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CARES Act Funding for Special Education—What You Need to Know

Several new federal funding streams have been linked together through the CARES Act earmarking billions of dollars for K-12 education as a result of the coronavirus. The primary fund for K-12 is called the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER). This fund has distributed \$13.5 billion to state education agencies (SEAs). Another \$3 billion was given to the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEER) to allocate emergency block grants to school districts and higher education institutions struggling to support students during COVID-19.

To [access ESSER funds](#), school districts must apply to their SEA. Awards are made according to current Title I, Part A formulas. The CARES Act requires that SEAs distribute awards to districts within one year of receiving their state allocation. Districts must commit or spend the funds by September 2022.

The GEER funds will also be allocated by formulas. The Department of Education is advising that these funds be used to [change education models](#).

Remote Learning Challenge for Special Education Students

[New research](#) from The School Superintendents' Association (AASA) reveals that during the last three months of this school year, 78% of districts found it difficult to provide special education instruction and related services during the school shutdown.

Although districts would prefer to have students return to campus in the fall, that is still uncertain. Consequently, most districts are planning for three scenarios: a continuation of remote learning, students fully back on campus, and a hybrid model. This unpredictability emphasizes the importance of choosing the right programs to advance learning in each district.

Special Education— Allowable Uses for ESSER Funding

For special education programs, allowable uses for CARES Act funding include any activity authorized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that prevents, prepares for, or responds to the coronavirus and the unique needs of children with disabilities. Additional technology can help districts serve these students. As a result, [this stimulus funding](#) may be used to provide technology for online learning and activities for all students, including special education students. Approved technology includes hardware, software, and connectivity. The funds can also be used for summer learning and supplemental afterschool programs. The sudden shift to remote learning has created stress and anxiety for students, so the stimulus money can also be applied to additional support services.

In a one-time policy change, schools may request a waiver to [carry over remaining Title I](#) funds into next school year. Also, schools

and districts may bundle carryover funds with new stimulus money to invest in special education academic programs, technology, and services. It might be necessary to provide additional support for special education students to overcome skill regression during their absence from campus.

Special Education Programs Aligned with Stimulus Objectives

Even if students return to campus this fall, remote learning may still be part of the course delivery mix. The ESSER funds can be used for technology infrastructure, devices, and connectivity for all students, including assistive technology for special education students. Instructional solutions for math, reading, and other subject areas that deliver differentiated instruction are also eligible. In addition, programs that help students develop self-management, transition, and independent life skills are also appropriate investments. Best-in-class products provide teachers and administrators with data that informs instruction and maintains compliance with fidelity.

Examples of suitable programs include n2y's research-proven, cloud-based [Total Solution](#), comprised of multiple programs to support the whole student:

- [Unique Learning System](#), a standards-aligned and evidence-based solution developed and differentiated specifically to help unique learners access the general education curriculum, through state extended standards, from any setting.
- [Positivity](#), an integrated, proactive behavior management and tracking solution that empowers students to self-regulate.
- [News-2-You](#), a weekly, differentiated current events newspaper that strengthens reading, writing, communication, and media literacy.
- [L³ Skills](#), accessible educational games for high-interest skills practice and independent learning.
- [SymbolStix PRIME](#), a symbol-based communication tool that supports both academic and non-cognitive skills.
- [Professional Development](#), optimizing each solution with best-in-class training and support from in-person courses to self-paced online professional development.

In summary, both ESSER and GEER funds from the CARES Act may be used to support special education students through new curriculum and life skills programs; technology to support remote learning; and any program that creates a new instruction model for special education. Additionally, for this year only, districts may carry over leftover Title I, Part A funds, which can be used alone or combined with CARES Act funding to make a larger investment in supporting special education students and teachers for the 2020–2021 school year.

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