The ARP-ESSER elephant in the classroom.

By A.D. Soleil

After what seems an eternity, the world has slowly begun to put itself back together, quietly crawling out from under the control of the ever-loving, if not restrictive and potentially emotionally abusive, governing bodies of the countries to whom citizens declare their affiliations. While [several countries](https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/european-countries-rolling-back-covid-19-restrictions) are beginning to curtail [mask](https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/27/denmark-drops-most-of-its-covid-19-restrictions-mo/) and [vaccine mandates](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/sweden-decides-against-recommending-covid-vaccines-kids-aged-5-12-2022-01-27/), the United States continues to see implementation in full swing with the majority of implications falling heartily onto the shoulders of the education system.

The ARP ESSER (the American Rescue Plan – Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief fund) has ensured that is indeed the case. With free-flowing money frequently comes conditions and restrictions as to how said money is allowed to be spent. And the ARP ESSER fund is no exception to this rule. Going beyond the acceptable threshold of conditions and restrictions suggested by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), it appears the United States government is also using the fund as a vehicle to usher in a few of its latest favorites, namely equity ([maintenance of equity](https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/03/FINAL_ARP-ESSER-FACT-SHEET.pdf)) and social and emotional learning (SEL) within its distribution requirements. [All states](https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/03/FINAL_ARP-ESSER-Methodology-and-Table.pdf) received millions of dollars while some received billions under the guise of recovery for a total of $122 billion set aside for K-12 schools throughout the United States.

**Reopening Conditions**

Complying with CDC operational guidelines and the fund requirements, each state, with input from state and county education and health offices, has produced a document ([State Plans](https://oese.ed.gov/offices/american-rescue-plan/american-rescue-plan-elementary-and-secondary-school-emergency-relief/stateplans/)) defining how districts are expected to operate in order to receive distributions. In many cases the plans include schools operating testing and vaccination clinics for students and families in addition to the standard masking and physical distancing guidelines. The CDC has recently [relinquished its support for cloth masks](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/14/health/cloth-masks-covid-cdc.html), nodding to the superior abilities of the N-95 mask to prevent Covid-19 spread - apparently unbeknownst to the many ‘Karens’ who are still running around treating anti-maskers are the pariah of society. At the time of this article, school districts have yet to update their masking guidelines for the schoolyear and CDC has yet to require them to do so. Curious minds would like to see how choirs and bands propose to fit N-95s into their repertoire.

Regarding school based Covid-19 screening and testing, data is gathered at the local level and fed into the system by the 15th of each month. “Both the monthly district data and the testing plans are of great interest to CDC and HHS leadership,” according to the [ELC Reopening FAQs guide](https://www.cdc.gov/ncezid/dpei/pdf/elc-reopening-schools-faq-508.pdf). The federal government is actively gathering the state’s testing data. To help facilitate testing programs federal government funds are provided to state health departments who then help districts by funding additional nursing staff and assistants on a temporary basis. Contact tracing is part of the health department requirements and is avidly reported to local authorities.

While testing and operating vaccination clinics in the schools pose many challenges to the potentially overwhelmed (and perhaps emotionally exhausted) districts the CDC has graciously partnered with organizations, such as Rockefeller Foundation, to provide guidance on [establishing trust](https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-RockefellerFoundation-Covid-19-K-12-Testing-Playbook-for-Educators-and-Leaders.pdf) and open communications with parents in hopes of preventing barriers to testing and vaccinations.

The Shah Family Foundation has also partnered with the CDC to provide (among other things) social marketing methods (known as nudges) to [increase program participation](https://www.openandsafeschools.org/communications#increasing-participation) suggesting the use of coaches or trusted teachers to get the message out. In an effort to further [nudge communities](https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/hcp/tailoring-information.html) to vaccinate and boost, the CDC has generously provided audience specific guidance - shaped by perceptions, beliefs and patterns. [Several general marketing documents](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/print-resources.html?Sort=Date%3A%3Adesc&Search=poster) and nudge guides are openly available on the CDC website. States need only know their demographics or target audiences to employ the federally supplied research and utilize the tactics or nudges. Nudge units across the Atlantic (in the United Kingdom) have recently come under fire for the use of [unethical, fear-based scare tactics](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2022/01/28/grossly-unethical-downing-street-nudge-unit-accused-scaring/).

In case the marketing does not provide a compelling enough case, ARP ESSER funds can also be used to [cover vaccine incentive](https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/07/FAQ-21.pdf) programs, allowing for anything from new tablets to college scholarships, books or even cash rewards. Yes, you too may have free Dunkin Donuts with your booster or win a new tablet! In an effort to prevent misinformation and helper counter vaccine and booster hesitancy, states are being encouraged by the agency to use [social media](https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/vaccinate-with-confidence/rca-guide/downloads/CDC_RCA_Guide_2021_Tools_AppendixE_SocialListening-Monitoring-Tools-508.pdf) to gather data (using Boolean logic, hashtags and analytics, among other things) to create to multi-channel snapshots of nay-sayers and purveyors of misinformation.

**Fund Requirements**

As mentioned earlier, nothing comes without strings attached. Along with the acceptance of ARP-ESSER funds, there are requirements which must be met. Most notable are the conditions (or requirements) of equity and social and emotional learning (SEL.) The equity requirements are to meet the needs of the students the federal government deems have been subjected to “longstanding opportunity gaps in our education system” (systemic), according to ARPA-ESSER’s own [Maintenance of Equity provision](https://oese.ed.gov/offices/american-rescue-plan/american-rescue-plan-elementary-and-secondary-school-emergency-relief/maintenance-of-equity/). How each state defines the opportunity gaps is open for negotiation and detailed within the individual state ARP-ESSER plans.

For example, the state of Florida’s plan openly highlights the numerical variances between the racial or ethnic lines, as required by the federal government, enunciating that for the most part the declination of EOC scores can be seen across the board. Regardless of income disparities scores declined across every racial or ethnic group. It is not simply low-income students who have been affected by school closures and hybrid learning plans. Florida mentions the following students are most impacted as well – those with; Individual Educational Plans (IEPs), 504 Disabilities, Developmental Delays, English as a Second Language, and Reading and/or Language Impaired. It is safe to say every student within the K-12 system across every state of the United States, regardless of income levels, has been affected by school closures and hybrid learning plans or lack thereof.

[North Carolina’s plan](https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/09/North-Carolina-ARP-ESSER-State-Plan-Final_Redacted.pdf), on the other hand, lacks solid numerical data. If the items highlighted are indicators of academic issues discovered during the pandemic within the state of North Carolina, one can safely assume English, reading ability and white children were not affected by the lack of education. Given every racial sub-group has at least 30% within or above the [mid-high poverty level](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/clb), as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics free or reduced lunch program, one can assume income disparities are faced by all races. Yet, North Carolina only highlights the needs for students who are; American Indian, Asian, Black, Hispanic and Two or more races when defined by ethnicity.

In any case, North Carolina’s highest priority, despite listing “recovery in reading and math” as its top issue, is to ensure its student have access to social and emotional learning, [a program the state started to roll out in the fall 2019](https://www.dpi.nc.gov/media/8133/download). Of the 230 comments North Carolina received when its ELC plan was available online for 30 days in draft form, 88% were in reference to Critical Race Theory leaving the state completely confounded in their response, “Critical Race Theory is not mentioned in the ARP ESSER State Plan Template.”

Social and emotional learning is a foundational tenet of Critical Race Theory, even if public and private schools alike choose to adamantly deny the fact. Critical Race Theory and Social and Emotional Learning are intertwined, one looks at the micro-level of identity whereas the other focuses on the macro-level, both attempting to highlight inequity and injustice. [Miller’s article on the Idaho Freedom Foundation](https://idahofreedom.org/social-emotional-learning-part-2-how-sel-became-a-vehicle-for-critical-race-theory/) highlighted as much when she quoted the declaration from CASEL’s CEO, [“We see SEL as a tool for anti-racism.”](https://idahofreedom.org/social-emotional-learning-part-2-how-sel-became-a-vehicle-for-critical-race-theory/) The ARP-ESSER fund is quietly furthering the federal government’s agenda of equity and SEL, perhaps hoping no one will notice until it is too late - the elephant in the classroom.