



October 28, 2021

Dear Chief State School Officer:

I write to you on behalf of GLSEN, the leading national organization on LGBTQ+ issues in K-12 education, to urge you to ensure that LGBTQ+ inclusion and intersectional equity are explicit components of programs and activities supported by COVID-19 Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds, including ESSER I, ESSER II, and ARP ESSER. LGBTQ+ youth, particularly those who are transgender, nonbinary, Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC), and people with disabilities, continue to experience unique and harmful impacts during this time of mass disruption and trauma.¹ In this context, ensuring all students have the opportunity to thrive and meet their full potential requires that we simultaneously work to advance racial, gender, and disability justice in our K-12 education systems.

One of the most impactful ways that State Education Agencies (SEAs) can support the use of COVID-19 relief funds to advance equity inclusive of LGBTQ+ equity is through guidance to Local Education Agencies (LEAs).² **GLSEN therefore urges you to revise or develop guidance to LEAs on implementing equitable, LGBTQ+ inclusive programming and activities supported by COVID-19 relief funds.** For example, SEAs can provide vetted vendors, as Wisconsin has done with regard to “[c]reating safe and supportive environments for LGBTQ Youth,”³ and detail authorized uses of funds by LEAs.

To address the unique impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and leverage what GLSEN has learned from decades of research on the [four supports](#) that make the greatest difference for LGBTQ+ students, **GLSEN recommends prioritizing the following programming and activities**, which are allowable uses of funds under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and therefore authorized uses of ESSER funds:

- **Mental health and other school-based wraparound support services.** SEAs can support LEAs in expanding access to LGBTQ+ affirming mental health services or coordinating resources for school-based counseling and mental health programs, such as through school-based mental health services partnership programs, and disseminating training materials, model policies, procedures, and forms, and other best practices. SEAs can also support LEAs in implementing evidence-based mental health awareness training and professional programs for school personnel.
- **Classroom or remote instruction.** SEAs can review and develop policies—including anti-bullying policies and affirming policies for transgender and nonbinary students—to ensure access to quality education both in-person and in remote learning contexts. SEAs can support the reengagement of students who experience marginalization and are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 through review and development of curricular standards that ensure the voices, stories, and contributions of LGBTQ+, BIPOC, and people with disabilities are included.
- **Summer, afterschool, and other out-of-school time programs**, including Gender-Sexuality Alliances or Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) and other peer networks of support. SEAs can provide curricular standards materials, disseminate best practices for supporting and advising GSAs and other inclusive clubs and activities, and assist LEAs in leveraging community partnerships.
- **Educator training and professional development.** SEAs can provide training and technical assistance on topics such as cultural competence and responsiveness, implicit bias, gender inclusivity, and other inclusive teaching practices. SEAs can also support teacher and staff leadership in LGBTQ+ equity efforts related to COVID-19 at the local, state, or national levels.



SEAs and LEAs have discretion to use COVID-19 relief funds in ways that advance intersectional, LGBTQ+ inclusive equity. Further, the U.S. Department of Education (USED) has acknowledged the disparate impact of COVID-19 on LGBTQ+ youth and advised that state and local efforts consider disparities experienced by LGBTQ+ youth—especially those who are BIPOC—including in the following resources:

- USED’s Office of Civil Rights’ (OCR) *Letter to Educators: Students at Risk for Self-Harm or Suicide Dear Educator* acknowledges the impact of COVID-19 on all students and the “increased risk for self-harm or suicide” that “students of color and LGBTQ+ students” may experience.⁴
- USED’s *Strategies for Using American Rescue Plan Funding to Address the Impact of Lost Instructional Time* details the mental health impacts of the pandemic on LGBTQ+ youth, advises replacing punitive discipline with restorative practices to combat disparities, and urges programs and activities that reengage and support youth who have been consistently absent, including “LGBTQ+ students, especially LGBTQ+ students who are Black or Native American.”⁵
- The *ED COVID-19 Handbook, Volume 2: Roadmap to Reopening Safely and Meeting All Students’ Needs* includes the same acknowledgement that appeared in Volume 1 (above), applies an intersectional lens in discussing how “LGBTQ+ students, especially those who are Black or Native American, are more likely than others to be homeless,” and affirms the need for “identity-safe classrooms and schools that support our students who are LGBTQ+.”⁶
- The *ED COVID-19 Handbook, Volume 1* “recognizes the unique challenges students in underserved communities face, including students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, LGBTQ+ students, English learners, students with disabilities, American Indian and Alaska Native students, students who are migratory, students in foster care, students in correctional facilities, and students experiencing homelessness.”⁷
- *Education in a Pandemic: The Disparate Impacts of COVID-19 on America’s Students*, includes LGBTQ+ students among those disproportionately impacted and clarifies how pre-pandemic disparities were exacerbated by the pandemic.⁸

As USED’s guidance makes clear, addressing the disparate impact of COVID-19 on LGBTQ+ youth, particularly those who are BIPOC and people with disabilities, requires more than a return to a pre-pandemic normal. We urge SEAs to ensure COVID-19 relief funds advance LGBTQ+ inclusion and intersectional equity in K-12 education systems.

Thank you for considering these recommendations and resources. We welcome the opportunity to speak with you and your staff to discuss these in further detail. For questions or additional information, please contact Aaron Ridings, Director of Public Policy and Interim Chief of Staff, by phone at 202-802-0468 or email at aaron.ridings@glSEN.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Melanie Willingham-Jaggers".

Melanie Willingham-Jaggers
Interim Executive Director

Enclosed:

[Advancing LGBTQ+ Inclusive Equity through COVID-19 Relief Funds](#) (factsheet)

[States’ Use of the Every Student Succeeds Act to Advance LGBTQ+ Equity: Assessment of State Plans and Recommendations](#) (report)

Notes

¹ The Trevor Project, National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health 2021, “Covid-19” (2021).

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2021/?section=Covid19>.

Salerno, J. P., Williams, N. D., Gattamorta, K. A. (2020). LGBTQ populations: Psychologically vulnerable communities in the COVID-19 pandemic. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy* 12, Suppl 1. doi:10.1037/tra0000837.

Fish, J. N., McInroy, L. B., Pacey, M. S., Williams, N. D., Henderson, S., Levine, D. S., Edsall, R. N. (2020). “I’m Kinda Stuck at Home with Unsupportive Parents Right Now”: LGBTQ Youths’ Experiences with COVID-19 and the Importance of Online Support. *The Journal of Adolescent Health* 67, 3. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.06.002.

Quirk, Abby. (July 7, 2020). Mental Health Support for Students of Color During and After the Coronavirus Pandemic.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/news/2020/07/28/488044/mental-health-support-students-color-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

Byard, E., Willingham-Jaggers, M. (October 19, 2020). As LGBTQ Students, Especially Those of Color, Head Back to School, They Must Be Kept Safe — & Not Just From COVID-19. *The 74*. <https://www.the74million.org/article/as-lgbtq-students-especially-those-of-color-head-back-to-school-they-must-be-kept-safe-not-just-from-covid-19/>.

² Wei, T., Johnson, E. (2020). “How States and Districts Support Evidence Use in School Improvement,” Institute of Education Sciences. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/2020004/pdf/2020004.pdf> (Accessed March 20, 2021).

³ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. ESSER Funds (I, II, and III) Guidance on Public Allowable Costs. Available at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1K78BQsDluMQ0aDTzd0Qb1gOKmLXVhfRYkBzXm6S3bCY/edit> (Accessed October 20, 2021).

⁴ U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights. (October 13, 2021). Letter to Educators: Students at Risk for Self-Harm or Suicide. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/correspondence/stakeholders/educator-202110-students-suicide-risk.pdf>.

⁵ U.S. Department of Education. (August 2021). Strategies for Using American Rescue Plan Funding to Address the Impact of Lost Instructional Time. Washington, DC. Available at: <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/coronavirus/lost-instructional-time.pdf>. (pp. 4, 11-12).

⁶ U.S. Department of Education. (April 2021). ED COVID-19 Handbook, Vol. 2: Roadmap to Reopening Safely and Meeting All Students’ Needs. Washington, DC. <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/coronavirus/reopening-2.pdf>. (pp. 9, 12, 14).

⁷ U.S. Department of Education. (February 2021 (Updated April 2021)). ED COVID-19 Handbook, Vol. 1: Strategies for Safely Reopening Elementary and Secondary Schools. Washington, DC. <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/coronavirus/reopening.pdf>. (p. 1).

⁸ U.S. Department of Education. (2021). Education in a Pandemic: The Disparate Impacts of COVID-19 on America’s Students. Washington, DC. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/20210608-impacts-of-covid19.pdf>. (pp. 1, 27-30, 45-48).