



Maximizing ESSER Funds in the American Rescue Plan Act to Prioritize Social Emotional Learning



Summary: Educators have far exceeded all expectations during the most challenging school year in history. There is clear consensus that as we prepare for recovery and full re-opening of our schools, our collective mental health is a top priority. Both students and teachers need social emotional support and a 'toolkit' of skills to draw upon. The neuroscience of learning confirms that before we can focus on academics, we need to address the trauma that we have collectively experienced. The Social Express is proud to partner with K12 schools to assist with the formation of plans required for implementing the 2021 American Rescue Plan (ESSER). In addition to cloud based interactive social emotional learning (SEL) for all students, we provide impactful professional development on SEL and restorative practices for educators. This curriculum is aligned with approved SEL standards from CASEL, which has been validated to maximize academic gains.¹ **This paper clarifies what funding is available and provides strategies to meet the rigors of the 2021 ESSER funding to maximize essential social emotional wellness and mental health outcomes for students and teachers.**

Share this document with your district grant writer.

¹ Belfield, C., Bowden, B., Klapp, A., Levin, H., Shand, R., & Zander, S. (2015). The economic value of social and emotional learning. New York: Center for Benefit-Cost Studies in Education.

What Funds are available to K12 Schools under the American Rescue Plan Act 2021?

On March 11, 2021, President Biden signed the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan, with another round of COVID-19 relief funding for education.

The new law includes:

- \$123 billion for K-12 state education agencies, including \$800 million for children experiencing homelessness (**AKA Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds or ESSER**)
- \$40 billion for colleges and universities
- \$2.75 billion to governors for use by private schools
- \$3 billion to support the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
- \$7.2 billion is also provided to the E-rate program for home internet access and devices

At least 20% of district funds must be used to address learning loss through evidence-based interventions that support students' academic and social and emotional learning (SEL) needs. The remaining dollars can be spent on any allowable use under the following:

- Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
- Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act
- Adult Education and Family Literacy Act

Districts can also use the funding to work with local health departments and for activities to address the needs of: students from low-income families, children with disabilities, English language learners, racial and ethnic minorities, students experiencing homelessness, and youth in foster care. Additionally, American Rescue Plan funds can be used to:

- purchase educational technology, including hardware, software, and assistive learning devices.
- support summer learning and supplemental after-school programs.
- provide mental health services.
- update school facilities to reduce risk of virus transmission.
- develop and implement school health and safety protocols based on guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- maintain the operation and continuity of services by employing existing staff.

The new law includes a mandate for schools to be transparent about reopening. Within 30 days of receiving their allocations, school districts must publish plans for reopening schools for in-person learning.

This new funding from the American Rescue Plan is in addition to \$82 billion for the Education Stabilization Fund and \$30.75 billion allocated in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act. This additional funding will significantly help schools reopen in person, but they are also going to need support and services from the education industry to ensure that all students are on track to achieve their highest potential.

[Full text of the bill - H.R. 1319 - American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 can be found here.](#)

WHO is Brighten Learning?

Brighten Learning is the publisher of a suite of evidence-based interventions for essential life skills including:

- **The Social Express** features 81 animated/interactive lessons which follow a curriculum addressing core social and emotional skills needed for success in life. Data driven, the program can be used in both Gen-Ed as a Social-Emotional Curriculum and Special Ed for students working on specific goals around Social-Emotional Learning. The program is data driven and can be used at school or for remote learning. *Recommended Grades for General Education: PreK-3rd & Special Education: K-12th*
- **Cool School** is an animated/interactive curriculum for elementary schools. Used as a classroom lesson, the program specifically addresses relevant topics around bullying, and what to do as a bystander, or a victim. A unique feature is an incident reporting tool which allows students to report bullying anonymously to their teacher. Schools now have a way to capture important data and manage situations timely and effectively. *Recommended General Education Grades: K-6th & Special Education: 4th-12th.*
- **Teen Career Path** is the first of its kind, an animated/interactive Career Exploration video game experience funded by The National Science Foundation. Using game-based learning students explore a day in the life of over 20 careers covering 16 job sectors. Schools now have a way of scaling job exploration for their students. *Recommended Grades: General Education 6th Grade & Special Education: 9th-12th for diploma bound students.*

ESSER Approved Expenditures	HOW our solutions meet the rigorous demands of the 2021 Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER)?
<p>Evidence-based intervention to address learning loss in academic and social emotional needs.</p>	<p><i>The Social Express</i> focuses on accelerating recovery in regard to social emotional wellbeing and skill development.</p> <p><i>The Social Express</i> curricula provides students with evidence-based interactive instruction, featuring 81 animated/interactive lessons that addresses core social and emotional skills needed for success in life. The program has been used with success since 2011 in both special education settings with students who require direct support, and in general education classrooms as group lessons for character education.</p> <p>This targeted intervention includes lesson plans to help educators address specific social skills.. The program also provides pre/post assessments, reproducibles, and reporting features that measure both engagement and progress. These reporting features provide valuable feedback relating to individualized student progress in the various target social skills.</p> <p><i>The Social Express</i> is aligned with Universal Design of Learning (UDL) and provides multiple means of representation, multiple means of expression, and multiple means of engagement. The curriculum is also aligned with standards as researched and published by The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), ensuring the rigor of research based best practices.</p>

ESSER Approved Expenditures	HOW <i>The Social Express</i> meets the rigorous demands of the 2021 Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER)?
<p>Evidence-based intervention to address learning loss in academic and social emotional needs. (cont'd)</p>	<p>Research has validated the outcomes of CASEL standards. SEL interventions that address CASEL’s five core competencies increased students’ academic performance by 11 percentile points, compared to students who did not participate in such SEL programs. Students participating in SEL programs also showed improved classroom behavior, increased ability to manage stress and depression, and better attitudes about themselves, others, and school.²</p> <p>Finally, the program is just plain FUN and ENGAGING! Students find the clever simulations and high quality graphics and audio to be a warm trusting environment to play and learn. They are presented with a variety of scenarios that they navigate through, with personalized feedback along the path. Educators can assign “webisodes’ (lessons) for work during in class instruction or distance learning (either asynchronous or synchronous learning.) Parents attest that students readily engage with instructional programs from <i>The Social Express</i> while involved with remote learning instructional models.</p>
<p>Curriculum and/or services which are already sanctioned by Individuals with Disabilities Education ACT (IDEA)</p>	<p>Both <i>The Social Express</i> and Cool School support SEL goals in Individual Education Plans (IEP) and 504 plans, using a teacher friendly student management system called “Central Station.” The system allows teachers and professionals to manage individual student and group use of the program, track usage and progress, run reports, and even export data for IEP reporting compliance. Activities in <i>The Social Express</i> adhere to CASEL standards and Common Core State Standards. The curriculum has been effectively used as an essential component to a Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS)instructional model.</p> <p>The instructional model of <i>The Social Express</i> is built on engaging use of high quality interactive animations and video modeling. Video modeling is a form of observational and visual learning in which a targeted behavior or skill is exhibited through a video demonstration in the hope that the behavior or skill will then be imitated and implemented in a person’s “real” life (National Professional Development Center³). Animations help students simulate and visualize concepts that are too intricate and nuanced to be described in a more traditional teaching approach.</p> <p>A 2011 study by Durlak⁴ et al found that teachers, who employed video modeling in a supplementary way in their classrooms, improved student achievement by an average of 11 percentage points and influenced their students to engage in more prosocial behaviors – such as kindness, sharing, and empathy.</p> <p>Additionally, professional development from <i>The Social Express</i> goes well beyond product training. A two-hour Professional Development session on Trauma Informed Practices provides baseline information on the neuroscience of learning in an unstable and trauma</p>

² Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D. & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students’ social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1): 405–432.

³ National Professional Development Center (NPDC) on Evidence Based Practices: <https://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/node/19>

⁴ Durlak, 405.

ESSER Approved Expenditures	HOW <i>The Social Express</i> meets the rigorous demands of the 2021 Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER)?
<p>Curriculum and/or services which are already sanctioned by Individuals with Disabilities Education ACT (IDEA) (cont'd)</p>	<p>infused environment. Participants learn about how trauma affects the brain, emotional responses resulting from trauma, and practical strategies for addressing trauma and supporting students in developing their learning brain. PD session to include follow-up meeting to discuss effectiveness of strategies and implementation of trauma-informed practices.</p> <p>Further professional development is available for educators who want to build their skills set and credentials via a 15-hour credit bearing course, delivered over 4 sessions. Facilitating Opportunities for Community Understanding of Social Emotional Well-being is designed to inform, teach, and share effective strategies as they relate to Trauma-Informed Practices, Restorative Practices, and Social Emotional Learning. The goals are to give participants sensible, relevant, useful tools to build on foundational knowledge and expand daily practices and youth support through these lenses and practical strategies.</p>
<p>Curriculum and/or services which are already sanctioned by Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESSA)</p>	<p>Incorporating cognitive behavioral research and evidence-based social learning practices, the lessons in <i>The Social Express</i> and <i>Cool School</i> use “Hollywood quality” animation to model the social skills integral to relationship building as well as career and life success. Over 100 animated webisodes target core SEL skills at multi-tiered user levels. Users interact with the scenes by making choices that have a positive or negative impact. This demonstrates consequences and provides them with effective tools to model on their own.</p> <p>Students interact with clever simulations that address:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Self-Management ● Attentive Listening ● Conflict Resolution ● Conversation ● Critical Thinking ● Group Participation ● Non-Verbal Communication ● Relationship & Self Management ● Emotional-Cyber-Physical-Emotional Bullying <p>In addition to the cloud based interactive activities, extensive curricular materials and offline lessons are included so that educators can use them for whole class instruction. Teachers can choose to assign lessons by Grade Level -Pre-K-3rd Grade + (Tier 1&2 students) or by Skill Level (Tier 3 students). Progress data is tracked throughout the student engagement, and there are even easy to use offline Multiple Choice Quizzes. Cool School incorporates an incident tracker, which can be used for anonymous reporting of bullying incidents.</p>

ESSER Approved Expenditures	HOW <i>The Social Express</i> meets the rigorous demands of the 2021 Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSE)?
<p>Curriculum and/or services which are already sanctioned by Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (CTE)</p>	<p>Built with funds from a National Science Foundation Phase I & II grant, Teen Career Path is the only life skills-career readiness curriculum with an interactive video game experience to discover a preferred career choice. Students are engaged right from the start as they “play employee for a day” and explore over 20 careers covering 15 career sectors.</p> <p>It is estimated that approximately 7 million young people in the United States from traditionally marginalized populations (e.g., low income communities) are insufficiently prepared to make the transition from high school to postsecondary education and eventually into the workforce.</p> <p>School-to-work transitions are also especially difficult for students with disabilities, who comprise an additional 6.5 million K-12 students in the United States. Combined, 13.5 million young adults face a daunting future with limited opportunities for meaningful employment</p> <p>Teen Career Path empowers students to prepare for making this transition, while working in a safe simulated environment. Students customize and manipulate an ‘avatar’ character throughout an entire work day. Navigating their way through 175+ leveled lessons, students are exposed to real tasks in real jobs. They also learn about ‘soft skills’ for independent living that will help them keep a job in their future.</p>
<p>Curriculum and/or services which supports summer school aka Extended School Year (ESY)</p>	<p>One of the best parts about all three of these products (<i>The Social Express, Cool School and Teen Career Path</i>) is that they can be used in an array, or combination of alternative settings, including both summer school (aka Extended School Year) and after-school programs (aka Extended School Day). Because the instruction is so highly engaging, students readily seek out time to ‘play’ on <i>The Social Express</i>, making it ideal for summer school and after school programs where motivation is a key factor to success.</p>
<p>Curriculum and/or services which supports after-school programs aka Extended School Day (ESD)</p>	<p>Using the teacher-friendly student management system called “<i>Central Station</i>,” teachers can manage individual student and group use of the program, track usage and progress, run reports, and even export data for IEP reporting compliance. For example, students may be introduced to a concept during the school day as part of a whole group instructional lesson. Later that day in the afterschool program, the student can continue working on the skills introduced. The teacher can get a report on that student’s progress for the work completed during the extended school day.</p> <p>There are many extension activities and even a full repertoire of songs which provide educators who are building ESY and ESD programs with a plethora of resources. Students who have been learning remotely during quarantine periods and/or participating in a hybrid learning model are often relieved to find ways to learn that involve both instructional games, music and simulations.</p>

ESSER Approved Expenditures	HOW <i>The Social Express</i> meets the rigorous demands of the 2021 Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER)?
<p>Conducting activities to address the needs of from low-income families, children with disabilities, English learners, racial and ethnic minorities, students experiencing homelessness, and foster care youth</p>	<p><i>All three programs in the suite of curriculum - The Social Express, Cool School and Teen Career Path - are being used by thousands of students worldwide, a large percentage of which are located in inner city and lower socio economic areas, with students representing a diverse background of ethnicity and proficiency in English Language.</i></p> <p><i>One study demonstrated the efficacy of this intervention specifically with African American Youth. This study examined the efficacy of a computer-based social skills training program, The Social Express. Independent researchers evaluated the program at both a school-wide level (Tier 1) and at a referred group level (Tier 2). The sample included third through fourth, and fifth grade students in a Title 1 public school with a 100% African-American population. Pre-post comparisons at the individual level found that about 39% of the children had statistically significant improvement in social skills, with 9% indicating a decrease in problem behaviors.</i></p> <p><i>Again, another benefit of all of these programs is the ability to be accessed in an array of settings. So, whether the student is in a full 5-day/week instructional model, or remote for all/part of the week, it doesn't matter. Students may access interactive components from any device that can access the Internet, their teachers may also provide the supportive materials in paper packets, if no Internet accessibility is available at home. Thus students, who are experiencing homelessness, can be provided with evidence based high quality SEL instruction, regardless of that status.</i></p>
<p>Purchasing educational technology (including hardware, software, and connectivity as well as assistive technology or adaptive equipment)</p>	<p>At the core of the interactive curricula from <i>The Social Express</i>, is a supportive learning management system which allows teachers to individualize and personalize instruction. Teachers can even integrate other popular Learning Management Systems (LMS) systems including: Google Classroom, Microsoft One, Schoology, and Canvas. It is easy for teachers to assign interactive lessons, or supportive extension activities for small group work using the very same LMS systems they use everyday. This is just one way that <i>The Social Express</i> suite of SEL tools can support the purchase of hardware, software and or connectivity.</p>
<p>Mental health services</p>	<p><i>The Social Express and Cool School, are both designed with restorative practices in mind that support students' mental health. Students who have experienced trauma are accommodated with both the content of rich social emotional skills (aligned to CASEL standards), and the engagement algorithms used within these clever simulations which provide positive reinforcement and validation of feelings. The low sensory environment supports trauma informed practices. Each webisode provides students with the opportunity to learn about and explore healthy strategies such as: emotional regulation and coping strategies, how to ask for help, identifying feelings, understanding non-verbal body language, and opportunities to explore correct and incorrect choices and related consequences.</i></p>

Maximizing ESSER funds for sustainability

Finally, it is essential that schools/districts focus on building an environment for sustainability and maintenance of effort over the foreseeable future. The ESSER funds from the American Recovery Act 2021 are intended to go beyond recovery and should be used to focus on deep systemic improvement. That provides a perfect opportunity to re-imagine the role of social emotional wellness and mental health. It underscores the importance of ensuring that our teachers have the appropriate training to recognize signs of festering emotional problems due to trauma from the current pandemic, and/or other underlying trauma.

The Social Express has taken measures to provide solutions which directly supports mental health and social emotional wellness in two key ways: 1) Professional development which targets three key areas for educators to build proficiency in SEL, restorative practices and trauma informed practices; and 2) A software licensing structure, which easily adapts to meet both short and long term goals. *The Social Express* may be purchased as consumable units, so that educators know they will have access to this dynamic curriculum for the next 3-5 years. The goal of this structure is to ensure both the continuity and sustainability of the recovery effort is comprehensive and systemic. Our goal is to ensure that we can help address short term goals for immediate recovery, and also withstand the test of time with lasting positive outcomes.

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Keywords

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