



ESSER Community/Stakeholder Feedback Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management

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Key Findings

- 4,957 people provided feedback on how the ESSER funds should be spent.
- Academic needs was overwhelmingly selected as the top issue facing students.
- Parents (56.4%) and teachers (33.5%) represented the two largest response groups¹.
- “Teachers are the backbone of our District” and recruiting and retaining them was seen as the best way to strengthen the District and was the most frequently cited strategy to help SCS students.
- For student academic support strategies early literacy and interventions for students in need were ranked highest overall.
- To support educators a reduction in class size is essential. Teachers felt that additional planning time would help them as well.
- In other student support strategies, mental health and more school counselors, nurses, and psychologist were ranked highest (3.7 weighted average out of 5).

Overview

Shelby County Schools solicited feedback from the community on how to spend the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds which aim to address the ongoing impacts that the Covid-19 pandemic has on K–12 education. Respondents were asked to review various educational strategies and provide insight into which strategies they believed were needed most. The survey was open for 13 days and received 4,957 responses² in both English and Spanish³. Parents made up 56% of the responses followed by SCS teachers (33.5%)⁴. A full breakdown by demographic group can be found in Appendix B.

Top Issues Facing SCS and the Impacts of the Pandemic

Respondents selected what they saw as the top issue currently facing Shelby County students related to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, 42.0% of respondents rated academic needs as the top issue followed by social-emotional needs (15.9%). The full breakdown is shown in the table below.

Top Issues Facing SCS students Related to the Pandemic		
Issues	%	N
Academic needs	42.00%	2,021
Social-emotional needs	15.92%	766
Opportunities for social connection	5.76%	277
Mental health needs	9.08%	437
Family economic challenges	15.75%	758
Other	11.49%	553

¹ Respondent groups are not mutually exclusive.

² Response rates vary by item and can be viewed in the appendix.

³ 98.4% of responses were in English. The Department of English as a Second Language provided translation support for the responses in Spanish.



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When broken down by group-type the selections change slightly. Parents felt that the top two issues were academic needs (38.2%) and family economic challenges (18.5%). Teachers on the other hand felt that academic needs (49.9%) and social-emotional needs (16.0%) were the top priorities.

Respondents had the opportunity to write in their top issue by selecting the “other” option. Over 500 responses were recorded. People felt that more virtual options were needed. One parent/guardian said, “we need our children protected until this pandemic subsides. Virtual learning with an instructor should be an option!!!”, and a student said, “SCS need[s] to let all students 11 to 5 years old do virtual learning at home because they can't get the vaccination shot yet.” Many responses showed that people are still very concerned with contracting the virus and becoming sick. A parent shared their concern about “catching & dying of covid or bring it home and a relative die” while a teacher wrote, “teachers dying and students getting sick” is the top issue facing Shelby County.

Priority Rankings

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of various support strategies. Strategies ranked first are the more important to that respondent and those with a lower rank were less important. Weighted averages take into consideration the average for each answer choice across all rankings. A reverse weight is assigned to that choice, so that the largest weighted average represents the most preferred option overall. While both the percent of number one rankings and the weighted averages provide valuable information, the weighted averages provide more comprehensive data.

Open Ended Responses

After respondents completed the ranking items, they wrote in which issue was most important for students and why. Three thousand four hundred forty-six responses were recorded and a sample of 2,000 responses were coded for the analysis. Qualitative analysis is reported along with direct quotes at the end of each of the following sections. Additional written responses can be found in Appendix C.

District Strategies

Student Academic Support Strategies

Respondents ranked six student academic support strategies from most to least important. Early literacy was ranked most important overall (4.4 weighted average out of 6) followed very closely by interventions for students in need (4.4 weighted average). When broken down by various demographic groups these two strategies remained the most important across all groups, though parents ranked interventions slightly higher than early literacy.

Student Academic Support Strategies Rankings		
Strategies	Weighted Average	% Ranking #1
Early literacy	4.44	31.96%
Interventions for students in need	4.35	21.62%
Tutoring	3.94	13.82%
Increase virtual school opportunities	3.12	23.72%



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Increase in advanced academic opportunities (honors classes, AP classes, dual enrollment)	2.66	5.95%
Summer academic programs	2.55	2.92%

The open-ended responses did not frequently cite the student academic support strategies as the primary strategy to help students. Of these strategies early literacy was mentioned most, though it was only cited in 6% of the open-ended responses. Virtual opportunities were also commonly referenced in the written response section, though most of the calls for virtual learning dealt with safety related to the pandemic.

- “Our children cannot read. They are failing so badly. Intervention is needed and necessary. Everyone should be in a reading intervention until they hit grade level.”
- “Student academic support is most important; schools must have a researched-based method that effectively prepares students to be productive citizens who can survive and compete in the real world.”
- “Early literacy is the key to a lifetime of learning. It almost determines how a student will function in reading throughout elementary school. Students should not be in 3rd grade not knowing their letters, sounds, and sight or high frequency words.”
- “Virtual learning. I'm scared for my kids to be back in a school building.”

Other Student Support Strategies

Respondents ranked five strategies for other student supports. More mental health services was ranked highest (3.7 weighted average out of 5) followed by increasing the number of school counselors, psychologists, and nurses (3.4 weighted average). Increasing use of progressive discipline came in lowest with only 6% citing it as their number one strategy.

Other Student Support Strategies Rankings		
Strategies	Weighted Average	% Ranking #1
Mental health services	3.74	33.73%
More school counselors, school psychologists, nurses	3.39	22.24%
More assistance for special populations (e.g., students with disabilities, English learners, homeless students)	3.18	21.91%
Focus on social-emotional learning	2.77	16.11%
Increased use of progressive discipline in schools	1.97	6.01%

Mental health and social-emotional learning were the most cited “other student support strategies” in the open-ended responses. The community felt that students need to have mental and social-emotional support and stability in order to focus on their academics.

- “Mental health services and wrap-around services for students experiencing poverty, homelessness, and any current or past trauma. Children cannot learn if they do not have their basic needs and safety met.”



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- “Social and emotional needs. Our students have gone through a lot in the past couple of years.”
- “Social-emotional learning is most important because we as educators do [not] know or understand the traumatic events that possibly took place in our students lives during the course of the pandemic. Students need tools and strategies with which to cope with and process their emotions in healthy and productive ways.”

Educator Support Strategies

Respondents ranked four educator support strategies. Reducing class sizes far outranked all other choices (3.4 weighted average out of 4). This strategy was ranked by participants first 61.4% and second 22.3% of the time. Increasing the number of teachers’ assistants had the second highest weighted average (2.5), followed by professional development and increased planning time for teachers.

However, educators are best positioned to speak about their own needs. Teachers responses for this strategy varied from the overall rankings unlike teachers’ consonance with the other groups on the student strategies. Specifically, teachers echoed the group when calling for reduced class sizes (3.5 weighted average), but providing teachers more planning time was their second ranked priority (2.59 weighted average).

Educator Support Strategies Rankings				
Strategies	Overall Responses		Teacher Responses	
	Weighted Average	% Rank #1	Weighted Average	% Rank #1
Reducing class sizes	3.40	61.39%	3.52	65.20%
More teacher assistants	2.48	12.72%	2.40	9.70%
Professional development	2.03	14.38%	1.51	5.34%
More planning time	2.10	11.52%	2.59	19.76%

Class size reduction received the second highest number of mentions overall in the written responses. Twelve percent (12%) of the community felt that smaller classes would directly and measurably benefit students.

- “The most important strategy is reducing class size so teachers can devote more time to addressing students’ needs.”
- “Reducing class size allows teachers to really focus on making sure all students are academically and emotionally ready.”
- “I honestly believe that we should have more assistants for not only K–2 but 3–5 as well. The assistants can help build up the students who have lost so much learning through this pandemic.”

Strategies to Strengthen the District

Five strategies comprised the strengthening the District category. Teacher recruitment and retention was ranked most important (4.01 weighted average out of 5). After focusing on



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teachers, the community saw developing school leaders as the next strategy for strengthening Shelby County Schools (3.42 weighted average).

Educator Support Strategies Rankings		
Strategies	Weighted Average	% Ranking #1
Teacher recruitment and retention	4.01	42.33%
Develop strong school leaders	3.42	23.40%
Increased focus on equity	2.71	9.27%
School repairs/maintenance	2.63	15.85%
Increase the number of pre-Kindergarten classrooms	2.27	9.15%

Just under a quarter of the open-ended responses listed teacher recruitment and retention as the most important strategy of all. This strategy far exceeded all other strategies in the qualitative responses for its number of mentions. Developing strong school leaders was the third most cited strategy overall with mentions in about 12% of all responses. Building repairs and maintenance was ranked fourth overall and was listed in about 11% of all the written responses.

- “Teacher recruitment and retention because it is difficult to learn in an atmosphere where the instructor is always changing.”
- “Developing strong school leaders and teacher recruitment and retention are the most important strategies to help strengthen the district. School leaders help guide instruction and set the tone for school excellence. We need effective teachers in the classroom to provide top-quality instruction so students can be successful. School repairs and maintenance. The student's environment plays an important part on teacher's keeping their focus and participation.”

Other Strategies

It would be remiss not to point out that the community listed other suggestions outside the scope of the ones provided for what they believe is the best way to support our students. Specifically, safety concerns around the pandemic, technology support, and teacher compensation were listed.

- “Teachers. Start paying them what they are worth. Ensure that they know they will receive a pay raise every year and more pay for more degrees earned.”
- “During this pandemic that we're in, the main issue should be the safety of all of the children as well as staff.”
- “Updated technology in the classroom for teachers and students.”

Overall, the community hopes that SCS can recruit and retain high-quality teachers, provide smaller class sizes, develop strong leaders, support student mental health, and maintain and repair the current facilities in order to focus on students' academic needs and improve their level of education.



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Appendix A.

Response Rate by Item

Response Rates by Item	
Item	N
Top Priority	4,812
Student Academic Support	4,916
Other Student Support	4,850
Educator Support	4,780
Strengthening the District	4,766
Open-ended	3,446



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Appendix B.

Response Rate by Demographic Group

Responses by Group†	
Group	Number of Responses Received
SCS Student	118
Parent, Guardian, or SCS Family Member	2,752
SCS Board Member/Elected Official	29
School or District Administrator	(217) *
School Principal	65
Other School Admin (not principal or special education admin.)	133
District Administrator	27
Special Education Administrator	49
Teacher	1,633
School Staff (including teacher assistants, aides, and substitutes)	453
Central Office Staff	379
Community Member	(296) *
Interest Group: Students with Disabilities	77
Interest Group: English Learners	49
Interest Group: Children Experiencing Homelessness	43
Interest Group: Children in Foster Care	38
Interest Group: Migratory Students	22
Interest Group: Students who are Incarcerated	19
Interest Group: Underserved Students	83
Interest Group: Participant in Educator Professional Association (e.g., MSCEA, UEA)	47
Non-SCS Educator	86
Participant in Civil Rights Organization	43
Participant in Disability Rights Organization	28

† Groups are not mutually exclusive, e.g., an SCS parent who also teaches with the District would be counted in both the "parent, guardian, or SCS family member" and "teacher" categories.
 * These numbers represent the over-arching group respondents selected in order to get the sub-categories to appear on the survey. They are duplicative of the numbers below it.



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Appendix C.

Sample of Open-ended Responses by Category

Sample of Open-ended Responses	
Student Academic Support Strategies	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “In order to close the learning gaps and attend to learning loss, it is important for students to have access to research-based interventions that will assist in closing gaps.” • “I feel the academic needs are the most important for students because our students are so far behind and need extra support to improve their academic achievement.” • “... It is truly important that we start early in life to reach young minds while their brains are like sponges...” • “Early literacy-data driven evidence that show the benefits of solid early literacy in regards to reading comprehension and the ability to perform mathematics.” • “I believe that more assistance with special populations is the most important strategy listed above. With all these students are faced with, with the additional stressors of the pandemic, these students need more support than ever to ensure their needs are met and they are fully supported.” • “Now, more than ever, differentiated instructions and special attention to individual needs are necessary for student growth. This is best achieved through smaller groups, smaller classes, and greater attention to special needs and mental health of students.” • “1:1 high-quality tutoring because of the learning loss and the proficiency gap; also really need more social workers, counselors and nurses in schools.” • “Summer academic programs because it’ll help with the progress with catching up on learning.” 	
Other Student Support Strategies	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Additional resources in terms or personnel like health professionals, assistants, extended day programs and family resources available on school campuses would be beneficial.” • “More counselor to address the Social Emotional needs of the students.” • “Social- emotional and mental health well-being from this pandemic. It is a stressful time for everyone, although I feel the kids are struggling the most with their feelings. Anxiety and depression is the highest. We need more intervention for these kids.” • “Equity and resources because stressors at home often prohibit students from showing up to school and focusing on academics.” • “Mental Health Needs and interventions due to Covid Slides. Our High School children are suffering and needing services to cope.” • “Supports for students with special needs because this is the group that gets overlooked the most.” • “Other student support because if students are facing homelessness, emotional distress, or have a disability that is not being addressed in the school setting they will not be able to focus on their academic success.” • “Mental health-during this pandemic, we need to address the mental health needs of our students so they can focus on learning.” 	
Educator Support Strategies	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Supporting our educators. They’re the ones reaching and teaching the students. They’re the ones who’re overworked and under paid. Get them help and that will trickle down to the kids.” • “reducing class size, there are too many kids in the classroom right now for kids to get the individual attention they need.” • “More planning for teachers. I often do all my schoolwork at home and am exhausted coming into the building. Are planning times are usually taken by meetings.” • “I think it’s important to have happy, we’ll supported teachers who can creative a positive learning environment.” 	



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- “Smaller classroom sizes, more teacher assistants for all subjects, not just literacy.”
- “Interventions for students in need and reducing class size on the high school level. High school students are often left out of the discussion when it comes to class size. Our students need just as much attention as the elementary students do.”
- “Smaller class sizes More planning time for teachers Less “busy work” for teachers More resource teachers Accountability for assistant teachers and support staff.”

Strategies to Strengthen the District

- “Teachers are the backbone of our district and We need to keep those that are dedicated to growth.”
- “Strong leadership impacts staff, students, parents and community stakeholders. Start there and it begins a domino effect.”
- “More pre-kindergarten classes will help more students be ready for kindergarten and grades beyond.”
- “I ranked school repairs/maintenance at the top because that should go without saying. If the physical buildings that they have to be in all day need repairs and maintenance, it should definitely happen. Leaving a school in disrepair gives the appearance that no one really cares.”
- “Safety, focus on equity, and develop strong [school] leader. Every child should be equal when it comes to education and their safety. It doesn’t matter what grade they all are somebody’s child. With strong school leaders they will support and speak up for the well-being of that school.”
- “Teacher retention is completely ignored. Experienced teachers are leaving in droves with no attempt to keep them.”
- “Teacher recruitment and retention. We must have strong and qualified teachers and offer opportunities that encourage teachers to stay in teaching.”
- “Equity in schools is most important. All kids should have the same opportunity in schools, no matter what neighborhood they are in.”
- “Mantenimiento de las escuelas y que el alumno tenga todas facilidades materiales y ayuda con el apoyo de maestros” [Translation³: The maintenance of the schools and that the student has all the facilities and the materials and helps with the support of teachers.]
- “Strong school leaders lead strong school students.”
- “Focus on equity because not all schools have the same needs and may need additional focus to provide the necessary support for students and educators.”
- “Teacher recruitment is most important because without high quality teachers our children suffer and [become] more disengaged.”
- “Schools repairs. I feel that if a school is welcoming and inviting on the inside and outside, then students will respond to that environment.”

Other Strategies⁴

- “Retaining good teachers are important we are losing teachers to local charter schools due to salary schedule & working conditions.”
- “Virtual Learning due a global pandemic it will keep the staff & students safe from coming close contact & getting infected in school environment.”
- “Virtual schooling to keep our kids out of harm’s way we as parents don’t want our kids contracting this deadly virus.”
- “Assistance with special populations in general Ed classrooms. A teacher cannot focus a lesson while others need more help, a counselor should be able to sit in for lessons to aid with bridging the gaps to reach the student.”

⁴ Virtual opportunities specifically related to the pandemic are included in the “other strategies” section and not listed under student academic support strategies.