

SMARTLAB® EBOOKS

# ESSER

## Funding Guide

INVEST IN YOUR STUDENTS' SUCCESS



A Guide to Utilizing ARP ESSER III to Increase  
Engagement and Address Learning Loss in K-12 Students

**smartlab**



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It's imperative that schools make use of funding like ARP ESSER III while it's available. ESSER III was designed to help schools reengage students, and keep them interested and motivated in class. Schools that have used their federal funding to implement project-based learning solutions have seen meaningful growth in student engagement and ability.

# Chapter 1: How to Utilize Funding to Find the Right Solution

## Invest in Students' Long-Term Success

It's imperative that schools make use of funding like ARP ESSER III while it's available. ESSER III was designed to help schools reengage students and accelerate their academic growth. Schools that have used their federal funding to implement project-based learning solutions have seen meaningful growth in student engagement and ability.

With a focus on student-led, project-based STEM engagements, SmartLab Learning delivers standards-aligned science and math programming while getting students excited about their schoolwork. Applying your ARP ESSER III funding to a sustainable, long-term solution like SmartLab Learning's solutions, can help your school address learning loss and other key issues by increasing student engagement—not just this year, but for years to come.

## What Can ESSER Funding Be Used For?

In March 2020, many administrators were left to improvise a plan for remote learning. This led to a decrease in student engagement and increased levels of learning loss as many students struggled to log in to their online classes or turn in their work. Per the terms of ARP ESSER III, a portion of a local education agency's (LEA) ESSER III Fund allocation needs to address the "academic impact of lost instructional time." Look for solutions that have evidence-based activities, curriculum, and/or technology that fulfills students' academic, social, and emotional needs.

With this guidance, schools should use their ARP ESSER III funding to address these immediate concerns:

- Implement student-led, project based learning engagements that mitigate learning loss while encouraging class attendance
- Update technology and modify spaces to support better 21st-century learning environments
- Include opportunities to apply core math and science skills through supplemental math and science curriculum
- Infuse learning engagements with collaborative activities that build critical "soft" skills

In addition to recommending extended school days, summer learning, or school-year programs, look for solutions that provide long-term returns on your investment of ARP ESSER III funds, such as:

- Supplemental classroom or after-school programs
- Educational technology, including hardware, software, and connectivity
- Solutions that address the unique needs of children from low-income families, children with disabilities, English learners, migrant students, and others

Tools to measure and address learning loss (e.g., assessments, school audits, faculty training)

All U.S. school districts are working to assess their available budgets and identify how to best use the federal stimulus money to invest in students' long-term success. SmartLab Learning's solutions can be purchased through many of the funding channels currently available to schools.



High quality project-based learning has been shown to have a positive effect on student engagement and learning. SmartLab Learning's unique approach to project-based learning engages students in hands-on, STEM-focused experiences that are supported by standards-aligned supplemental math and science curriculum.

# Chapter 2: Using Project-Based Learning to Engage Students

Missing assignments. Dwindling attendance. Disengaged students. This has been the experience for many teachers who switched to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Learning loss was rampant, and engagement was at an all-time low.

Now that students and teachers are back in classrooms, engagement is low, truancy is high, and the pressure to mitigate learning loss is immense. How do schools get students excited about learning again?

High quality project-based learning has been shown to have a positive effect on student engagement and learning. SmartLab Learning's unique approach to project-based learning engages students in hands-on, STEM-focused experiences that are supported by standards-aligned supplemental math and science

curriculum. With this solution, learners choose projects they care about, collaborate with their peers, and present their findings—all while applying core concepts to what they're doing.

This resource serves as a guide to help you maximize your school's ARP ESSER III stimulus funding, particularly when it comes to providing engaging, equitable STEM programming that supports math and science standards—two areas where students commonly experience learning loss. Funding is crucial to reigniting students' interest in school and improving their learning retention and academic performance,

*All guidance and recommendations included in this eBook are based on available information at the time of writing.*

## Project-Based Learning Experiences with a STEM Focus Will:



### Develop Career and College Ready Students

According to a 2021 Report by the U.S. Bureau of labor statistics, STEM occupations are growing twice as fast as all others in the U.S.

[U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)



### Implement Equity in Education

2 out of 3 U.S. women say they were not encouraged to pursue a career in STEM.

[Emerson](#)



### Increase Achievement and Reduce At-Risk Factors

11% increase in Science and 18% increase in Math test scores among lower socioeconomic students. 10% increase in English Language Arts (ELA) among English Language Learners (ELL).

[Lucas Foundation Research 2021](#)



### Build 21st Century Skills and Advance Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Create authentic experiences, increase student engagement and generate feelings of belonging within.

[Lucas Foundation Research 2021](#)



# Chapter 3: Engagement Is Critical to Student Success

## Engagement Improves Outcomes

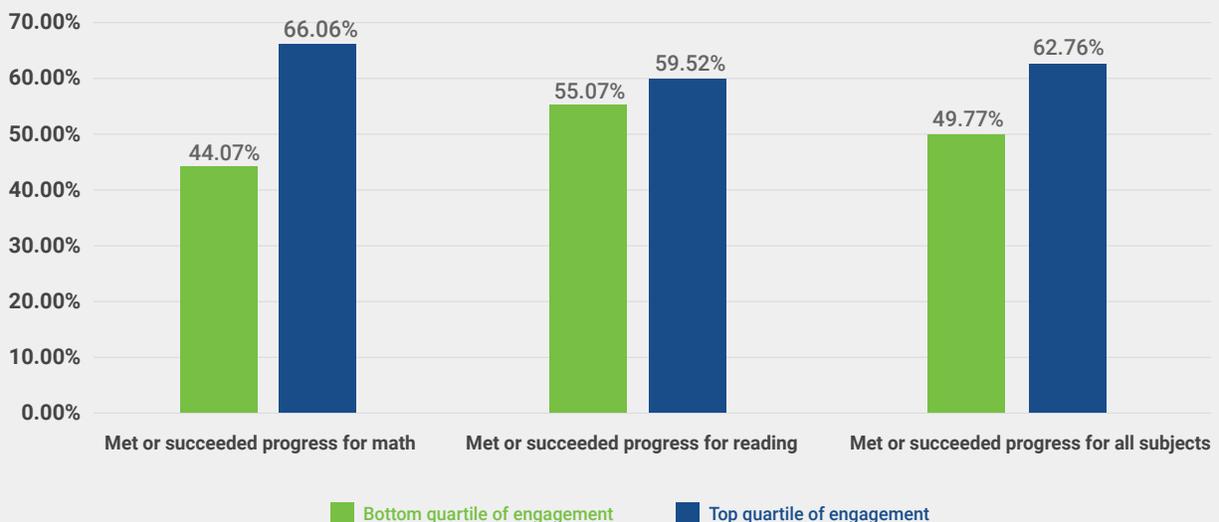
Research has demonstrated that engaging students in the learning process increases their attention and focus and motivates them to engage in higher-level critical thinking. Students who are actively engaged are more likely to view learning as a positive experience and retain important knowledge and skills.

One recent Gallup study including 128 schools and more than 110,000 students found that student engagement and hope were significantly positively related to student academic achievement in math, reading, and all subjects combined, along with postsecondary readiness in math and writing. The study found that schools in the top quartile of student engagement had significantly more students exceeding and meeting proficiency requirements than schools in the bottom quartile of engagement.

When students are engaged in the learning process, they are less likely to lose interest in what they are taught. Engaged students are also more likely to excel in standardized tests and less likely to drop out.

Schools with higher student engagement show significantly lower incidents of negative student behavior compared to schools with lower student engagement—including lower rates of suspension, expulsions, truancies, and dropouts (Figure 2: Gallup, 2019). By focusing on solutions that have proven to positively impact student engagement, administrators set their students—and themselves—up for success.

**Low vs. High Student Engagement and Academic Achievement**



## The Connection Between Strong PBL Programs and Engagement

As its name suggests, project-based learning involves student projects, but projects in PBL classrooms are much more complex and intentional than a simple book report or Powerpoint presentation. Projects in an authentic project-based learning classroom are formed around students' interests and intended to highlight or resolve real-world issues.

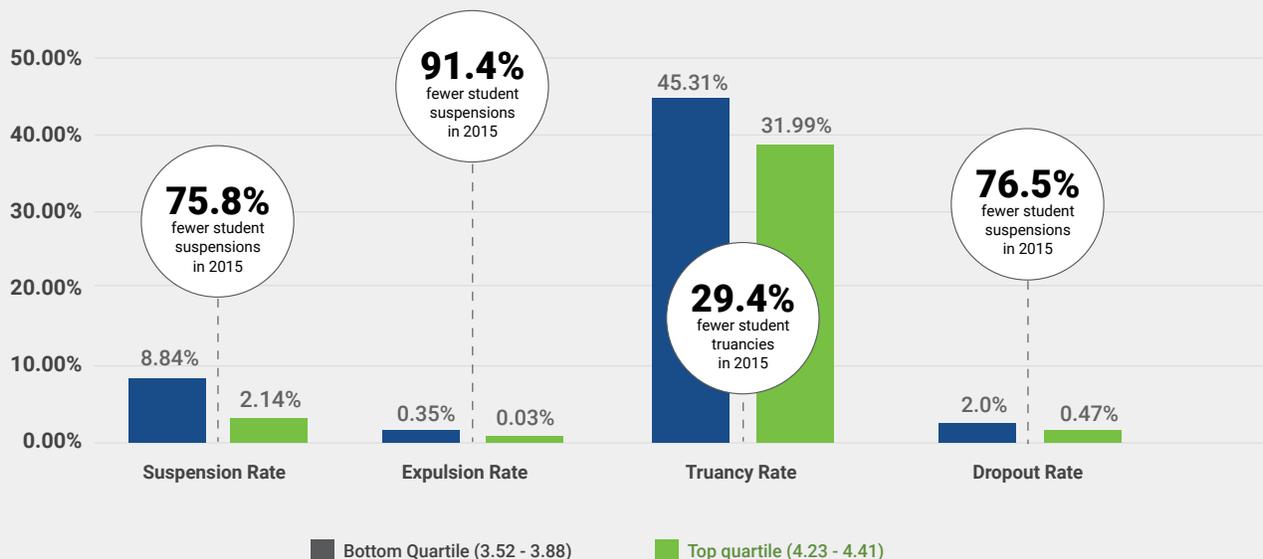
When implemented correctly, project-based learning fosters the agency and empowerment essential to cognitive engagement. Not only does PBL promote student engagement and capitalize on natural student curiosities, it also fosters the development of important cognitive skills, including critical thinking, planning, and reasoning.

Learners in PBL classrooms are also engaged in collaborative learning, which promotes the development of critical social skills, including empathy, communication, and cross-cultural understanding. This collaborative, authentic process correlates to higher student engagement and improved academic outcomes (Lucas Foundation, 2021).

In the SmartLab Learning environment, students get to explore their own interests at their own pace. As a result they stay on-task, use critical thinking, and achieve their personal and academic goals on a schedule that works for them.

Classrooms that support the PBL approach also foster learners who feel empowered, capable, and prepared to make a difference in the world. Yet another merit of project-based learning is that it lends itself to natural, authentic assessment.

### ENGAGEMENT QUARTILES AND CALIFORNIA STUDENT DISCIPLINE AND BEHAVIOR OUTCOMES AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL







Every SmartLab Learning Solution includes leading-edge, relevant technologies that help students both become literate in current technological tools and learn how to adapt to future technologies.

# Chapter 4: How SmartLab Learning Meets ESSER Criteria

## SmartLab Learning Alignment

SmartLab Learning programs are approved purchases under the ESEA Act.

SmartLab LearningHub provides equal opportunities to all students and is also designed to be accessible to students of any skill level or ability. In particular, students with special needs and ESL learners have excelled in SmartLab's hands-on, project-based learning framework.

SmartLab LearningHub provides supplemental digital resources students can access from home.

Every SmartLab Learning solution includes leading-edge, relevant technologies that help students not only become literate in current technological tools but also learn how to adapt to future technologies.

SmartLab Learning provides standards-aligned, supplemental curriculum that reinforces core math and science concepts.

Whether they're learning in remote or in-person settings, SmartLab learners engage with projects that are relevant and important to them. Students who are actively engaged with their learning tend to retain more core content and skills over time. SmartLab Learning also supports intervention efforts by providing accessibility tools and multiple modes of assessment.

## ESSER Acceptable Uses

- Any activity authorized by ESEA, IDEA, AEFLA, Perkins, or McKinney-Vento.
- Activities to address the unique needs of low-income children, children with disabilities, English learners, racial and ethnic minorities, students experiencing homelessness, and foster care youth, including outreach and service delivery.
- Planning for and coordinating during long-term closures, including technology for online learning, guidance for carrying out IDEA requirements, and providing educational services consistent with applicable requirements.
- Purchasing educational technology (including hardware, software, and connectivity).
- Planning and implementing summer learning and supplemental afterschool programs.
- Addressing learning loss.

# Chapter 5: SmartLab Learning: Engage Learners with Hands-on, Standards-Aligned Curriculum

**Every SmartLab Learning solution begins with student engagement.**

## **We do this by:**

- Providing a unique, student-led, project-based learning approach
- Designing technology-rich, 21st-century classroom environments
- Giving students opportunities to apply core math and science skills through our supplemental curriculum
- Infusing collaborative learning into every experience

When they're actively engaged in their learning, students infuse core concepts with meaning and connect them to real-world applications. Plus, since every SmartLab Learning solution is intentionally designed for self-directed, collaborative work, students take ownership of their learning.

This also helps students build communication and problem-solving skills and nurtures their social-emotional development—critical after a period when much learning happened in physical isolation.

While they can, administrators should leverage their ARP ESSER III funding to address the academic and social-emotional impacts of extended remote learning on students.

**Students who followed a project-based learning curriculum like SmartLab Learning experienced a 63% gain in social studies learning, equal to five or six months of increased learning. Altogether, this approach led to a 23% gain in informational reading—an additional two months of learning for the year (Duke et al, 2020).**

# Four priorities for planning your ARP ESSER III Funding allocation:



## Build Real-World Connections Into Student Learning.

Students often ask their teachers, “But when will I use this?” With SmartLab Learning’s project-based framework, students apply the concepts they’re learning in core classes to help them solve real-world problems.



## Introduce Programming that Allows for Student-Led Learning.

When students direct their own learning, they become increasingly able to apply creativity and problem solving at school and in their future careers (Feehan, 1999). SmartLab Learning’s open-ended engagements leave room for students to learn at their own pace while providing opportunities for them to self-reflect and assess their progress along the way. Perhaps best of all, SmartLab Learning’s remote and hybrid solutions can keep students engaged and able to direct themselves no matter where (or when) they’re learning.



## Use Technology to Motivate and Inspire.

From robots to weather mapping to 3D design, incorporating current and innovative technology into classroom learning is an excellent way to capture and keep students’ attention. In a technology-rich environment like the SmartLab HQ, social interactions among students and between students and teachers become more fluid as users learn, demonstrate, and teach each other how to use new tools. Students make deeper connections to subject matter when they can touch, experiment, and share relevant new technologies (Hannafin, 1997).



## Emphasize Project-Based Learning.

At SmartLab Learning, we develop open-ended, project-based learning experiences that engage students at all grade levels in STEM. Our standards-aligned math and science curriculum empowers students to integrate their own ideas and creativity while providing them with opportunities to showcase authentic evidence of learning.



# Ignite students' love of learning today with our comprehensive solutions:

**smartlab**<sup>®</sup>  
HQ

Our flagship learning program with fully stocked environments for K-12.

**smartlab**<sup>®</sup>  
STUDIO

Robust video production and broadcasting systems that rival the pros.

**smartlab**<sup>®</sup>  
LEARNINGHUB

Our new integrated digital platform with STEAM focused and standards-aligned project starters that support the skills students need to problem solve, think critically, and build deep learning in a personalized way.

## We infuse each solution with our five guiding principles for learning:



### ENGAGED

**Why:** Engaged students are more focused in class, have fewer disciplinary issues, build stronger critical-thinking skills, and authentically connect to their learning.

**How:** We engage your students in hands-on, project-based learning experiences that support and reinforce academic content—specifically STEM topics.



### EMPOWERED

**Why:** Empowered learners become empowered adults who are equipped with the next-gen skills required for post-secondary success.

**How:** We empower your students to own their learning and approach challenges with creativity. This helps them develop the confidence needed to thrive in a rapidly evolving world.



### EXPERIENTIAL

**Why:** When learners use age-appropriate, pre- and professional tools in real-world settings, they're more prepared for college and career.

**How:** Through experiential learning, your students connect real-world problem-solving to core academic content, which helps them make more informed decisions in the future.



### PERSONALIZED

**Why:** When learners have voice and choice to determine which projects they want to pursue, they are more intrinsically motivated.

**How:** With open-ended engagements, educators and facilitators collaborate on projects that support their students' achievement, while ensuring learners can pursue projects they're passionate about.



### COLLABORATIVE

**Why:** Collaborative learning helps students develop higher-level thinking, verbal communication, self-management, and leadership skills, which prepares them for post-secondary success.

**How:** We purposely build collaboration into our learning spaces. Through collaborative work, learners use critical thinking to make meaning of facts, develop communication skills as they present their learning, and creatively solve problems.

# ESSER Funding & SmartLab: Frequently Asked Questions

## How will a SmartLab Learning solution help my students?

SmartLab Learning engages learners with open-ended, project-based experiences in which they choose to solve problems that are important to them. Increasing both student and teacher engagement can dramatically impact learning outcomes, since engaged teachers have more engaged learners (Fullan, 2013). Engaged learners also have fewer truancy issues and higher graduation rates (Trowler, 2010). Students in a SmartLab:

- Select and lead their own project-based activities with teacher support
- Thrive in technology-rich spaces
- Apply core math and science skills to problems with real-world connections
- Build autonomy, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills

## How does SmartLab Learning support educators?

SmartLab facilitators have around-the-clock access to instructional resources, technical support, and ongoing education and workshops. Instructional training is part of our standard implementation process, so every educator is prepared to facilitate SmartLab Learning from day one.

## Do SmartLab Learning solutions come with curriculum to engage students?

Yes. Every SmartLab experience starts with student engagement. We design our standards-aligned curriculum to help students connect core concepts to real-world problems in ways that spark their personal interests. As learners challenge themselves to work in teams or tackle new and exciting topics, they also build communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. Our online, integrated LearningHub platform facilitates both in-classroom and remote learning through self-directed, hands-on activities, so students are engaged in their learning no matter where they are.

## Do SmartLab programs qualify under ARP ESSER III funds?

Yes. Since a minimum of 20% of an LEA's allocation must address learning loss, any program that implements evidence-based activities to fulfill students' academic, social, and emotional needs qualify for this funding. SmartLab Learning is designed by experienced educators and grounded in effective pedagogy. Our approach to project-based learning meets students' academic needs and fits hand-in-hand with social-emotional programs.

## Where should I spend my school's ARP ESSER III allotment?

In addition to materials and supplies that ensure the health and safety of students and staff, the Department of Education recommends spending funds on solutions that will mitigate learning loss. Instead of “quick-fix” solutions, the best use of these funds is on long-term, sustainable programming that can serve and engage both current and future students, particularly in STEM subjects.

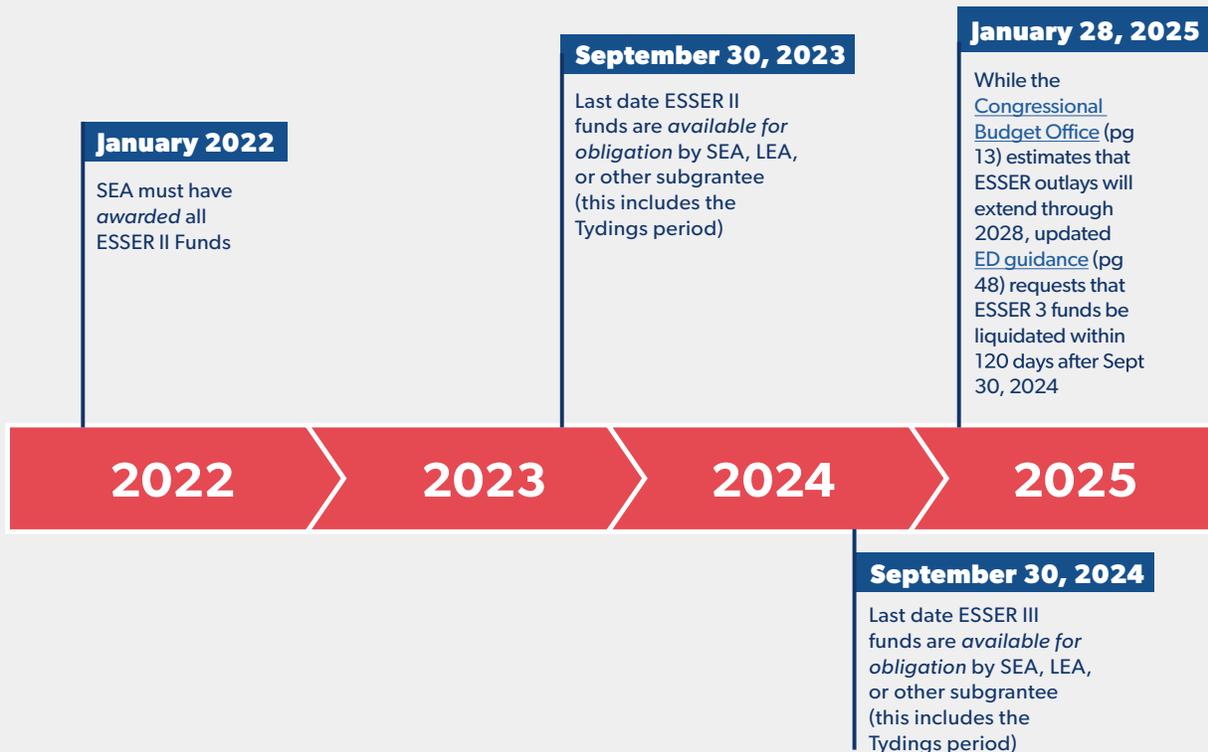
## How can I access my ESSER funds?

A. School districts (LEAs) must apply to their relevant SEA. Every SEA must use at least 90% of its ESSER Fund grant to make subgrants to LEAs based on how much the LEAs receive through Title IA or No Child Left Behind Act.

## How much flexibility do I have with my funding?

LEAs have considerable flexibility in determining how best to use ESSER funds. The U.S. Department of Education encourages LEAs to target activities that will reduce learning loss and support remote learning for all students (especially those who are disadvantaged or at risk of dropping out), and their teachers. LEAs may also use ESSER funds for personal protective equipment (PPE), cleaning and sanitizing materials, and similar health and safety supplies.

### Timeline of the Elementary and Secondary School Relief Funds (ESSER)



# Appendix

## What Is ARP ESSER III? Key School Funding Acronyms

**CARES Act:** The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Stimulus Act is a \$2.2 trillion economic stimulus bill passed and signed into law on March 27, 2020, to address the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic.

**ESSER Fund:** The CARES Act established the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, which distributed an initial \$13.2 billion in school funding in March 2020 and has since disbursed two more rounds of funding to schools.

**CRRSA Act:** The Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, signed into law in December 2020, provided an additional \$54.3 billion in an ESSER II Fund.

**ARP Act:** The American Rescue Plan was signed into law in March 2021. It includes the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER III) Fund, which allocates \$126 billion to K–12 schools.

The ESSER Fund is meant for state educational agencies (SEAs) and local educational agencies (LEAs) to help schools:

- Return safely to in-person instruction
- Maximize in-person instructional time
- Sustain the safe operation of schools
- Address the academic, social, emotional, and mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students

## Terms of the ARP ESSER III Fund

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, each state receives funds according to the amount they currently receive under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Title IA, or No Child Left Behind Act.

The terms of the ARP ESSER III Fund, effective April 22, 2021, are as follows:

- SEAs must distribute at least 90% of funds to LEAs.
- SEAs are required to reserve 5% of their allocations to address learning loss, 1% for afterschool activities, and 1% for summer learning programs.
- LEAs must reserve at least 20% of the funding they receive to address learning loss.
- Two-thirds of funds are immediately available to states, while remaining funds will be made available after states submit ARP ESSER III implementation plans.
- States have the option to reserve 10% of the allocation for emergency needs related to the COVID-19 pandemic, as determined by the state (called the SEA Reserve).
- SEAs must award funds to LEAs within 60 days of receipt.
- Funds must be utilized for all intended purposes by LEAs by September 30, 2024.

## Qualifications for ARP ESSER III Funding

For states to take advantage of ESSER funding, they must adhere to the following terms:

- Only SEAs in the 50 United States, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia may apply.
- Eligible recipients include LEAs (those that oversee public, private, and charter schools), organizations that serve students and families, and any entity that receives a subgrant or contract consistent with applicable state and federal subgrant and procurement standards.
- To receive funds, LEAs must submit an implementation plan and make it available for public comment.
- Funds are only available by direct application to the U.S. Department of Education.
- Recipients must intend to spend funding on any of the allowable activities stipulated in any of the coronavirus relief bills approved by Congress.

## ESSER / ARP Resources & Links

[The Office of Elementary & Secondary Education ARP](#)

[ARP State Allocation Table](#)

[ARP State Strategic Plan Template + State-by-State Application Information](#)

[ARP Resource for Non-Public Schools](#)

*\*The Bureau of Indian Education and the Outlying Areas are not eligible to receive ESSER funds. Congress provides funds to these entities as part of a comprehensive Education Stabilization Fund.*

## How to Secure ARP ESSER III Funding for Your School or District

Every Local Education Agency (LEA) seeking to receive ESSER III funding must apply to their State Education Agency (SEA). Schools and LEAs should monitor their SEA's website for the latest updates and information on applications.

Since each state handles its own ESSER application process, follow these steps to start yours:

1. Visit your state government's website to access ARP ESSER III applications and list of required documents.
2. Ask your SEA to download and print the application.
3. Collect the required documents to provide to your SEA, including your implementation plan.
4. There is no deadline to submit your application; SEAs must award all ESSER funding by September 30, 2022.
5. LEAs/schools must spend their funds within one year of receipt, and before September 30, 2024. The Department of Education will monitor and has the right to audit spending.

ARP ESSER III funding is meant to help schools get back to their primary mission: To engage students in their learning and prepare them to build bright futures. SmartLab Learning is here to help.

[\*\*LEARN MORE ABOUT SMARTLAB\*\*](#)



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Contact us today to learn about ESSER and other funding opportunities.  
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