to return kids back to a place-based system safely and effectively. The Federal Elementary and Secondary School Relief funds, or ESSER gave districts the infusion of resources necessary to tackle the immediate challenges as well as put them on a footing to address the systemic change that has arisen out of the pandemic.

I am here today to provide you with a bit of an overview of how the funds were used in the Northwest Regional ESD service area. NWRESD provides services to over 100,000 students in the 20 school districts within Columbia, Clatsop, Tillamook, and Washington counties. Our districts range from Beaverton and Hillsboro with 40,000 and 25,000 students down to Jewel with 295 students. I will provide an overview of how funds were used in each of the three rounds of ESSER funding.

ESSER I

The first wave of ESSER funds, approved in late March 2020, provided the critical infusion of funds necessary for immediate pandemic response. At the **ESD** we purchased air purifiers and other assorted PPE so that we could safely serve the vulnerable populations we serve in the early stages of limited in-person instruction. In **Beaverton** the funds were initially used to purchase sanitizing supplies and PPE, but also online curriculum materials and mobile hotspots to support remote instruction, the funds also paid for a COVID coordinator position in the district. Similarly, in **Scappoose** the funds purchased air purifiers and air filters.

In general, this trend holds across the region. These initial federal pandemic response funds were primarily used for immediate relief and needs. Most districts indicated that the funds were used for air purifiers, air filtration, personal protective equipment, and supplies needed for enhanced disinfection. Larger districts in the region, with their economies of scale were additionally able to use these early funds to support the shift to online instruction including

supporting technology needs of students and teachers (hotspots, curriculum, chromebooks, etc).

ESSER II

The second wave of federal pandemic funding came in December of 2020 and it was clear at this point that districts would be operating from a pandemic footing for some time to come. At the **ESD** investments continued in sanitizing supplies and air quality improvements. At districts larger investments were made to begin to address new surfacing systemic needs of students. In **Astoria** the district supported student engagement coaches, summer school matching funding, technology enhancements, and medical assistants. In **Hillsboro**, ESSER II funds supported additional classified staffing in buildings, literacy and math intervention staffing, mental health supports, and additional technology infrastructure. In **Seaside**, the district added student success TOSAs focusing on intervention supports.

With this round of funding districts built upon the immediate pandemic response needs by continuing investments in air quality and disinfection to ensure a safe learning environment when staff and students returned to the buildings. In addition, this round of federal supports saw a broader level of investment in direct student supports with many districts in the region focusing on interventions supports, health assistants, and summer or extended learning programming that was leveraged with targeted state funding.

ESSER III

The final round of federal pandemic assistance was approved by Congress in March of 2021 a full year after the start of the pandemic and about the time that most Oregon schools returned to in-person instruction, albeit in a hybrid manner. At the **ESD** this final round of funding was used to make facility improvements at the various early childhood programs the ESD operates. These improvements were meant to provide a healthy and engaging learning environment for the vulnerable populations served in our early childhood centers. In **Beaverton** the funds were used to maintain the targeted staffing supports from ESSER II, as well as bilingual facilitators and English language development supports, classroom and library replacements, digital curriculum support, and expanded nursing services. In **Hillsboro**, the district added evening courses as a pathway pilot program, bilingual curriculum, and language liaisons. In **Seaside**, the district expanded community and family engagement and maintained previously adopted programs. And in **Astoria**, the district invested in a family liaison, additional technology, and instructional coach, elementary class size reduction, and behavior intervention specialists.

Where the first round of ESSER funding was primarily used to address the immediate pandemic response with air quality, disinfection, and PPE investments, by the last round of funding districts had shifted to focus on their response to the student needs that arose as a result of the pandemic. This final round was about student recovery, whether academic, behavioral, or social and emotional.

Throughout the use of the various ESSER funds there were a variety of strategies employed in the region. While most districts were cognizant of the limited duration nature of the funds and as a result invested in one time capital needs or one-time services, it is also clear that districts saw these funds as an opportunity to target specific supports for kids. I recently met with the Seaside superintendent and asked her about the district's approach to utilizing the ESSER funds. While she acknowledged the limited duration nature of the funding, she expressed that in Seaside there were not significant capital needs as they had just moved into a new middle school/high school complex. However, how her district approached the funds was viewing them as an opportunity to innovate for kids. By using the funds for several targeted programs from health services, to student success TOSAs they are piloting new services for students. And as the funds come to conclusion they will review the metrics pertinent to each program to determine effectiveness and whether a program should be folded into their general fund for continuation or elimination.

In many ways, this is the approach many districts are applying, if not explicitly. Districts in our region have used the ESSER funds to provide explicit and targeted services to students, mostly outside the classroom through intervention staffing, nursing, social and emotional supports, and mental and behavioral services. The use of these funds recognizes that as we move forward in recovery, the needs of students and families are fundamentally different than before the pandemic. Our leaders, educators and staff are working tirelessly to serve all students that walk through our doors. In reality, the pandemic is not over, while cases are down and pressure on hospitals are easing, our system was pushed to the breaking point and the trauma experienced by our students, our families, and our staff is one that the public education system will be recovering from for several years to come.