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Snapshot of Districts' Plans for Using Federal Relief Funds to Support Student Mental Health

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Introduction

This report was commissioned of the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) by the Maine Legislature's Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs in the spring of 2021. At that time, there were widespread anecdotal reports that students' mental health was suffering after a year of disrupted schooling from the global coronavirus pandemic. With room left in our 2021-22 annual work plan for a small-scale study, MEPRI was asked to investigate how districts are taking advantage of their federal COVID-19 relief funds to add resources or supports for their students' mental and emotional well-being.

This limited summary builds on another, larger, MEPRI report undertaken in the same year that provided a national scan of innovative practices that schools had reported implementing during the year. The combination of these reports provides two different perspectives on districts' efforts to support their students. However, even taken together, these studies do not encompass *all* activities that school districts have attempted during this pandemic year. Districts also had ongoing programs from before the pandemic that they continued to operate, or even expand, using local, state, or federal funds other than federal COVID-19 relief funding. In addition, this summary outlines how districts *planned* to make use of relief funds; the actual activities may have shifted during implementation.

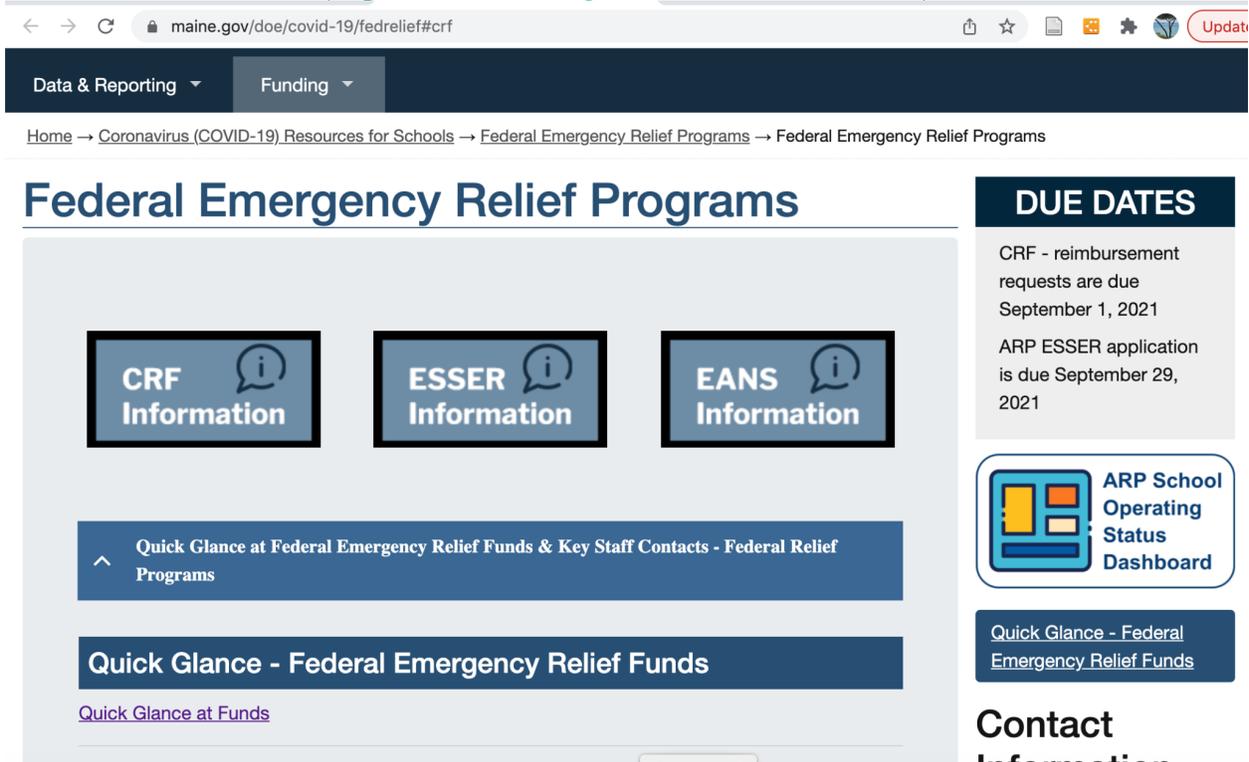
Background

In rapid response to the enormous challenges that public schools faced at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government issued three different funding packages to provide them with additional resources. The first of these funding packages was the \$816.9M Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act that was passed by Congress in late March of 2020. In the face of ongoing struggles, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) was later added in December 2020 with an additional \$200.0M, including some support (\$12.8M) for non-public schools. The third round of relief funds was the American Rescue Plan (ARP) which appropriated \$423.8M in March of 2021 to Maine education.

Each of these three funding programs had similar allowable uses but with different areas of emphasis. The most distinguishing factor is their different (yet overlapping) spending timelines. While the CARES Act funds had to be used within the first year of the pandemic (March 2020 through June 2021), the CRRSA and ARP funding allocations can be spent through September of 2023 – and possibly longer if Congress provides an extension.

The large amount of federal funds flowing to school districts in such a short timeframe – during a time of intense and ongoing work to keep adjusting to the pandemic and keep schools operating for kids – required quick and decisive action from districts. Each funding priority has its own application process and eligible uses for the funds. To help school district leaders and school boards prioritize and focus efforts, the Maine Department of Education quickly created a central website with high-level information about each funding program; a screenshot is included below. Much of the background information in this report was gleaned from those helpful sources.

Figure 1. Screenshot of Maine Department of Education Information Portal
(<https://www.maine.gov/doe/covid-19/fedrelief>)



Screen shot taken February 22, 2022

The MDOE’s “quick glance” summary providing additional details about the grants within each of these Congressional funding packages, and their total allocations for Maine, is included in this report as Appendix A.

Methods

This study was conducted in collaboration with the Maine Department of Education staff who oversee federal grant programs. All federal awards to school districts are tracked by the MDOE in a centralized grant management system. Each entry in the system contains a narrative description of the grant award and the total funding amount. MDOE staff searched through all of these descriptions for CARES and CRRSA grant awards, using a built-in keyword search feature, to identify districts that included activities to support student mental health, social-

emotional learning, behavioral health, or general well-being. This process generated a list of 42 distinct school districts that intended to use at least some portion of their federal Coronavirus relief funds on these activities. MEPRI research staff then analyzed and categorized the narrative descriptions to summarize the different approaches districts planned to take with their federal funds to support students.

As a small and exploratory study, this was not a comprehensive review of all of the various ways schools districts may have been taking action to support students' mental health. Several factors limited the scope. First, the information available in the grants management database is constantly changing as new applications are received from school districts, and as districts submit revised plans in light of changing priorities and new information. This summary is based on a snapshot of the descriptions existing in the system in October of 2021. The results would vary if a different snapshot date were chosen.

More importantly, this analysis was restricted to just two sources of federal funds: the CARES and CRRSA allocations. The American Rescue Plan had been enacted at the time the data snapshot was taken, but the application process was not complete. The analysis also was focused solely on relief funds and did not include information about how districts were using other funding sources – local, state, or federal – for similar purposes.

The specific dollar amounts that were allocated to each district for activities supporting student mental health were not available. The search feature in the grant management system only had the ability to identify the total awards for each district; the amount that was budgeted for these purposes was just a portion of the total, and it was not possible to discern the proportion from the information available.

Findings

The database search in October 2021 yielded a list of 16 districts planning to use CARES act funds and 30 districts using CRRSA funds for student mental health support. Four of the districts appeared in both lists, for a total of 42 distinct districts making use of early federal relief funds in these ways. Upon analysis, the proposed relief-funded activities were grouped into four distinct categories: additional staff to focus on student mental wellness; staff professional development; programs or curricula for student social-emotional learning; and physical health or wellness activities.

Additional staff hires

The most popular use of federal relief funds was in the category of additional staff support. There were 22 districts planning to either directly hire staff or to contract with providers to expand access for students. Some also proposed positions to provide better coordination between districts and providers, rather than only working directly with students. The types of providers included:

- Social workers
- Clinical counselors
- School psychologists
- Nurses
- Educational technicians and coordinators

Programs and curricula

Eight districts proposed adding new programs or purchasing curricula for social-emotional learning (SEL) with their relief funds. These included:

- Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs
- Materials to supplement SEL4ME (the MDOE's free online curriculum)
- Therapeutic adventure or sensory projects intended to improve emotional resilience
- Supplies and equipment for the above

Professional development

Three school districts intended to use relief funds to provide additional resources for their staff to learn new skills needed to adjust to the changing nature of schooling during the pandemic. For example, one district engaged teachers in learning about trauma-informed

practices to better support struggling students. These projects involved a mix of paying for training and purchasing technology or supplies to support communication.

Physical health / wellness activities

Lastly, two districts had plans to expand opportunities for physical education or exercise through purchasing equipment, with an acknowledgment that such activities also promote mental health – particularly when offered outdoors with the ability to experience the natural environment (and reduce Covid risk). One district purchased Nordic skiing gear for wintertime outdoor fitness, and the other planned to add different physical education activities with new equipment.

Conclusion

While an informative exploration into the variety of districts’ priorities for supporting students during the pandemic, this study would need follow-up to provide more actionable information to policymakers. As a next step, it would be valuable to get feedback from district leaders to learn whether they were able to implement their planned activities. Because there were staff and supply shortages as a result of the pandemic it is possible that some districts had to pivot to new ideas to make use of their federal relief funds. Understanding the barriers and challenges to implementation would be useful to inform future rounds of funding.

It would also provide a more complete picture of how districts are supporting student mental health if the scope were broadened to include all sources of funding (state, federal, and local as well as grants from non-public funders). The full picture might also include activities that are achieved without additional funding, but rather through an investment of time (for example, implementation of the free SEL4ME curriculum). To achieve such a breadth of information would require time-intensive direct data collection from districts, and thus need more resources. The use of administrative data in the current study was expedient for our more limited purposes.

Additionally, it would be important to learn districts’ perceptions of the effectiveness of their attempts to support student wellness. Once given enough time to be able to implement their

ideas and have students participate, did they see their desired impacts? What evidence do they have about the value of their investments?

Lastly it would be helpful to gain input from districts who have implemented the MDOE-developed SEL4ME curriculum (in full or in part). This program was developed through public funds and is free for all schools to use (public or private, Maine or out-of-state). If shown to be successful, additional measures should be taken to further encourage and promote more schools to implement. This would also create more opportunities for cross-district collaboration in professional development and expanding the curriculum if it were in widespread use.

Appendix A: Federal COVID-19 Relief Programs

(Summarized from Maine Department of Education informational materials that follow)

From:

https://www.maine.gov/doe/sites/maine.gov.doe/files/inline-files/Federal%20Emergency%20Relief%20Funds_v2_0.pdf

Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act

Purpose: Address the impact that COVID-19 has had, and continues to have, on elementary and secondary schools.

<u>Program</u>	<u>Total Maine Allocation</u>
● ESSER I	\$43.8M
● CRF	\$342.0M (ended 6/2021)
● GEER I	\$9.3M
● RREV grant	\$16.96M (3 year)
● Nutrition	\$27.7M

Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA)

Purpose: Prevent, prepare for, and respond to COVID-19 related to addressing learning loss, preparing schools for reopening, and testing, repairing, and upgrading projects to improve air quality in school buildings

<u>Program</u>	<u>Total Maine Allocation</u>
● ESSER II	\$143.8M
● GEER II	\$ 4.1M
● EANS	\$ 12.8M

American Rescue Plan (ARP)

Purpose: Safely reopen and sustain the safe operation of schools and address the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

<u>Program</u>	<u>Total Maine Allocation</u>
● ESSER III	\$411.3M
● EANS II	\$12.5M
● ARP-HCY	\$2.7M <i>Homeless Children & Youth</i>

Federal Emergency Relief

The purpose of this document is to provide high level information about funding established in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act, and the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act.

Federal Relief Aid Package	Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act enacted on March 27, 2020 Link to Bill	Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act enacted on December 27, 2020 Link to Bill	American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act enacted March 11, 2021 Link to Bill
Focus and Allowable Uses	Address the impact that COVID-19 has had, and continues to have, on elementary and secondary school	Prevent, prepare for, and respond to COVID-19 related to addressing learning loss, preparing schools for reopening, and testing, repairing, and upgrading projects to improve air quality in school buildings	Safely reopen and sustain the safe operation of schools and address the impact of the coronavirus pandemic
Allocations	<p><i>Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER)</i> \$43,793,319 Allocated to Maine Schools; click here for SAU allocations. ESSER allocations include equitable services for non-public schools</p> <p><i>Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF)</i> \$342,000,000 Allocated to Maine Schools; click here for SAU allocations. Includes separate allocations for day programming</p> <p><i>Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEER)</i></p>	<p><i>ESSER II</i> \$183,138,601 Allocated to Maine Public Schools; click here for SAU allocations</p> <p><i>GEER II</i> \$4,082,345 Continued focus on school safety and internet connectivity</p> <p><i>Emergency Assistance for Non-public Schools (EANS)</i> \$12,751,099 Allocated to approved Non-public Schools; click here for Non-public School allocations</p>	<p><i>ESSER III</i> \$411,303,282 Allocated to Maine Public Schools; click here for SAU allocations. Includes the minimum 20% LEA set-aside for Learning Recovery</p> <p><i>EANS II</i> \$12,527,260 Allocated to approved Non-public Schools; allocations are forthcoming</p> <p><i>American Rescue Plan – Homeless Children and Youth (ARP-HCY)</i> \$2,694,256 Providing HCY wrap-around services and assistance needed</p>

	<p>\$9,273,552 Focused on #ConnectKidsNow! and Wilderness Activities and Virtual Experiences for Students (WAVES)</p> <p><i>Rethinking Remote Education Venture (RREV)</i> \$16,958,613 Focused on educational stabilization and rethinking education models</p> <p><i>Child Nutrition CARES Grants to States</i> \$27,701,541 Federally funded meal program providing reimbursements to SAUs</p>		to attend and participate fully in school activities
Period of Allowability	<p>All period of allowability is 3/13/2020 - 9/30/2022 unless otherwise noted below.</p> <p>CRF: 3/1/2020 - 6/30/2021 RREV: 8/3/2020 - 7/30/2023</p>	3/13/2020 - 9/30/2023	3/13/2020 - 9/30/2023, unless extended by a 12 month Tydings Amendment.
FAQ	<p>CARES Act FAQ ESSER I & II FAQ</p>	US Department of Education ESSER	ESSER & GEER FAQ of May, 2021