

Montana ESSER Spotlight

Arlee Joint School District

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Arlee Joint School District (Arlee), located 17 miles north of Missoula on the Flathead Indian Reservation, serves 416 students and consists of one elementary school, one junior high school, and one high school. Approximately 36% of Arlee students are American Indian.¹ The district received nearly \$3.8 million in three rounds in 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund.²

Montana’s Office of Public Instruction (OPI) requested support from REL Northwest to spotlight districts that were using ESSER funds to increase student re-engagement. Using the methods described on Page 3, REL Northwest identified Arlee as a district to spotlight and engaged in a structured interview with a district administrator.

Identifying priorities for spending ESSER funds

The district administrator who was interviewed shared that Arlee district leaders created a committee, including the school board, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes Tribal Education Department, the tribal council, and community members, to identify priorities for ESSER spending. MAP³ scores showed that Native American students were disproportionately affected by the loss of instructional time as they were less likely to return to in-person learning even after COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were lifted. To improve learning, the committee prioritized tutoring and access to instructional materials that could be used flexibly in blended learning settings. The committee worked with the Tribal Education Department to ensure the strategies would work for Native American students and their families.

Strategies for improving student re-engagement and learning

Small Group Tutoring

Arlee used ESSER funds to hire reading interventionists, paraprofessionals, and a librarian. These additional staff provide essential instructional services, particularly tutoring to address students’ learning needs. As the district administrator stated, “*We’ve noticed that a lot of our Native Americans do not feel comfortable in a large group setting when they’re lower in their educational attainment ... yet they don’t necessarily like the one-on-one tutoring either ... we’re doing small groups, 3-4 kids max with one staff member, and we’ve really discovered that’s paying off.*”

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ESSER funding received:²

ESSER I: \$245,403
ESSER II: \$1,074,188
ESSER III: \$2,477,223
TOTAL: \$3,796,814



¹Data source: <https://nces.ed.gov/Programs/Edge/ACSDashboard/3002250>.

²Data source: [https://gems.opi.mt.gov/esser as of 3/7/2023](https://gems.opi.mt.gov/esser%20as%20of%203/7/2023) (see callout box for additional data).

³MAP (Measures of Academic Progress, NWEA): <https://www.nwea.org/map-growth/>

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The district administrator also shared, “we believe this is the first year where our Native American students have actually outscored our other populations in our MAP scores” and reflected, “we can see that [having more staff] has absolutely had the biggest impact on our students being more successful ... in smaller groups [for tutoring].” Spring 2022 was the first time that Arlee saw Native American students score higher than non-Native American students in math in grades 3-6. Initially, Arlee focused on math and plans to prioritize reading as the next focal area for the additional staff in support of improved student learning.

Investing in Instructional Materials that Support Blended Learning

Arlee purchased several instructional materials with ESSER funds, many of which can be used outside of the classroom. For example, in 2021 the district began offering Imagine Learning,⁴ a virtual learning program, to K-12 students seeking virtual learning, credit recovery, or access to courses that the district does not offer in person. The district administrator interviewed indicated that Arlee’s tribal liaison helped select materials, “growing up on the reservation, she knows almost all of these families and she would make personal house visits to find out what would work best in those homes.”

Sustaining new strategies after ESSER

Arlee has started planning for 2023-24 school year staffing needs. The district administrator shared, “we’re not willing to give up any staff,” and as a result, are reimagining how teachers can be redistributed across the district. For instance, they may reassign a teacher from junior high PE to support elementary reading intervention. Arlee also seeks to use general funds to retain new staff members and maintain its investment in instructional materials. As Arlee is on the Flathead Indian Reservation, the district also receives federal Impact Aid, which will help to sustain the new staff and programming.

Continuing communication with the community

Arlee publishes a monthly newsletter and maintains an active social media presence to keep community members abreast of the district’s priorities and efforts. The district benefits from the networks of community that already exist on the Flathead Reservation. Members of the Indian education committees and the Tribal Council are active participants in district activities.

Lessons learned regarding the spending of ESSER funds

The following are key takeaways from the interview with an Arlee district administrator regarding the spending of ESSER funds:

- *Leverage community networks.*
According to the district administrator, much of Arlee’s success comes from its networks of community on the reservation. In addition to robust collaboration among district officials, Arlee also works together with Tribal Education Department leaders and tribal council members. Community partners beyond the district administration hold the district accountable to families and to community priorities.

⁴<https://www.imaginelearning.com>

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- *Devote resources to addressing specific groups of students' needs.*
One theme that emerged in the interview was that Arlee prioritizes its understanding of the specific needs of its students, particularly Native American students who comprise over a third of the Arlee student population. With Arlee's tribal liaison, the district noticed that Native American students were less likely to return to in-person school and addressed that need (see previous Imagine Learning example). The district also provided educational access to students over the age of 19 by allowing them to use Imagine Learning to complete the courses they need to graduate.
- *Create buy-in for innovative solutions.*
The district administrator believes that the unprecedented circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic allowed Arlee to provide online learning options for its students. This solution coupled with an open line of communication between the district and its families has been a key pathway to success.

Methods

To select districts to feature, REL Northwest first examined data from Montana's ESSER Annual Reporting to identify a pool of districts for consideration. To be included in the pool, as of July 22, 2022, districts had to have expended at least 50% or more of their ESSER funds in the "Lost Instructional Time" category.

Districts were then categorized by their student enrollment size and locale (rurality) into one of three types: mid-sized district, small-rural district, and tribal nation district. Next, REL Northwest identified districts that had included evidence-based activities that are likely to directly improve student learning outcomes (e.g., tutoring, student-facing technology investments, after-school programming) in their grant applications to the Montana OPI. REL Northwest then identified 2-3 potential districts that met the above criteria within each type of district. REL Northwest then conducted prescreening interviews with administrators at these districts.

After conducting screening interviews with the district candidates, REL Northwest selected Belt Public Schools (Belt) for the small-rural district, Miles City Unified School District for the mid-sized district, and Arlee Joint School District for the tribal nation district. The final selection of the districts was based on two factors: districts that included student-outcome focused programming in their ESSER plans and of those districts, which ones were far enough along in implementation to share information about their planning phase, implementation phase, and evaluation plans.

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