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End of ESSER: Short-term fixes = long-term crises

By Dr. Dana Godek and Michael Moore November 9, 2023



Americans gain an average of eight pounds over the holidays each year. Before you switch over to a fad diet, consider a bigger weight loss goal: \$122 billion. Since the beginning of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) we have been warning that when FY24 arrived, executive leadership teams would need to be ready to shed initiatives they can't sustain and report on their Return on Investment (ROI). Teams also need to maintain those initiatives that produce Learning on Investment (LOI).



Dana Godek

As we travel the country, we've been increasingly worried that superintendents and boards are waiting too long to confront the upcoming fiscal cliff. The reporting season is here, as the U.S. Department of Education just released financial reporting dates as early as March 2024 for all states.

Chief financial officers and Grants Administration leaders have been patching budgets with one-time fixes as schools returned from pandemic disruptions. Year-to-year, short-term solutions are not only causing the avoidance of hard decisions about the loss of ESSER funds but, we'd argue, they are also masking deeper, longer-term crises such as declining student enrollment, an educator workforce that is too large to sustain, and instructional offerings that are too diffuse to close learning gaps. It's like going on a fad diet rather than making the necessary lifestyle changes.

Like getting to a healthy and sustainable weight, you'll need to adjust both your intake and your level of activity. Communicating a compelling vision of success shared with a wide range of stakeholders will ensure better results, more satisfied families and educators, and predictable fiscal planning.



Michael Moore

Measuring investment

ROI is a financial metric used to evaluate the profitability or efficiency of an investment relative to its cost. ROI is measured by dividing a company's net profit by its initial investment and then multiplying the result by 100 to express the ratio as a percentage. But how to measure learning on investment (LOI)?

An LOI measure divides net student learning gains by the investment needed to generate that gain. This is a versatile process that can be applied to various scenarios, such as evaluating the performance of academic interventions, assessing the effectiveness of training programs, or comparing curricula. It guides decision-makers as they allocate resources effectively and informs choices about where to invest time, money and effort. It also identifies initiatives that need to be strategically shed to make room for fresh approaches based on the current needs of students, families and our workforce.

The fundamental challenge of public services

"Public services"—road maintenance, public safety and K12 education, for example—don't have a "profit motive." That absence makes it challenging but not impossible to measure the effectiveness of a public service. Historically, a particular public service will expand in scale or scope in response to political pressure and will be reduced or constrained when resources (usually tax dollars) are limited.

This push-pull dynamic can be seen as a back-and-forth between resiliency and efficiency. Resiliency in this context is the ability to respond quickly to things that aren't predictable, such as post-pandemic student learning loss. Efficiency is simply getting the "most bang for the buck" in the most expedient ways.

There's a negative correlation between resiliency and efficiency: when one goes up, the other goes down. Think of restaurants: they plan for efficiency, but customer volume is unpredictable and some diners want changes to what's on the menu. School systems are facing similar changes with volume (enrollments) and modifications (requests for new services such as intervention and student well-being). That's the challenge presented by the fiscal cliff.

ESSER was intended to improve the resiliency of K12 operations, providing for 1:1 technology, increased staffing, facility upgrades, and innovative methods and materials. The narrative of ESSER's expiration is: "We gave you additional resources to help you through the pandemic and return to school. These resources improved your resiliency but reduced your efficiency. That's not sustainable. Now we need you to continue moving toward a 'new normal' by improving your efficiency and to do that, we need to reduce your resilience."

This superintendent's challenge

While CFOs and federal programs directors have done a good job guiding districts through the last three years of budget tailoring, now it's time for superintendents, cabinet members and board members to take a longer-term, strategic approach to ensure that only the most effective strategies—those with the strongest LOI—are retained as resiliency is drained from the system.

Researchers of corporate governance refer to this as “[repositioning the core](#)” of the business. LOI is not as clear-cut as ROI. Superintendents are subjected to more public scrutiny and political pressure than corporate CEOs. As such, it's important to design a comprehensive decision-making model, maximize appropriate stakeholder engagement, push for data-driven decisions, prioritize equity, and communicate a clear and compelling vision of the future emphasizing the investment, not the reductions.

This will test even the most experienced superintendents. In our next article, we will offer practical, actionable ideas on how to get this done. But, before you stop eating all carbs, push your team to show the data wins for each initiative. It will become very clear quickly: If you can't put it on a scale, it's going to derail the weight loss.

Dr. Dana Godek is a seasoned expert in educational policy, social wellness, and community engagement. Her extensive career encompasses roles as a teacher, public school administrator, national researcher, and leader in federal and state policy. In her current role as the CEO of EduSolve, she applies her wealth of experience tackling intricate educational challenges in collaboration with local communities. Dana is a dedicated policy advisor to the Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning and serves as a Data Currency Advisor to Credential Engine. She has contributed her expertise as a board member of the National Association for Federal and State Program Administrators and is a sought-after keynote speaker on matters related to federal investment in public education. Dana holds a doctorate in organizational leadership with a specialization in public policy and is a certified fundraising executive.

Michael Moore has been a national leadership and organizational development consultant and executive coach for 20 years, following a successful career as a high school principal and Superintendent of Schools. He works in school districts with 'Directors and above' to prioritize strategy, manage change, and build organizational capacity. As an expert in principal supervision and development, Michael co-designs culturally responsive, job-embedded leadership pathways and support models. As an expert in talent strategy and team building, he coaches executives and their teams across a wide range of organizations. Michael is a partner at the Urban Schools Human Capital Academy and works frequently with the Partnership for Leaders in Education at the UVA Darden School of Business.

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