

Child Nutrition Policy Review

The Learning Accelerator (TLA) reviewed federal, Massachusetts Commonwealth, and district ESSER and ARP guidelines to examine the availability of funding for child nutrition programs for the 2023-24 school year. Each section highlights the source, synopsis, and final determination as it relates to addressing the TEC Connection Academy (TECCA)'s need to provide nutritional services.

Source: [Leveraging COVID Relief Funds to Mitigate the Impact of Child Nutrition Waiver Expirations](#) (Federal)

Synopsis: The nationwide child nutrition waivers set forth by Congress in response to the pandemic have expired, translating to a potential loss of 95 million free meals served in Summer 2022. The expiration of waivers impacted schools by causing them to use general funds to provide school nutrition services to students. The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) III Fund has additional restrictions when compared to the ESSER I and ESSER II counterparts. However, there are opportunities for Commonwealth officials to ensure summer and after-school programs funded through ESSER can be leveraged by the federal child nutrition programs.

Findings:

ESSER III funds could support school nutrition programs and operators that service **summer and after-school enrichment programs** during Summer 2022 and the 2022-23 school year. Funds can be leveraged using the following options if federal child nutrition programs are *not* available or are insufficient in covering expenses:

- Increase staff capacity by hiring staff or covering additional labor costs associated with serving meals.
- Provide “premium pay” or other additional compensation for school nutrition staff.
- Support pandemic-related expenses, including school meal equipment, supplies, or packaging, transportation, and PPE, cleaning, and sanitizing materials – or other emergency supplies.
- Maximize enrichment programs through state involvement by providing meals using ESSER funding.
- Offer supplemental funding for nutrition in recognition of high food costs that may exceed federal meal reimbursements.
- Purchase equipment or supplies necessary to produce, package, transport, or distribute meals.
- Provide transportation support to help kids and families access summer meals sites.
- Offset high fuel costs, especially for mobile meals operations during the summer. In keeping with the goals for ESSER and GEER, this would be most relevant for routes that offer activities or deliver books or other enrichment materials along with meals.
- Offer take-home or delivered meals to students who miss summer enrichment programs or school due to quarantines, classroom closures, or illness, as well as students taking part in virtual education or enrichment.

- Support adoption of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) at schools that are eligible (individually or via grouping with other schools in the LEA) but not able to receive federal reimbursement at the highest rate. This will allow more schools to continue serving both breakfast and lunch at no charge to students, which research shows has both academic and health/nutritional benefits for students.
- Cover the reduced-price copay or offset unpaid meal debt. This will directly support families experiencing financial hardship who may not qualify for free meals or who may not have an application updated before the first day of school. This will also prevent the school nutrition department from needing additional sources of funds to cover losses.

Final Determination: ESSER III funds were available for child nutrition services during the **summer of 2022 and the 2022-23 school years.** This funding source is not relevant to TECCA's current needs.

Source: [Massachusetts ESSER III Plan](#)

Findings:

The following needs were prioritized for MA DESE during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years:

- Vanguard for Health and Safety: Improved communications between districts and schools, COVID-19 testing, expanded health and safety support.
- Focus on academics and equity: Refined IEP templates, [mass literacy guide](#) launch, deeper learning professional development through [Kaleidoscope Collective for Learning](#), and the development of an [acceleration roadmap](#).
- Increased in-person instruction to support students' learning and mental health with a focus on fostering a sense of belonging and partnership, unfinished learning, and keeping students and educators healthy and safe, with focus on lost instructional time and re-engagement, ongoing STEM career development, Kaleidoscope Learning, and wraparound supports to address behavioral challenges.
- Understanding the impact of COVID-19 discern impacts on student learning.
- School operating status: Investment in an improved student information management system to collect data to understand the number of hours students spend learning synchronously and asynchronously in the remote setting, as well as in-person, and figures on enrollment and attendance.

For child nutrition, USDA funds were used to assure continuous, safe meal service throughout the pandemic, including emergency operational costs and targeted reimbursements for local administrative fees associated with P-EBT. Additionally, funds were received from the Coronavirus Relief Fund to support related school meal costs, including a grant for food security-related infrastructure improvements. The following methods can be used to stay abreast of child nutrition guidance and

decision making:

- Monthly newsletters from the DESE Child Nutrition Office to provide additional follow up guidance to support districts with decision-making.
- Continued written guidance from DESE for each new USDA funding stream with detailed, step-by-step instructions.

Final Determination: USDA funds were used for safe meal service during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years. This funding source is not relevant to TECCA's current needs.

Source: [MA District ESSER III Plans](#). (Each district was required to consult with local stakeholders to create a plan for how it would use ESSER III funds and then post the plan to its public website in 2021.)

Synopsis: USDA child nutrition funds were provided throughout the pandemic to assure continuous, safe meal service. In addition to the standard, annual grant funding for school meals, the USDA has also provided new COVID-19 grants authorized through numerous stimulus bills. **New USDA funding this past year included funds for child nutrition emergency operational costs and targeted reimbursements for local administrative fees associated with P-EBT. Additionally, districts received funds from the Coronavirus Relief Fund (CvRF) to support COVID-19-related school meal costs, including a grant opportunity for food security-related infrastructure improvements.** The DESE Child Nutrition, School Finance, and Federal Grants Offices have worked side by side to ensure consistent messaging and coordination at the Commonwealth level. In support of districts, DESE has held numerous virtual webinars and town halls with school business officials and school nutrition directors around child nutrition funding and – importantly – how they relate to other federal grant funds (either from USED or FEMA). Monthly newsletters from the DESE Child Nutrition Office also provide additional follow-up guidance to help support districts in their decision-making. Lastly, as necessary, detailed DESE written guidance has and will continue to be disseminated for each new USDA funding stream to explain the funding, in full detail with step-by-step instructions as well as a question-and-answer resource. Each guidance document has been followed up with a virtual town hall to answer questions.

Final Determination: USDA funds were used for child nutrition services during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years. This funding source is not relevant to TECCA's current needs.

Source: [American Rescue Plan \(ARP\) with Disabilities Education \(IDEA\) Early Childhood Grant Program](#)

Synopsis: The American Rescue Plan Act was signed into law on March 11, 2021, dedicating supplemental funding in section 2014(a) to serve students with disabilities. These funds are provided to help districts recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and to safely reopen schools and sustain safe operations. The purpose of this federal special education entitlement grant program is to provide funds to ensure that eligible three-, four-, and five-year-old children with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education that includes special education and related services designed to meet their individual needs in the least restrictive environment (LRE). LEAs are required to ensure that children, aged three through five, who require special education and related services, receive these services through free and appropriate public education (FAPE), in accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ([IDEA4](#)) as well as Massachusetts Special Education laws ([M.G.L. c. 71B](#)) and regulations ([603 CMR 28.00](#)).

LEA Use of ARP ESSER Funds: Of the total amount allocated to an LEA from the Commonwealth's ARP ESSER award, the LEA must reserve at least 20% of funds to address learning loss through the implementation of evidence-based interventions and ensure that those interventions respond to students' social, emotional, and academic needs and address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on underrepresented student subgroups (each major racial and ethnic group, children from families receiving low income, children with disabilities, students learning English, students with gender identities that typically encounter barriers, migrant students, students experiencing homelessness, and children and youth in foster care).

Remaining LEA funds may be used for a wide range of activities to address needs arising from the pandemic, including any activity authorized by the ESEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA), or Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 (Perkins CTE).

Specifically, ARP ESSER funds may be used to develop strategies and implement public health protocols including – to the greatest extent practicable – policies in line with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on reopening and operating schools to effectively maintain the health and safety of students, educators, and other staff, as well as:

- Coordinating preparedness and response efforts with Commonwealth, local, tribal, and territorial public health departments to prevent, prepare for, and respond to COVID-19;
- Training and professional development on sanitizing and minimizing the spread of infectious diseases;
- Purchasing supplies to sanitize and clean LEA facilities;
- Repairing and improving school facilities to reduce risk of virus transmission and exposure to environmental health hazards;
- Improving indoor air quality;
- Addressing the needs of children from families receiving low income, children with disabilities, students learning English, racial and ethnic minorities, students experiencing homelessness, and youth in foster care;
- Developing and implementing procedures and systems to improve the preparedness and response efforts of LEAs;

- Planning for or implementing activities during long-term closures, including providing meals to eligible students and providing technology for online learning;
- Purchasing educational technology (including hardware, software, connectivity, assistive technology, and adaptive equipment) for students that aids in regular and substantive educational interaction between students and their classroom instructors, including students from families receiving low income and children with disabilities;
- Providing mental health services and supports, including through the implementation of evidence-based, full-service community schools and the hiring of counselors;
- Planning and implementing activities related to summer learning and supplemental after-school programs;
- Addressing learning loss; and
- Other activities that are necessary to maintain operation and continuity of and services, including continuing to employ existing or hiring new LEA and school staff.

Final Determination: Funding allocations under this source provide meals that can be allocated for implementing activities during long-term closures. This funding source is not relevant to TECCA's current needs.