

## ESSER/GEER Extra, Volume 16

This week's volume of [ESSER/GEER Extra](#) includes a reminder to submit your ESSER II applications by December 10, a status update on ARP ESSER applications, a reminder to submit prior approval forms with a completed ARP ESSER application, clarification regarding the use of ESSER funds to purchase gift cards, and the allowability of using ARP ESSER funds for field trips.

All editions of [ESSER/GEER Extra](#) are archived on [PDE's website](#).

### Submit ESSER II Applications Now

PDE strongly encourages LEAs to submit outstanding ESSER II applications by **Friday, December 10, 2021**. While school districts and charter schools have until September 30, 2023 to obligate these funds, PDE must award ESSER II funds to LEAs within one year from PDE's receipt of the funds – meaning PDE must make all ESSER II awards to LEAs by January 6, 2022.

**ESSER II funds that are not awarded to LEAs by January 6, 2022 must be returned to the U.S. Department of Education (USDE).** There will be no way for school districts and charter schools to receive ESSER II funding once these funds are returned to USDE. Therefore, it is vital that LEAs submit ESSER II applications by December 10, 2021 to ensure that PDE has time to review and approve applications.

If you have questions, please reach out to your [PDE Federal Programs Division regional coordinator](#).

### ARP ESSER Status Update

As ESSER II applications and the ARP ESSER 7% set-aside applications are reviewed by PDE, we encourage school districts and charter schools to finalize and submit ARP ESSER applications to receive their share of the \$4.5 billion in ARP ESSER funds.

To date, about 38% of eligible school districts and charter schools have submitted their ARP ESSER applications to PDE. Most applications are under review, while some have been fully approved and others have been returned to LEAs for corrections. Another 60% of LEAs are in the process of completing their ARP ESSER applications; only a handful of LEAs have not yet started their applications.

### REMINDER: Prior approval forms will be approved with your ARP ESSER application

As you complete your ARP ESSER applications, please make sure to complete and submit your prior approval form, where applicable, if your LEA is engaging in construction, renovation, or other capital expenditures. Your prior approval form and your ARP ESSER application will be reviewed and approved together. Your prior approval form will not be reviewed separately, and your ARP ESSER application will not be approved without a prior approval form (where necessary).

### Can ESSER funds be used for field trips?

All expenditures made with ESSER funds must meet [the three-part test for allowability](#) (i.e., there must be an eligible use under the ARP Act for the expenditure; the expenditure must assist the LEA to prevent, prepare for, or respond to COVID-19; and the expenditure must be reasonable and necessary under Uniform Guidance). It may be an allowable use of ESSER funds for an LEA to take a group of students that had been negatively impacted by the pandemic to a local science museum for hands-on learning experiences to re-engage them in school and with their peers. However, it would not be an

allowable use of ESSER funds to pay for a routine, annual field trip that has not been adjusted or modified in any way as a result of the pandemic.

**Can an LEA use federal funds to purchase gift cards?**

Because of the difficulty in tracking whether funds have been used for an allowable purpose and the potential for waste or abuse, PDE generally prohibits the purchase of gift cards, store cards, or prepaid debit cards with federal funds. However, there are certain limited exceptions to this general rule. For example, USDE has specifically stated that “providing store cards/prepaid debit cards to purchase materials necessary for students to participate in school activities” is an allowable use of ARP-Homeless Children and Youth (HCY) funds. When using gift cards with ARP-HCY funds, an LEA must ensure all costs are reasonable and necessary and that the use of funds in this manner align with the purpose and requirements of the HCY statute.

Notably, under certain circumstances, federal ESSER funds may be used to provide a limited reimbursement (potentially via gift cards, store cards or prepaid debit cards) directly to parents or guardians to transport their students to and from in-person schooling. Otherwise, PDE will not approve the purchase or use of gift cards, store cards, or prepaid debit cards with ESSER funds.

Contact your [regional coordinator in the PDE Division of Federal Programs](#) with questions regarding the use of ESSER funds for this purpose.

**Send Us Your Feedback**

Do you have an ESSER-related question? Please let us know by sending your question to [ra-edarpesser@pa.gov](mailto:ra-edarpesser@pa.gov).