

**ADAPTING THROUGHOUT
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:
HOW CHARTER SCHOOLS SPENT ESSER FUNDING**



NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR
**PUBLIC
CHARTER
SCHOOLS**



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Public charter schools, which serve 3.7 million students (7.5% of all public school students),¹ have more flexibility than their district-run counterparts in the areas of school academics, operations, and finance. This flexibility means that charter schools were uniquely positioned to respond nimbly to the changing needs of their communities during the pandemic. And, while there is broad data on how all public schools (including public charter schools, but largely representing district-run schools) leveraged the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds,² less is known about how public charter schools specifically used ESSER funds to adapt to student needs.³

To understand more about how ESSER funds were spent across the charter sector, the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools administered a survey to charter school leaders in fall 2022. The survey reached approximately 4,000 heads of charter school networks and free-standing schools, who are best positioned to have knowledge of network or school spending and priorities. Of that sample, 278 leaders, representing at least 364 schools—as some leaders were responding on behalf of their networks—responded.

This brief synthesizes survey results, which demonstrate that ESSER funding was essential in order for schools—including charter schools—to adapt to student needs during the pandemic. Charter school leaders reported spending more of their ESSER funds on academic recovery, technology, student mental health and family support when compared to data largely representing district-run schools. Charter schools are, of course, continuing to adapt their priorities to respond to community needs.

An analysis of local educational agencies' (LEAs') planned ESSER III spending found that LEAs were planning to split the funding nearly equally between staffing (27%), academic recovery (25%), and facilities and operations (23.3%), with smaller amounts devoted to technology (9%), mental and physical health (6.4%), miscellaneous financials (5.2%), and other types of spending (3.7%).⁴

“The impact of these dollars will go far beyond the spending window in many ways for students, and for that we are extremely grateful.”

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What Is ESSER funding?

Anticipating the impact of COVID-19 on students and schools, Congress created the ESSER fund in 2020. Through three waves of funding, Congress distributed nearly \$190 billion to K-12 schools.⁵ Schools could use ESSER funding in a variety of ways to adapt to student needs during the pandemic, including on purchases to address lost instructional time (e.g., tutoring, summer learning, high-quality assessments of student progress, etc.), mental health services and supports, school facility repairs and improvements, educational technology, and facilities sanitization and cleaning.⁶ Unless states apply to the U.S. Department of Education for an extension, states must obligate the last of their ESSER funding by September 30, 2024, and spend it within four months.⁷ With the upcoming ending of the ESSER funding, schools are facing a fiscal cliff and must make difficult decisions about which initiatives to maintain and how to pay for them.

Charter school leaders prioritized academics and staffing when spending their ESSER dollars.

We asked charter school leaders to identify the percentage of their ESSER funding they had spent in seven areas: academics, facilities, family support, mental health, physical health, staffing, and technology. Table 1 describes each area. For each category we also include data reported by Future Ed about planned district spending to provide approximate comparison datapoints.⁸

Table 1.
Categories of ESSER Spending

Spending Category	Examples of Types of Spending
Academic	Purchases to address learning loss, such as tutoring, out-of-school learning, credit recovery, and curriculum
Facilities	Purchases to improve or repair school buildings, including air filtration or HVAC, repairing/improving school facilities to reduce risk of illness, construction for the purpose of expansion, nutrition programs
Family Support	Purchases to help families, including helping families meet basic needs, connecting families to available social services, student attendance and reengagement efforts, etc.
Mental Health	Purchases to support student and staff mental health, including adopting a multi-tiered system of supports, social-emotional learning programs or assessments, counseling, and mental health services for staff
Physical Health	Purchases to support student and staff physical health, including public health protocols, nursing equipment or supplies, training on virus mitigation, and minimizing the spread of infectious diseases, etc.
Staffing	Funding staff positions, programs for recruitment and retention, or stipends for additional work
Technology	Purchases related to technology, such as devices or hotspots for students and/or staff, technological infrastructure and hardware, student information systems, and video conferencing platform



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Academics and Staffing

As seen in Figure 1, charter school leaders reported spending more, approximately 53%, of their ESSER funding on academics (30%) and staffing (23%)—two interconnected areas that are essential to recover from missed instruction and learning loss. The charter school leaders also identified these areas as top priorities (i.e., their first or second priority): 49% of leaders identified academics as a top priority, and 25% identified staffing as a top priority. FutureEd found that ESSER plans for all public schools slated 52% of funds for academic (25%) and staffing (27%) spending.⁹

Figure 1.
Charter school leaders' spending on academics and staffing reflected their top priorities.



*Rated as either first or second priority

To better understand the specific types of spending, we asked charter school leaders to identify the types of activities they funded using ESSER dollars. For academic spending, the majority reported spending at least some of their ESSER funding to provide additional staff (71%) that was necessary to implement many of the academic programs, reading (67%) and math supports (56%), and tutoring services (58%). One leader described the usefulness of ESSER funding in supporting instruction by stating that their school was able to purchase a new math and reading curriculum, and “with these funds, not only were we able to make those purchases, but we were able to fully train and provide strong supports for implementation.” Other charter school leaders described using the funding to offer summer school, after-school learning, and schoolwide literacy programs.

When it came to staffing, leaders reported using at least some of the ESSER funding to add staff, such as support staff (51%) and teaching staff (47%), as well as for non-recurring payments, such as stipends for additional work (47%) and retention bonuses (36%).

The charter school leaders described using additional staffing in different ways. For instance, one noted, “Our ESSER funds allowed us to hire five more interventionists to provide targeted support to address pandemic learning loss.” Another used additional staff to sustain operations during the pandemic, citing that the extra staff “allowed for safe and sustainable coverage during staff absences due to COVID.”



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Technology

When schools closed in March 2020, roughly 16 million K-12 students had no access to a working digital device or reliable internet, or both.¹⁰ Technology spending was necessary, as many schools were required to offer classes virtually for the 2020–21 school year.¹¹ As one charter school leader said, “Having 1:1 technology for all scholars allowed instruction to continue during shutdowns.”

To bridge this gap in technology access, respondents reported spending an average of 16% of their ESSER dollars on technology, including investing at least some of the ESSER funding for devices for students and staff (75%), providing Wi-Fi connectivity and hotspots (53%), and strengthening the virtual classrooms by spending on digital learning platforms (41%) and video conferencing tools (36%). By way comparison, according to data from FutureEd, all districts reported technology.¹²

“We were able to significantly upgrade technology resources in classrooms and for students with 1:1 devices, and support families with Wi-Fi hotspots. Additionally, teachers had significant training in the use of technology in hybrid and virtual classrooms.”

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Facilities and Physical Health

To aid the return to in-person instruction, charter school leaders reported spending, on average, 14% of their ESSER funding on infrastructure and 9% on physical health services. For example, they reported using at least some of the funding to address COVID-related expenses such as improving air filtration or HVAC systems (56%) and repairing or improving upon existing infrastructure to reduce the transmission of illness (40%). Similarly, 53% reported spending ESSER funding on public health protocols, and 42% reported spending it on nursing equipment. FutureEd reported that 23.3 % of planned spending overall was for facilities and operations.¹³

“ESSER funds allowed us to keep our entire community safe through weekly testing and COVID-19 protocols.”

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Mental Health and Family Support

The pandemic impacted more than just physical health: Charter school leaders reported spending, on average, 13% of ESSER funding on student mental health and 7% on family support. FutureEd found that 6.4% of all district funding was designated for mental health support.¹⁴ One charter school leader described the importance of the funding to high-risk students: “We have been able to learn a great deal about SEL [social-emotional learning] supports for high-risk students. Our partnerships with organizations in the community are priceless and wouldn’t have happened without this funding.” Another cited the ESSER funding as being key to improving the mental health services offered at their school. To address issues related to mental health, respondents spent funding on in-person counseling (42%), additional staffing (42%), and social-emotional learning (SEL) programming (41%).

“The hiring of additional nurses and mental health supports has been hugely helpful once we returned to in-person instruction.”

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To combat student disengagement, charter school leaders also invested in family support practices, focusing on student attendance and reengagement efforts (35%) and outreach and engagement efforts with students’ families (35%). For example, some charter schools, like Rocketship’s California schools, used ESSER funds to hire community service coordinators to connect families with “job assistance and training programs, healthcare services, and legal assistance.”¹⁵

When asked what ESSER funding allowed them to do, leaders noted a range of activities, from improving the quality of learning for their students to hiring and training qualified instructors, mental health specialists, and interventionists. For instance, one leader reported that the “ESSER funds . . . allowed us to provide professional development to teachers, paid for new HVAC units, and provided funds for student enrichment resources.” Similarly, another described the funding as “a great safety net for increased supplies, educational materials and devices, installation of AC/heat/filtration units, increased tutoring staff, and online tutoring and counseling options.” One charter school leader also noted the importance to families: “ESSER funds have been critical to . . . provide other supports students and families needed during and still need coming out of the pandemic.”

“We could not have gotten through these difficult years without the ESSER investments.”



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Charter school leaders are continuing to adapt to changing needs and increasing their focus on academics, physical health, and mental health.

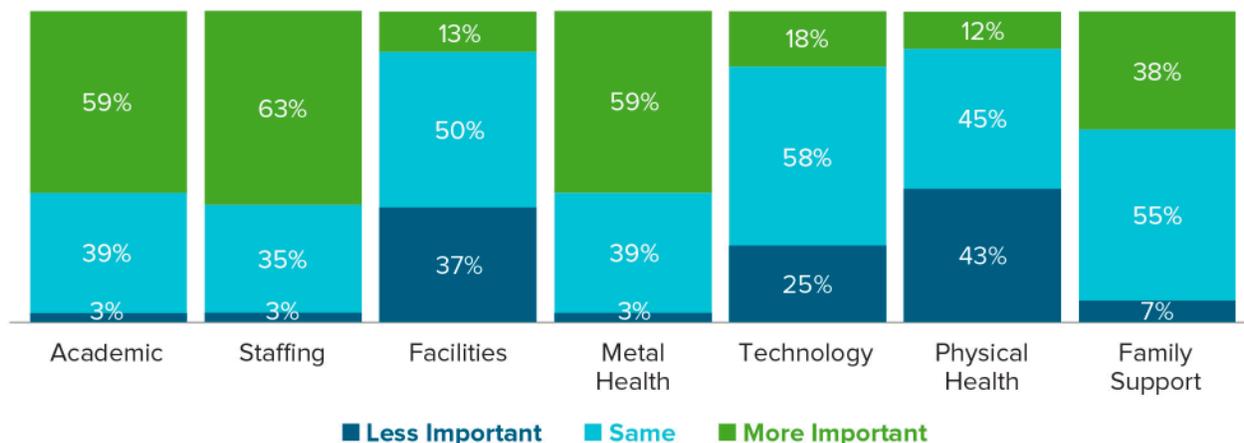
To better understand how they are adapting to changing student needs, we asked charter school leaders how important each category was in 2022 compared with 2021.

As seen in Figure 2, as the public health concerns of the pandemic have begun to decrease, charter school leaders have deemphasized physical health, facilities, and technology during the 2022–23 school year, finding them to be relatively less important compared with the 2021–22 school year (43% physical health, 37% facilities, and 25% technology).

Charter school leaders are increasing their focus on academics, mental health, and staffing. Nearly two-thirds of leaders reported greater importance for these categories when compared with 2021 (59% academics, 59% mental health, and 63% staffing).

Figure 2.

Charter school leaders have begun to deemphasize physical health, facilities, and technology in favor of academics, mental health, and staffing.



In addition to the changing circumstances of the pandemic, charter school leaders may be deprioritizing technology and facilities because those were larger, one-time purchases. For example, 75% of respondents reported spending ESSER funds on digital devices, and 42% of respondents reported spending ESSER funds on nursing equipment. These purchases likely will not incur an ongoing cost compared with purchases such as hiring additional staff.



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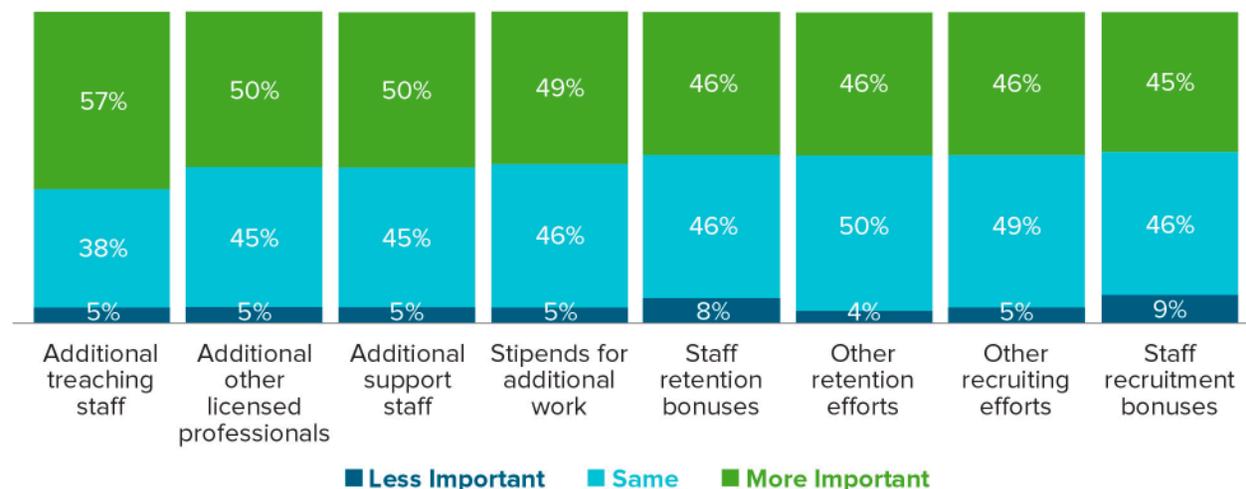
Charter school leaders have identified staffing as key.

According to one charter school leader, “ESSER funds have allowed us to staff in a way necessary to grapple with the significant learning loss seen from the pandemic in an already stretched city with economic and academic gaps.”

Others surveyed agreed that it is essential. As noted earlier, staffing is a top priority for charter school leaders and has accounted for, on average, 23% of ESSER funding (Figure 1), and nearly two-thirds of charter school leaders identified staffing as more important than 2021 (Figure 2).

When looking at different types of staffing initiatives, a near majority of charter school leaders reported that nearly every type of initiative was more important than last year (Figure 3). In particular, charter school leaders identified additional staff—either teachers (57%), other licensed professionals (50%), or support staff (50)—as being more important than they were in 2021.

Figure 3.
Charter school leaders indicated that nearly all types of staffing are more important for the 2022-23 school year compared to last year.



Increasing staff poses future budgetary challenges, as charter school leaders will need to determine where budget cuts should be made once ESSER funding runs out in 2024. However, these additional staff members may be essential to addressing the academic and mental health impacts of the pandemic. For instance, one charter school leader described the need for additional funding “to maintain the staffing needed to increase student achievement. Our students need to be able to be in small groups with trained professionals. Unfortunately, the cost of experience is so dramatically higher than it used to be that there is no way to maintain the staff under the traditional funding model.”



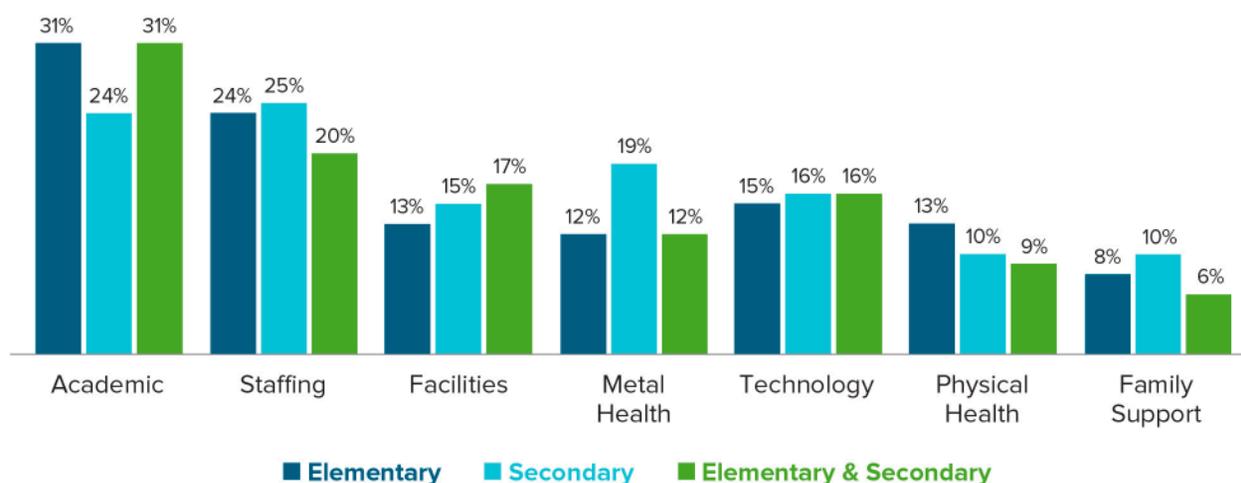
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As charter school leaders work to address the academic and mental health impacts, the focus may vary based on the grade levels the charter serves.

When addressing the needs of students, charter school leaders differentiated their approaches based on the grade levels they served. We compared responses for schools serving only elementary students (i.e., does not offer grade levels higher than sixth grade) and schools serving only secondary students (i.e., does not offer grade levels lower than sixth).

Schools serving only elementary students reported spending more of their ESSER funds on academic supports (31%) compared with secondary schools (24%). Schools serving only secondary students reported spending more of their ESSER funds on mental health (19%) compared with public charter schools serving elementary students (12%). Similarly, secondary charter school leaders reported greater concern for student mental health than elementary charter school leaders (62% vs. 32%) as well as student attendance and reengagement (44% vs. 25%, respectively). This is consistent with the CDC's 2021 findings that 37% of high school students reported experiencing poor mental health during the pandemic, and 44% reported feeling "persistently sad or hopeless."¹⁶

Figure 4.
Charter schools serving elementary students are spending more ESSER funding on academic supports, whereas charter schools serving secondary students are focusing on mental health compared to the 2021-22 school year.





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Looking ahead, charter school leaders are most concerned about student mental health and student achievement, adequate staffing, and the fiscal cliff.

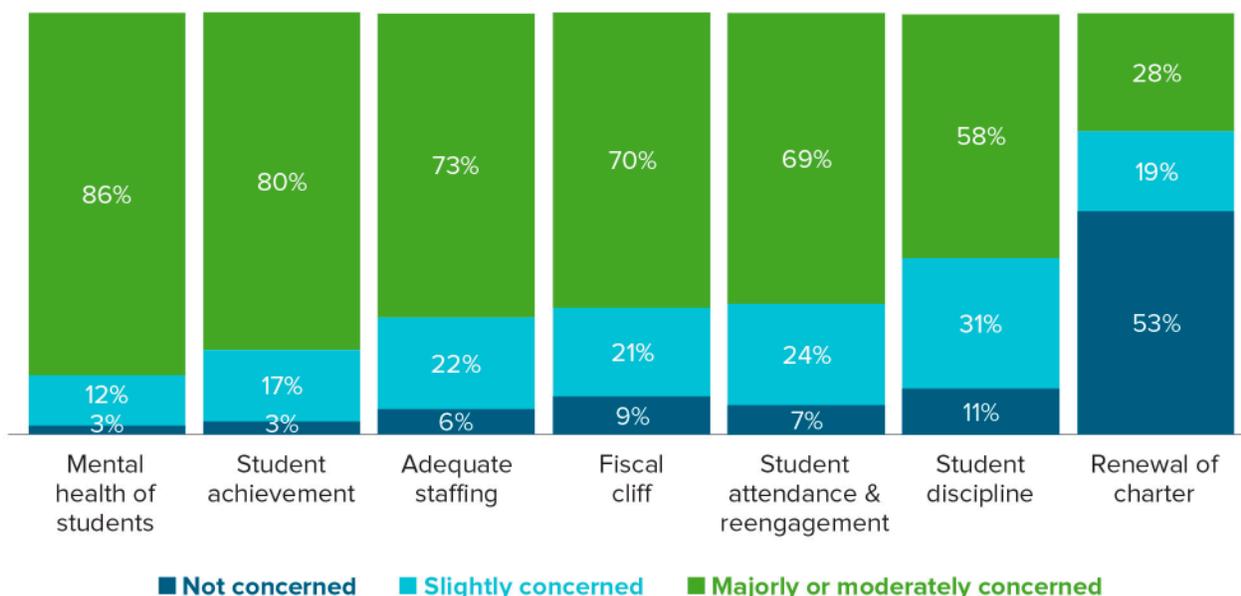
To better serve charter school leaders, the National Alliance asked them what they anticipate will be the areas of most concern in the coming year. The majority of charter school leaders said they are majorly or moderately concerned with the mental health of their students (86%), student achievement (80%), adequate staffing (73%), and ESSER's fiscal cliff (70%).

The 2024 fiscal cliff will be a challenge. Schools will need to innovate to find cost-effective mechanisms to address student learning and mental health.

“The funding we used for additional school support has been a huge factor in our social-emotional learning support and academic growth this past year. To continue giving these supports to our underserved population is a major concern when ESSER runs out.”

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Figure 5.
Charter school leaders are concerned about student mental health and achievement, staffing, and the fiscal cliff. (Percentage indicates level of concern)





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Conclusion

Public charter schools have adapted throughout the pandemic. As illustrated by the survey data, charter schools have shifted the focus of spending and priorities from physical health and remote learning toward addressing the academic and mental health impacts of the pandemic. Flexibility and autonomy are critical to charter schools' ability to pivot and respond to community needs, and charter schools will need to continue to adapt, particularly given the budgetary challenges associated with the fiscal cliff. To assist public charter schools in facing these challenges, the National Alliance is working to document and share the best practices and innovative solutions that charters adopted in response to the pandemic. The project is part of a U.S. Department of Education Dissemination Grant to disseminate forward-looking materials and resources, such as case studies and toolkits, to charter and traditional public school leaders, policymakers, and other school personnel professionals. By sharing how charter schools have adapted and continue to adapt to changing student needs, we can help students recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

¹ Jamison White, "How Many Charter Schools and Students Are There?," National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, December 6, 2022, <https://data.publiccharters.org/digest/charter-school-data-digest/how-many-charter-schools-and-students-are-there/>.

² Budio's School Budget Tracker, Burbio, https://about.burbio.com/school-budget-tracker#ESSER_III_spending_categories.

³ In January 2023, Burbio released information on public charter spending, but it was limited to the third wave of ESSER funding. Dennis Roche, "Burbio School Tracker: Charter vs. Non-Charter," Substack, January 23, 2023, https://burbioschooltracker.substack.com/p/burbio-school-tracker-charter-vs?utm_source=profile&utm_medium=reader2.

⁴ Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/education-stabilization-fund/elementary-secondary-school-emergency-relief-fund/>.

⁵ U.S. Department of Education, "Frequently Asked Questions: Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Programs Governor's Emergency Education Relief Programs," December 7, 2022 Update, <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2022/12/ESSER-and-GEER-Use-of-Funds-FAQs-December-7-2022-Update-1.pdf>.

⁶ Ibid; Kara Arundel, "Ed Dept approves extensions for ESSER, GEER spending," K-12 Dive, March 23, 2023, <https://www.k12dive.com/news/Extensions-for-ESSER-GEER-approved/645813/>.

⁷ DiMarco and Jordan, "Financial Trends." <https://publiccharters.org/newsroom/publications/charter-schools-and-esser-funds-a-series-of-case-studies/>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Sumit Chandra, Amy Chang, Lauren Day, Amina Fazlullah, Jack Liu, Lane McBride, Thisal Mudalige, and Danny Weiss, Closing the K-12 Digital Divide in the Age of Distance Learning, Common Sense Media and Boston Consulting Group, 2020, https://www.bbcmag.com/pub/doc/BBC_Nov20_DigDivide.pdf.

¹⁰ Education Week Staff, "A Year of COVID-19: What It Looked Like for Schools," Education Week, March 4, 2021, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/a-year-of-covid-19-what-it-looked-like-for-schools/2021/03>.

¹¹ DiMarco and Jordan, "Financial Trends."

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ National Alliance for Public Charter Schools and Charter School Growth Fund, "Charter Schools and ESSER Funds: Overview of Case Studies," 2022, <https://www.future-ed.org/financial-trends-in-local-schools-covid-aid-spending/>

¹⁵ "New CDC Data Illuminate Youth Mental Health Threats During the COVID-19 Pandemic," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, March 31, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2022/p0331-youth-mental-health-covid-19.html>.