

Adding it All Up

Wisconsin School Districts' Use of Federal Pandemic Relief Funds

Wisconsin school districts received more than \$2 billion in one-time federal relief funds to address the effects of COVID-19 and boost student recovery and district finances. Early spending focused on educational technology to help students and schools adapt to virtual learning, while later spending focused on catching students up academically following setbacks from the pandemic and long-term school closures. Despite these efforts, Wisconsin's students have yet to fully catch up.

Wisconsin school districts received approximately \$2.3 billion in federal relief funds to mitigate the negative effects of COVID-19. The stakes surrounding the use of that money were substantial, both because of the cost to taxpayers and the level of need within schools. A federal assessment known as the [Nation's Report Card](#) has shown that the pandemic harmed students in Wisconsin and nationwide, leading to substantially lower student scores in mathematics and reading.

The pandemic and school closures presented unique challenges for districts and school leaders to address student recovery. [National research](#) shows that student results in mathematics and reading have not returned to pre-pandemic levels. In Wisconsin, average math achievement remains a third of a grade level below 2019 levels, and average reading achievement remains half a grade level below.

One-time federal relief funds provided a key revenue stream that districts could use to address a range of priorities, including reversing test score declines that took place during and after the onset of the pandemic. In response, lawmakers froze their state-imposed revenue caps and districts navigated two consecutive years (2022 and 2023) without an increase to their per pupil funding.

Using data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI), we analyzed spending claims by districts to offer a statewide look at how they used federal relief aid to address goals such as responding to COVID-19 and then pursuing student recovery.

This report was made possible by the family of Norman N. Gill, who served as the director of the Milwaukee-based Citizens Governmental Research Bureau (now the Wisconsin Policy Forum) for 39 years. The Gill family's generous contribution has provided for the creation of the Norman N. Gill Civic Engagement Fellowship, under which the Forum annually hires a graduate student fellow to conduct research under the supervision of its staff.

The 2024-2025 Norman N. Gill Fellow, Vilma Fermin, was the lead author of this report.

Previous Forum [research](#) summarized the sources of federal education relief aid to districts in Wisconsin. Through successive federal laws, districts received \$46.6 million in Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER I) funds, \$158.5 million in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER I) funds, \$685.4 million in ESSER II funds, and \$1.43 billion in ESSER III funds.

ESSER funds were distributed through the same formula used for federal Title I aid, which delivered greater aid to districts serving more students from low-income households. GEER I funds were distributed to districts that [were most impacted by COVID-19](#) based on the percentage of students in need of academic support and their ability to access learning.

The average school district in Wisconsin received \$2,841 per pupil across all ESSER and GEER I funds, and the median amount was \$1,784 per pupil. The formula allocated the greatest portion of the statewide federal funds (34.4%) to Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), at \$11,923 per pupil.

Congress allowed the funds to be used for a wide array of expenditures to give school districts flexibility in addressing local needs during the pandemic.

In the final installment of ESSER funds provided by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), districts were [required](#) to use at least 20% of the aid to address the decline in student academic achievement through the implementation of evidence-based interventions. These approaches were meant to address students’ academic, social, and emotional needs while also confronting the [impact](#) of the pandemic on students.

Our analysis highlights how districts spent their federal relief dollars to support student recovery. To do so, we analyzed spending across state-determined categories and also spoke with the leaders of three districts to better understand their decision-making. Readers should note that our analysis included independent charter schools wherever we refer to school districts, unless otherwise stated. Our analysis, however, does not include [Emergency Assistance for Non-Public Schools](#) (EANS) funds provided to private schools and [separate grants](#) provided through ESSER III funds.

Breaking Down Statewide Spending

Previous Forum [research](#) provided an initial look at districts’ relief aid spending through early March 2022, finding that early spending focused on addressing immediate pandemic challenges such as preparing for

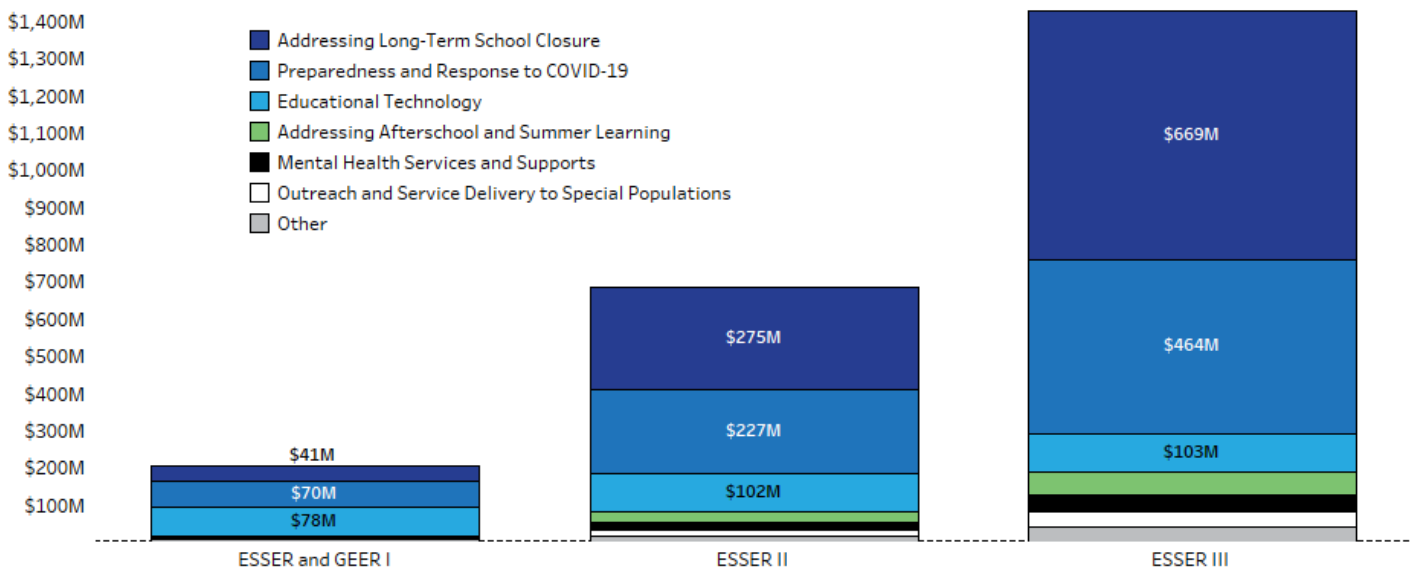
virtual learning and health and safety. Once schools reopened, districts prepared for different challenges to address student and district needs more broadly.

Districts could submit claims for federal reimbursement of funds spent or obligated through September 30, 2024. Forum analysis of this now-complete dataset expands the takeaways from our initial research. In particular, we focus on how districts used the remaining funds to address student recovery in the face of COVID-19 while trying to avoid leaving budgetary holes when funds expired.

Districts spent over \$2.3 billion in federal relief funds, leaving just 0.01% (\$256,000) unused. The [spending categories](#) Wisconsin used include addressing long-term school closure; preparedness and response to COVID-19; educational technology; mental health services and supports; addressing afterschool and summer learning; outreach and service delivery to special populations; and other.

Over time, the spending shifted from prioritizing educational technology and adjusting to virtual learning to prioritizing school reopening. In early statewide spending through ESSER I and GEER I, educational technology accounted for \$78.3 million (38.2%) of the spending. However, as schools reopened, the proportion of ESSER funds spent on educational technology decreased. With ESSER II and III, districts spent \$102.2

Figure 1: Early Focus on Technology and Pandemic; Later Rounds Addressed School Closure
Total district spending of ESSER and GEER funds, by use and round



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction



and \$103.3 million on educational technology, respectively, which accounted for only 14.9% and 12.3% of total spending (see Figure 1 on the previous page).

As districts turned their attention to student recovery from the pandemic, they increasingly prioritized addressing long-term school closure which may have included acquiring and distributing virtual learning resources, providing meals, and expanding academic support services. This category of spending – which might be the closest analog to spending on academic recovery – made up just 20.0% (\$40.9 million) of ESSER I and GEER I spending. However, that amount rose from \$40.9 million to \$274.8 million and 40.1% of ESSER II spending, and again to \$669.5 million and 46.9% of ESSER III spending.

The preparedness and response to COVID-19 category also remained a priority for each round of federal aid. This category focused on cleaning protocols, physical distancing plans, training employees, purchasing safety supplies, and later also included greater spending on district buildings and capital projects. In total, \$761.1 million was spent in Wisconsin within this category, representing approximately one-third of spending in each round. It is notable that this remained the case during ESSER III, for which spending happened in the 2023-24 school year when the COVID-19 pandemic no longer had the same urgency for many districts.

Consistent Priorities Across District Types

Overall, spending patterns across district types remained largely consistent. Statewide prioritization of addressing long-term school closure, preparedness and response to COVID-19, and educational technology applied across all district types regardless of locale, demographics, and student enrollment.

Nearly all district types also followed statewide trends in the *order* of these spending categories: on a per pupil basis, they all spent the most federal relief aid on addressing long-term school closure, preparedness and response to COVID-19, and educational technology in a distant third place.

One exception to this rule was districts in which a majority of the student population are students of color. These districts spent the greatest portion of federal

relief funds per pupil on preparedness and response to COVID-19 (\$2,584 per pupil on average), rather than addressing long-term school closure.

That stood in sharp contrast to districts with 25% to 50% students of color, which spent on average more than twice as much on addressing long-term school closure (\$977 per pupil on average) as on preparedness and response to COVID-19 (\$411 per pupil on average). Districts serving less than 25% students of color also spent much more on addressing long-term school closure (\$780 per pupil on average) than on preparedness and response to COVID-19 (\$438 per pupil on average).

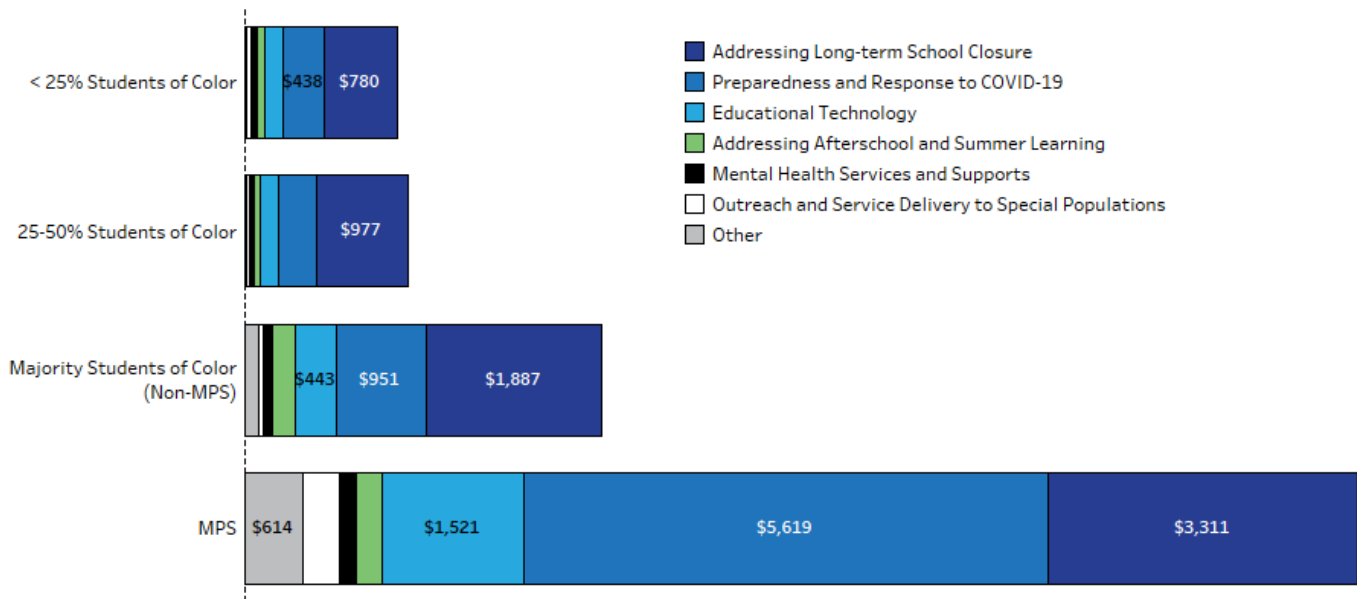
This difference is notable. Given that districts with a majority of students of color faced some of the biggest impacts to learning and associated difficulties such as chronic absenteeism, it is worth reflecting on whether this mix of spending was the highest and best use of this scarce, one-time resource.

Our analysis found that this trend was a result of spending by MPS in the preparedness and response to COVID-19 category. If we excluded MPS from the analysis of districts in which a majority of students are students of color, the remaining districts followed statewide trends, spending the largest portion of funds on addressing long-term school closure (\$1,887 per pupil average), followed by preparedness and response to COVID-19 (\$951 per pupil on average). MPS alone spent on average \$5,619 per pupil on preparedness and response to COVID-19 and spent less on addressing long-term school closure (though it was still a substantial amount at \$3,311 per pupil on average) (see Figure 2 on the next page).

After the top three categories of spending, nearly all district types prioritized spending on addressing afterschool and summer learning and mental health services and supports. The exceptions to this rule were for districts in which student enrollment was greater than 5,000 students, districts in which students of color account for a majority, and districts in cities. Our analysis found that these exceptions were again a result of MPS's per pupil spending across categories. For MPS, the fourth highest spending category was Other (\$614 per pupil on average). Addressing afterschool and summer learning (\$282 per pupil on average) and mental health services and supports (\$169 per pupil on average) were the bottom two categories for MPS.



Figure 2: Districts with Many Students of Color, Including MPS, Received and Spent More
Total per pupil ESSER and GEER spending, by makeup of students of color



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

Largest Amount Spent on Addressing Long-Term School Closure

Statewide, addressing long-term school closure made up the largest portion of ESSER spending (\$985.2 million, or 42.5%). Spending in this category rose as districts shifted their focus to re-opening schools and responding to the effects of closures. Spending in this category may have included support for COVID-related and Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) benefits processing for staff, systems for managing and scheduling substitutes, systems to track attendance for students, access and accommodations for online courses, additional staff, food service costs, educator evaluations, and data security.

Nearly every district spent relief funds to address long-term school closure, including nearly half (211) that spent a majority of their total ESSER funds in this category. Among the 440 school districts and charter schools with enrollment information for their most current school year, the median district spent \$778,362 in total and \$1,131.45 per pupil on average in this category, with most of it happening as part of ESSER III.

In conversation with Forum researchers, district leaders highlighted that they used ESSER II and ESSER III funds to address long-term school closure and support student academic recovery. Districts prioritized spending on additional staff support and intervention programs like credit recovery, which allowed students to

re-take courses to obtain the necessary credits to graduate, and tutoring services, which helped students returning to school.

While these efforts helped, district leaders highlighted the pandemic’s lasting impact on the youngest learners. Some districts have seen an increase in students who enter school with developmental delays for language and behavioral milestones such as engaging in conversations, understanding simple instructions, and lack of potty training.

This aligns with [research](#) from the pandemic that shows the youngest learners fell behind and are having more difficulty recovering academically compared to older students. With districts still addressing pandemic recovery after the end of federal pandemic aid, paying closer attention and prioritizing recovery for young learners will be critical.

District leaders also highlighted staffing and diagnostic educational programs as key to addressing student recovery. These education programs allowed districts to adapt curriculum to student needs, and some leaders found that personalized instruction made a positive difference for students. Additionally, they helped identify learning gaps and influenced personal interactions between students and teachers. While districts are generally not able to fully sustain increased staffing levels after the expiration of funds, they are exploring funding opportunities to continue to use the digital programs that are making a difference for students.



Preparing for and Responding to the Pandemic

The second highest spending category was preparedness and response to COVID-19. Statewide, districts spent \$761.1 million (32.9%) on this category. The percentage of ESSER funds spent on preparedness and response remained relatively consistent, as districts spent 34.0% (\$69.8 million) of their ESSER I and GEER I funds, 33.1% (\$226.9 million) of their ESSER II funds, and 32.6% (\$464.4 million) of their ESSER III funds in this category.

Nearly every district spent funds to prepare for and respond to COVID-19, but only 70 (15.9%) spent more than 50% of their total ESSER funds in this category. Among the 440 districts and charter schools with pupil data in 2024-25, median spending was \$332,334 per district and averaged \$715 per pupil.

Spending in this category may have included sanitizing and cleaning supplies, staff training related to COVID-19, safety plans, physical infrastructure and modifications, transportation for students, additional staff coverage, and hazard pay. District leaders highlighted that spending focused on purchasing protective equipment to help keep students and staff healthy. Later rounds of funds focused on creating a

healthy environment to keep school buildings safe such as ensuring clean air.

While the spending categories provided by DPI do not specifically identify capital investments such as facility upgrades or construction, the agency was able to provide some data on the ESSER III funds used for Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning (HVAC) needs and construction projects as reported within the overarching category of preparedness and response to COVID-19. While these data are not comprehensive, they offer at least some insight into more specific expenditures by districts.

According to these data, districts spent at least \$293.9 million combined on HVAC and construction projects just using ESSER III funds alone. This made up 63.3% of total spending on preparedness and response to COVID-19 (see Figure 3).

If HVAC and construction spending was its own category, it would have been the third highest spending category, surpassing spending on educational technology. Example projects in this category included upgrading HVAC systems to meet air quality needs, renovating athletic facilities, classroom expansions, and window replacements.

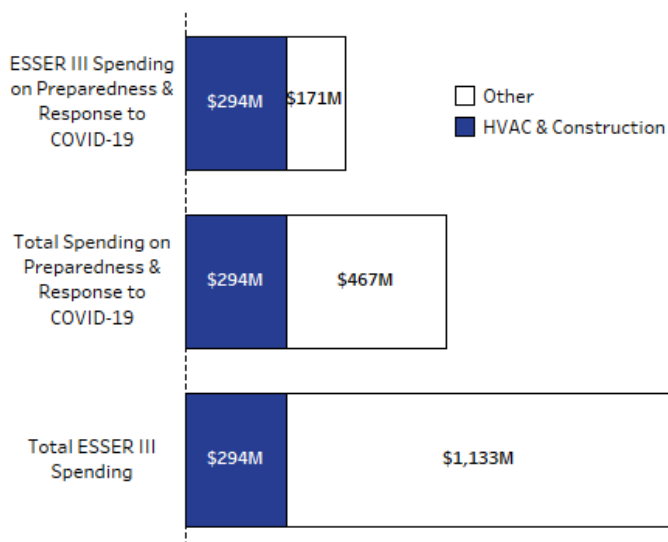
In previous Forum research, district leaders pointed to these one-time HVAC and construction projects as reasonable choices that addressed costly deferred maintenance issues and avoided future budget gaps once the federal funds ran out. Yet this spending on construction and heating, cooling, and ventilation also reduced the funds that districts could spend to directly help students recover academically.

These HVAC and construction projects are worth some reflection by policymakers. They did not directly address the substantial effects of learning loss on students, though in some cases they may have improved the learning environment and saved on energy and maintenance costs. They also may have provided some worthwhile upgrades in air quality given the airborne nature of COVID. However, these projects were not completed until well after COVID-19 vaccines had become available, with some projects still in progress.

Districts faced difficult decisions in balancing the immediate pandemic response needed with longer-term infrastructure improvements. Reflecting on spending in the preparedness and response to COVID-19 category,

Fig. 3: HVAC and Construction Spending Featured Heavily

Known* spending on heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) and construction projects as compared to selected categories



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. *HVAC and construction spending was only reported within ESSER III; more was likely spent in this area as part of ESSER I, GEER I, and ESSER II.



district leaders shared that they might have spent less on prevention supplies because many of them remained unused and will need to be recycled at the end of this year. It was difficult to know what amount of supplies would have been enough at the onset of the pandemic, but district leaders we interviewed shared that knowing what they know now, they would have used additional funds to support students instead.

Milwaukee Diverges from Statewide Trends

Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) received \$797.2 million in federal pandemic relief funding (34.4% of the statewide total and \$11,923 per pupil), which far exceeded all other districts. At the start of the pandemic, MPS prioritized educational technology using ESSER I and GEER funds. Spending priorities shifted to preparedness and response to COVID-19 in ESSER II, and this category remained high within ESSER III spending. As we have noted, this focus differed from statewide trends, in which most districts prioritized greater spending on addressing long-term school closure.

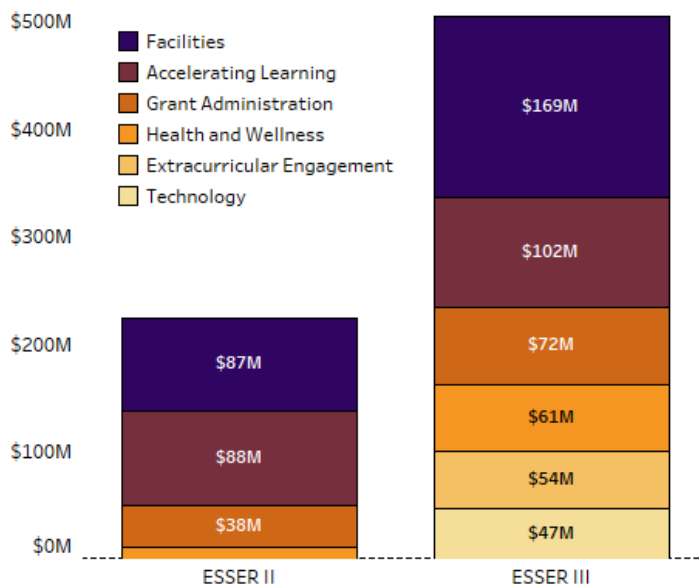
Previous Forum [research](#) highlighted early ESSER I spending by MPS, and we can now report on the district's completed spending. It is important to note that the following analysis uses MPS spending categories rather than the state categories.

In [ESSER II](#), MPS spent nearly equal amounts on accelerating learning (\$88.1 million, or 39.2%) and facilities expenses (\$86.9 million, or 38.6%). Spending on accelerating learning included credit recovery courses, dual enrollment programs, literacy support, new curriculum, tutoring programs, instructional technology, and parent institutes. Facilities spending included deferred maintenance repairs on mechanical systems, new water fountains, hiring contractors, air purifiers, personal protective equipment, and window screens. Other spending included \$38.4 million (17.1%) on grant administration and \$11.5 million (5.1%) on health and wellness.

In [ESSER III](#), MPS spent more on facilities expenses at \$169.2 million (33.5% of this funding round) than on accelerating learning, which amounted to \$102.3 million (20.2%). Spending on facilities included the construction of a barn facility for a high school, a nutrition services center for a middle school, fire alarm

Fig. 4: Facilities Spending Led MPS' ESSER III Priorities

Total spending by MPS-defined category, ESSER II and III



Source: Milwaukee Public Schools. Categories differ from DPI.

systems, painting projects, furniture, air purifiers, and window replacements. Spending to accelerate learning aimed to address the ESSER III requirement that 20% of the funds had to support evidence-based intervention strategies to address the negative impacts of the pandemic. Spending included academic planning, career and technical education, extended learning services, family engagement kits, adult literacy programming, hiring support staff, and professional development.

Other spending included: \$71.9 million (14.2%) on grant administration, \$61.1 million (12.1%) on health and wellness, \$53.5 million (10.6%) on extracurricular engagement, and \$47.4 million (9.4%) on technology (see Figure 4).

MPS leaders we interviewed noted that the district's initial goals were to create an environment where students and teachers remained healthy and could learn. They spent a significant portion of federal aid on deferred maintenance to achieve this goal. On the one hand, these expenditures did not directly boost learning. On the other, recent lead poisoning cases among students illustrate the importance of doing basic maintenance in schools such as addressing peeling lead paint.

After making some facilities improvements, district officials shifted their focus to addressing student



recovery. The district highlighted tutoring, curriculum updates, afterschool programming, and extracurricular activities as strategies used to support pandemic recovery.

MPS leaders shared that students benefitted from access to technology, learning skills through various software. Despite not focusing as large of a percentage of funds on the state-defined addressing long-term school closure category, MPS still spent on average \$3,375 per pupil in this area – more than four times greater than the statewide median and the 15th highest per pupil amount in the state.

Still, reflecting on the use of ESSER funds, MPS leaders highlighted that while their focus was on looking at children’s immediate needs, it may have been equally important to consider how decisions would have impacted them in the long term. With the expiration of pandemic aid, MPS must now find ways to address student recovery without these funds.

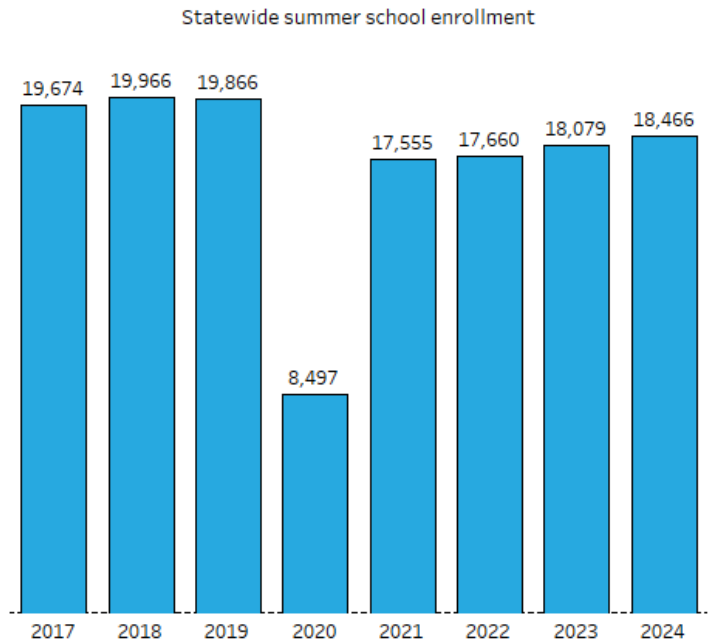
In the Forum’s review of the [MPS 2025 budget](#), we noted substantial decreases in the district’s number of budgeted positions that accompanied the loss of federal pandemic aid. Those cuts happened despite the influx of substantial local property revenues that accompanied the approval of the district’s April 2024 operating referendum. As the district continues to address student recovery, officials can draw on both referendum funds and the lessons learned from the effectiveness of different strategies funded by ESSER dollars. Yet given their ongoing budget challenges, they will have to assess carefully what long-term strategies can be sustained to address student recovery.

Other Uses of Pandemic Relief Funds

The spending categories examined thus far offer some insight into how districts used the bulk of their federal relief dollars. Outside of the top three spending categories, districts also spent on addressing afterschool and summer learning, mental health services and supports, and outreach and service delivery to special populations.

Statewide, districts spent 4.0% (\$93.7 million) of all ESSER funds on addressing afterschool and summer learning. Readers should note that we cannot separate afterschool and summer learning spending, as they were reported in the same category. Spending in this category focused on diagnosing and addressing

Figure 5: Summer School Enrollment Yet to Recover



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

unfinished learning, resources for closing gaps, transportation, and programming for remediation and emotional supports. In addition to ESSER funds, nearly \$14.7 million was distributed through a separate, competitive [ESSER III summer school grant program](#).

As a proxy for the efficacy of this spending, we analyzed summer school enrollment data from DPI from 2019 to 2024. Statewide, summer school enrollment continued to rise from 2020 levels, when enrollment dropped from 2019 by 57.2% to 8,497 full-time equivalent (FTE) students. By 2024, enrollment had increased to 18,466 FTE students but remained 7.0% below 2019 levels (see Figure 5).

This finding is striking given that the academic outcomes of many students have yet to recover from the pandemic and summer school represents one tool to help close those gaps. It is also notable because summer school enrollment is counted for the purposes of state revenue limits on school districts, and so boosting enrollment can provide at least a limited increase in ongoing district revenue.

Some district leaders we spoke to pointed to challenges in implementing robust summer school programming. They noted transportation as one structural barrier to summer school enrollment. Though the one-time federal funds presented opportunities to provide transportation, these efforts could not be sustained without the funds.



As a result, some districts chose not to pursue this opportunity, though they could have done so on a temporary basis at least.

District leaders also noted the unique structure of summer school. Summer school is a shortened program and presents challenges with childcare and meals. In some cases, older children have to care for younger children who are not in summer school. These difficulties, though real, were also present to some degree prior to the pandemic. However, hiring teachers for summer school does appear to have been more of a challenge because of staff burnout in the wake of COVID-19.

Ultimately, only around two-thirds of districts spent any federal funds at all in this category, and of those, the median district only spent a little over \$60,000. As a result, the impacts on summer school enrollment and programming were likely limited at best. Although, it is possible that more local resources were available for summer schools than otherwise would have been because districts used pandemic funds to cover other needs in their budgets.

Meanwhile, districts spent nearly \$62.0 million on mental health services and supports, which made up 2.7% of all ESSER spending. Of the districts that spent anything in this category, the median amount was \$91,736. Spending in this category focused on supporting relationship building, collaboration with mental health providers, parent trainings, therapy transportation costs, and behavioral screenings.

When reflecting on the lasting impacts of the pandemic, district leaders highlighted an increase in student mental health concerns. Yet overall spending on mental health services made up a small portion of all ESSER spending. It is possible that districts used funds in other spending categories to support mental health services, as hiring additional staff in this area could be funded through multiple categories. District and state leaders may wish to consider additional measures to support mental health services and support student recovery.

Districts also spent \$60.4 million on outreach and service delivery to special populations, which made up 2.6% of all ESSER spending. Among the districts with any spending in this category, the median amount spent on outreach and service delivery to special populations was \$54,897. Spending in this category focused on

social workers, counseling, early childhood virtual instruction, online modules, individualized education plan (IEP) support, and family communication for students from special populations, defined as those who were low-income, English learners, or migrants, or had disabilities.

Conclusion

While federal pandemic relief funds provided temporary support to districts across Wisconsin, their ultimate impact on student recovery and on schools themselves appears mixed. Some districts have seen notable improvements in student outcomes, proving that progress is possible. However, overall statewide test scores, chronic absenteeism, and other key metrics have not returned to pre-pandemic levels.

ESSER funds provided a one-time boost in revenue for districts to help meet some of the challenges from COVID-19, but they came with both benefits and drawbacks for Wisconsin school districts and charter schools. First, not all districts received large sums of relief aid. Next, in part as a response to this large influx of federal funds, legislators in the 2021-23 budget froze state revenue limits, which capped the amount of local property taxes and state general school aids that went to all districts for two years and left the limits lower still today than they otherwise would have been.

Districts then faced a dilemma: their ongoing operating funds were tightly constrained at a time when some of them were receiving large amounts of temporary federal funds. They could use the one-time aid to sustain their ongoing operations despite the freeze on their core state and local funding. However, doing so would mean a fiscal cliff taking effect in the current 2024-25 school year. These challenges did in fact occur for districts around the state including MPS and the Madison Metropolitan School District, which likely contributed to the large number of school referenda held in recent years.

Districts could also use the federal aid to stand up new programs and efforts to help students and families overcome learning loss, chronic absenteeism, and other pandemic problems. Yet these new efforts would have to be temporary in nature, or they would also add to districts' growing financial challenges. Many of those efforts also required additional staffing, but hiring can



be complicated in the case of temporary positions and was also more difficult in the midst of the pandemic.

Last, districts could choose to make one-time investments that were less dependent on district staffing such as HVAC and other building-related capital projects as well as other purchases such as new curriculum. These one-time expenditures avoided future budget shortfalls and offered some lasting benefits for districts, local taxpayers, and to a lesser extent students. However, they were often less focused on helping students catch up.

In the end, ESSER funds in many cases focused on addressing immediate needs or long-term capital projects rather than long-term recovery efforts for students. District leaders may have benefited from support to establish evidence-based interventions that directly addressed academic recovery beyond students' immediate needs.

Many district leaders now face the challenge of addressing gaps in math and reading achievement while grappling with broader issues that include absenteeism and student disengagement, the rise in mental health concerns, and ongoing budget constraints.

Adding to these pressures is the lasting impact of the two consecutive years where the state froze per pupil revenue increases. While federal relief funds addressed immediate needs, the state revenue freeze reduced the districts' funding base for future years. With the ongoing impact of this freeze and ESSER funding gone, many districts may struggle to maintain any initiatives that effectively contributed to student recovery or to begin others as needed.

Previous Forum [research](#) on the February and April elections found that for the 16th straight year, Wisconsin voters approved a majority of school district referenda. Despite this, referenda alone will not be sufficient in many districts to sustain all desired spending, especially in the context of statewide student enrollment declines. In other districts such as the School District of Beloit, there has not been a recent funding increase from referenda because residents have repeatedly voted against ballot measures.

The loss of federal funds and the impacts of the pandemic have already prompted tough district and community conversations regarding priorities. The

tradeoffs that came with the pandemic aid in Wisconsin will also be worth discussing for years to come. Ultimately, we hope that these conversations will yield insights that will help districts and state officials reach better outcomes for students by protecting and investing in effective interventions while remaining grounded in budget realities.

