

*By: Laura Anderson and Marguerite Roza  
Edunomics Lab at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.  
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Here we map out six ways leaders can communicate about and help make the most of their ESSER investments:

Describing investments with dollars in per-pupil terms clarifies the magnitude of spending and centers it on students. And it helps staff and the community better understand cost-equivalent tradeoffs—tradeoffs the district can show it has carefully considered. (We’ve shared some examples [here](#).) Concerns about waste in school spending are widespread (even among teachers), and communicating in dollar terms can help assure audiences that the district has weighed costs alongside value for students. For instance: “Our district received \$1,000 per pupil in ESSER money. We’re spending \$500 per pupil to extend the school year by two weeks using stipends to staff. And we’re spending \$500 per pupil on 4–1 group tutoring for students lagging behind grade level so they can get back on track in math and reading.”

Georgetown University's Edunomics Lab created a cost equivalent worksheet to help gather meaningful input on spending priorities.

## DO Talk about what you hope ESSER investments will do for students (and how you'll measure progress)

While ESSER has broad allowable uses, the public clearly expects the money to [help students' learning](#). Come 2023, if districts can't show what they've achieved for students, [the spending choices will likely be judged a failure](#). That means [measuring and communicating student progress is key](#). This doesn't have to mean standardized test scores. If after-school enrichment spending is supposed to attract reluctant families back to in-person school, then leaders can measure and communicate the degree to which those students are returning. Districts could also measure monthly progress on key parameters like reading, math, student attendance and engagement. That clearly communicates to the public that the district is laser-focused on what matters and that staff know exactly where to focus their efforts.

## DO Communicate about ESSER spending decisions often, both internally and externally

Communicating about ESSER spending isn't a one-and-done task completed via news release when the district spending plan is approved. Those spending decisions can be expected to evolve over time, and that's something that can be clearly messaged from the outset. Cultivating trust implies communicating regularly, without [business lingo](#), with both the community and those inside the school system. Districts need not deliver all communications centrally; principals are ideal communicators with families and staff.

A communication template for principals on use of federal relief funds.

## DO Encourage principals to talk with staff, families, and communities

[Principals tend to be highly trusted in their communities](#). As such, they're ideally positioned to help communicate the district's ESSER spending decisions as well as gather local input and share it with district leaders. Given that few principals have had training in communications, we created [a guide for leading conversations](#) with their families and staff; principals can then use that feedback to press the district for solutions that will work for their students. In so doing, principals create a crucial feedback loop that strengthens communications and trust.

## DO Invite feedback

Ideally, [community input](#) has already played a role in the district's federal relief spending decisions. Regardless, to foster trust, the district needs to invite feedback on how investments are going. (And, ideally, explain how that input influences the district's decisions moving forward.) As noted above, principals can play the role of inviting family and staff feedback, which gets channeled to district leaders.

## DO Commit to revising spending plans based on what's working and what's not

As the 2021–22 school year unfolds, with new interventions and investments, make clear that there will be opportunities to pivot on spending as needed, depending on whether programs are working or not. [There's still time for district leaders to modify spending decisions that won't pass muster in the rearview mirror](#). Smart, ongoing communications can help ensure the public understands what's working, what's not and how spending decisions will benefit their community's students.

**Here's the bottom line:** Spending decisions made in the coming months will likely play out in communities for years to come. Taking time now to focus on students, communicate spending decisions and enable community dialogue can go a long way toward building trust and improving educational outcomes.

*Laura Anderson is associate director of the [Edunomics Lab](#).*

*Dr. Marguerite Roza is [research professor at Georgetown University](#) and director of the [Edunomics Lab](#). She also leads the McCourt School of Public Policy's Certificate in Education Finance.*