

RISE ACADEMY

ARP ESSER III Use of Funds & Safe Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services Plan

[revised January 2022]

Introduction: The amount of federal funds allocated to public schools, including charter schools, via the three ESSER grants is enormous. Rise Academy, as a small single-campus charter school, is set to receive over \$800,000 from ESSER II & ESSER III funding. The amount is so substantial that our charter school leadership has struggled to find enough ways to spend these vast sums of money in ways that are consistent with the grant guidelines.

USE OF FUNDS – ESSER II: Many of Rise Academy’s more identifiable and costly needs for the purposes of COVID prevention and mitigation as well as addressing student learning loss were significantly met with the allocation from ESSER II. These expenditures included UVC air sterilization units, online instructional resources, paper instructional workbooks, and additional sanitary supplies.

ESSER III USE OF FUNDS PLAN: Additional needs for the purposes of addressing the continued threat of COVID and remaining student learning loss are being met with ESSER III funds. Some of these expenditures are similar to those made with ESSER II funds: additional and renewed online instructional resources, more paper instructional workbooks, additional UVC air sterilization units, and sanitary supplies. However, ESSER III uses include other types of expenditure, as described below.

ESSER III Uses for COVID Response/Safe Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services.

A minimal amount of funds was originally allocated in the summer of 2021 to the prevention and mitigation of the continued threat of COVID-19. Continued expenses largely consisted of the **continued purchase of masks for student, staff, and parent use.** (The Rise Academy board of directors determined in August 2021 that our school would require masking of students, staff, and parents and visitors on campus, despite the Governor’s executive order, which is facing many legal challenges.) Some additional funds will also to be spent on the upkeep and maintenance of **hands-free soap, sanitizer, and paper towel dispensers as well as on cleaning chemicals.**

With the persistence of COVID through the summer of 2021 and into the beginning of the school year, and the surge of the Omicron variant in December 2021, **more ESSER funds have been expended on prevention and mitigation costs than originally expected.** These additional costs include additional UVC air sterilization units in all classrooms and the purchase of rapid testing kits on the open market after the original supply provided by the state was depleted.

ESSER III Uses for Summer School Sessions.

30 Additional days of school were held during the summer of 2021 for all students who failed or nearly failed the core subjects of reading comprehension and or math. This included students with low report card grades in these subjects, those who failed STAAR tests in either subject, or younger students grades K – 2nd who failed or nearly failed reading and or math on our academy's end-of-year tests.

Rise Academy plans on another summer school session during the summer of 2022 and beyond to extend learning for struggling students, including students new to our academy who often lag significantly behind those already enrolled.

In addition to these remedial summer instructional days, Rise Academy is likely to offer summer enrichment sessions for higher performing students who are interested in more **advanced learning activities** of various kinds.

ESSER III Uses During Regular School Days for Recovery from Learning Loss.

- **Reading Mastery Trainer/Consultant** – This long-time trainer/consultant for Rise Academy will have an expanded role in working with pre-K – 1st grade teachers to improve the instructional delivery of our reading and language programs at the earliest grade levels.
- **Additional 2nd Grade Teacher Assistant** – previously our two 2nd grade classes shared an assistant. But with ESSER support, each run will have a full-day assistant to support instruction.
- **Teacher Apprentice** – the best way for Rise Academy to develop new teachers is through a year-long apprenticeship, pairing the apprentice with experienced teachers who are able to model effective instruction, preparation, and classroom management.
- **Additional Digital and Physical Instructional Materials and Resources** – the renewal of annual access to digital instructional resources, such as Measuring-Up Online, are covered, as well as the purchase of more physical STAAR-oriented workbooks. Expenditures will include the start of a coding program for computer classes.
- **Special Education Software** – Region 17 has strongly advised us to purchase a particular software that facilitates the reporting and documentation requirements for special education and intervention information and data. This is a costly software program that would be difficult for our charter school to afford without ESSER support.
- **Math Academies Training** – this state-required training for early elementary teachers must be paid for by schools.
- **Diagnostic Speech Assessments** – tests for diagnosing and monitoring students with speech and language challenges are costly but necessary to fulfill speech & language services.

- **Dyslexia Training** – students identified with dyslexia must be serviced with trained personnel. Rise Academy personnel were trained in the Read Write program conducted by ESC Region 17 specialists in the summer of 2021.
- **Physical Education Equipment** – typical items and equipment used for gym classes were replenished with ESSER funds.
- **Instructional Technology** – Any additional student or instructional related technology, such as Smartboards or Chromebooks, is supported by ESSER funds.
- **Extra-Curricular Programs** – Rise Academy offers boys’ and girls’ basketball, cheerleading, and choir as its extra-curricular activities. The associated costs include coaching stipends, equipment, uniforms, and transportation costs related to use of the school bus.
- **Additional Expenditures To Be Determined** – As ESSER III funds are not subject to the “supplement—not—supplant” rule typically required for the use of federal funds, Rise leadership will continue to work to identify other ways to spend the balance of the remaining grant funds. Possibilities include supplanting certain teacher salaries and the construction of a small greenhouse for science instruction and inquiry.

SAFE RETURN TO IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION AND CONTINUITY OF SERVICES PLAN: By far, the most significant action taken by our academy to ensure the continuity of effective instruction was to require in-person attendance throughout the 2020-21 school year, with no allowance for a remote option. This continues to be our policy during the 2021-22 school year.

Rationale for In-Person Only Instruction.

If anything was learned from the initial closure of schools in the spring of 2020, it was that remote instruction was an enormous failure. This failure was not fundamentally due to the lack of technology, or connectivity. Rather, it was caused by the impossibility of controlling the learning environment with students remaining at home. Therefore, going into the new 2020-21 school year, our academy’s leaders understood it was paramount to conduct as much in-person instruction as possible. Remote instruction was only offered to students who were COVID positive or quarantining due to close contact exposure.

The benefit of this policy of in-person instruction only, with no remote option except for COVID positive or quarantining students, was proven by the results of the 2021 STARR scores. Although the performance of Rise students declined somewhat over previous years, our students scores were much stronger than most schools throughout the state of Texas. Our students’ learning loss was significantly minimized.

In-Person instruction only will continue to be the policy of Rise Academy, unless the Governor issues an executive order to close all Texas schools. In the event that an executive order

closing all schools is issued (a very unlikely scenario), Rise Academy has obtained one-to-one Chromebook correspondence for all students so that remote instruction, however ineffective, can be carried out.

Mask Mandated School.

Rise Academy has chosen, however, to defy the Governor's executive order banning a mask mandate by Texas public schools. Rise leadership reasons that if we are requiring in-person instruction only, we must at the same time do everything supported by actual evidence to prevent and mitigate the spread of COVID. And a first practical line of defense in this regard is the wearing of masks. We are confident that such an action will be strongly supported by federal education authorities, while obviously opposed by at least the state's attorney general's office. Whatever the case, all staff, all students in grades 2nd – 8th, and all parents and visitors must be masked at all times while on campus. This is an on-going requirement until the number of cases of COVID is significantly reduced.

Vaccine Mandate.

Rise Academy has also chosen, again based on overwhelming evidence, to require full vaccination of all school staff. Again, this is contrary to the Governor's executive order, while at the same time strongly supported by federal authorities. Compliance with this vaccine requirement is very high. Those few staff members refusing to comply are required to test on a weekly basis to catch any cases for which symptoms have not yet surfaced.

COVID Rapid Testing at School.

We strongly encourage staff to request testing by school personnel if they have any symptoms related to COVID. We also encourage this with parents if their children have any COVID-related symptoms. To continue such testing, it has become necessary for the school to purchase additional testing kits, as we have used all those provided by the state in the 2020-21 school year. Such kits are in short supply and are costly. But obtaining them is essential to catch cases among students and staff as soon as possible to lessen exposure to others.

Additional UVC Air Sterilization Units.

Using ESSER II funds, Rise Academy purchased sterilization units which use ultraviolet radiation to sanitize the air in all classrooms, the administrative office, and the gym. We have doubled up on these units in all school buildings using ESSER III funds. Such units are important because the HVAC units in our all-modular classrooms are not modifiable in ways that can accommodate other air ventilation improvements.

Social, Emotional, and Mental Health Needs.

Rise Academy is of the opinion that students and staff do not need counseling or other forms of therapy to endure the long stretch of the pandemic. We are largely a resilient people. What students need is the routine of consistent, in-person instruction that is as close to normal as possible. What everyone at Rise Academy needs is an environment as safe as possible, even if it requires the annoyance of wearing masks, the frequent cleaning, and the small sacrifice of personal liberty to contribute to the common good by getting vaccinated. If these two basic conditions are largely met, then the emotional and mental well-being of the vast majority of us will prevail.