

Montana ESSER Spotlight

Miles City Unified School District

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Miles City Unified School District¹ (Miles City), located in rural southeastern Montana, serves nearly 1,500 students and consists of one high school, one middle school, and four elementary schools. The district received \$5.3 million in three rounds in the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund.

Montana's Office of Public Instruction (OPI) requested REL Northwest's support to spotlight districts that were using ESSER funds to increase student re-engagement. Using the methods described on Page 4, REL Northwest identified Miles City as a district to spotlight. REL Northwest then engaged in two structured interviews. The first interview included a district administrator and a district staff person, and the second included a school administrator and a school staff person.

Identifying priorities for spending ESSER funds

To identify priorities for spending ESSER funds, Miles City surveyed over 450 families, students, teachers, district staff, and community members, and analyzed local assessment and standards-based report card data .

Creating a safe learning environment and behavioral and mental health emerged as top priorities for Miles City based on the survey data. As the school staff person stated in their interview, "behavior affects students' academics." The school administrator elaborated, "with the behaviors I see in the office, kids just need so much help with anxiety and depression and anger management, and those big social skills that seem to be lacking even at the middle school level."

Academically, standardized assessments (MAP⁴ and Smarter Balanced⁵) from the 2021-22 school year revealed concerning performance for students in grades 2 and 10 in 2023. The younger students were preschoolers when schools closed in the spring of 2020. When they entered kindergarten during the 2020-2021 school year, Miles City shifted from full-day to half-day kindergarten to enable smaller classes (as well as social distancing). Reflecting on test scores, the district administrator said, "Now those kids

Miles City United
School District ESSER
funding received:³

ESSER I: \$380,212

ESSER II: \$1,543,107

ESSER III: \$3,391,133

TOTAL: \$5,314,452



¹ Miles City Elementary District and Custer County High School merged to become Miles City Unified School District.

² Data source: <https://gems.opi.mt.gov/school-district-data> for Miles City Elementary District and Custer County High School combined.

³ Data source: <https://gems.opi.mt.gov/essser-as-of-3/7/2023>.

⁴ MAP (Measures of Academic Progress): <https://www.nwea.org/the-map-suite/>.

⁵ Smarter Balanced: <https://smarterbalanced.org/member-state/montana/>.

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are second graders, and we are seeing how far behind they are." The district administrator also indicated that high school sophomores in 2023, who missed middle school instruction due to spring 2020 school closures, also scored lower on standardized assessments than students in years before the pandemic.

The district focused on two key strategies to address student mental health issues and to provide additional instructional time: 1) investing in a new technology platform to assess and support students' mental health needs, and 2) hiring or reallocating staff for before- and after-school programs and summer school.

Strategies for improving student re-engagement and learning

Addressing student and staff behavioral and mental health needs

Miles City school counselors explored tools designed to identify, monitor, and address behavioral and mental health needs as prioritized by the survey findings. Miles City school counselors sought input from Montana districts that had used specific tools and attended demonstrations of various platforms. Based on these conversations, Miles City school counselors recommended the Panorama system⁶.

The Panorama system uses student surveys and quick check-ins to identify needs, suggest appropriate interventions, and monitor progress. The platform offers an integrated "playbook" with specific strategies and multi-tiered system of supports. Teachers administer the survey to younger students, while older students can use the system independently. The school staff person explained, "*if a high school student is too intimidated to walk to the counseling center and ask for help ... they can use the [Panorama] check-ins at any point.*" As the platform is compatible with Montana's learning management system, PowerSchool, district educators can discover patterns and relationships between students' grades, attendance, behaviors, and well-being.

In early 2023, 98% (over 1,400) of Miles City K-12 students completed surveys assessing their behavior and mental health needs, specifically in the areas of supportive relationships, classroom effort, self-management, social awareness, growth mindset, learning strategies, and emotional regulation. Interviewees shared that based on survey data from 341 middle school students, initial results suggest that emotional regulation is the highest need for middle school students. The school counselor will determine appropriate interventions using the Panorama "playbook." Additionally, the school counselor intends to use weekly check-in data to inform which tier of intervention is best suited for students and to work with students during their advisory period.

The district also used funds for guest speakers to offer professional learning to staff on mental health topics. For example, one guest speaker presented the brain research behind trauma-informed practices. More than 100 district staff (of approximately 127) participated. The district built an ongoing relationship with the speaker. As the district administrator explained, "*If we have a difficult situation with a student [that] we're not understanding ... because we can't figure out what the causes are, [we] will email her and she will respond back within minutes.*"

⁶ [Panorama Education](#) is a technology platform that offers tools to improve student academic progress and well-being.

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Expanding summer school and before- and after-school programming

In 2022 Miles City hired additional teachers and expanded summer school from one month to three months. Summer school sessions focused on math and reading in small K-6 student groups. To further increase instructional time, the district added before-school programming to three mornings a week and after-school programming two days a week for 20 minutes of additional support in any subject. Teachers refer students for before- or after-school help. As a result, the district administrator believes the district has been better able to identify and respond to student learning gaps.

Sustaining strategies after ESSER

According to the district administrator, although the district hired new staff, it balanced its budget: *"The staff is already here. Especially for Panorama ... those are existing counselors, existing staff members. The other staff that we have hired have largely been for tech support because of all the increased technology usage that came with remote learning. And so probably the need for that should wane."* The district also hired three part-time technology integration specialists to serve the grade bands K-5, 6-8, and 9-12 for this technology support.

Interviewees shared that Miles City did not eliminate positions. Rather, the district intentionally chose not to fill positions when they were vacated, such as when there was attrition in elementary grades with fewer students or when a half-time music teacher left the position .

Continuing communication with the community

Miles City communicates district updates and invites input from the local community in various ways: through monthly school board meetings, the local newspaper, social media, and the PowerSchool messaging platform.

Lessons learned regarding the spending of ESSER funds

The following are key takeaways from the interviews with Miles City staff regarding the spending of ESSER funds:

- *Solicit input from multiple audiences before implementation.*
Interviewees shared that Miles City demonstrated a high commitment to community, family, and staff input by administering surveys to identify and re-assess needs. School counselors took the time to find the best behavior and mental health monitoring system for their district before recommending it to the district administration. Interviewees stated that this process, coupled with Miles City's efforts to survey staff, families, and the local community throughout the implementation process have contributed to the district's success. Interviewees expressed that Miles City is an exemplar for districts looking to create local buy-in and build collaboration across the Miles City community.

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- *Identify critical staffing needs and capacity.*
The district administrator interviewed emphasized the centrality of having a grants manager to research allowable expenditures and ensure compliance with ESSER regulations. The district administrator interviewed shared that at the school level, turnover among both instructional and administrative staff posed an obstacle to implementation, though the district avoided staffing shortages and layoffs through careful reassignment. For example, an art teacher at the middle school who also holds an English degree was assigned to teach English classes at the high school.
- *Actively monitor the use of funds and consistently report expenditures through an official channel.*
Interviewees shared that to demonstrate sound financial management, Miles City shares board agendas and materials to keep its school board apprised of all spending levels, showing accountability to the public that the district is being good stewards of public dollars.
- *Build upon existing relationships and infrastructure rather than creating new ones.*
Interviewees shared that Miles City school counselors already collaborated regularly, allowing them to work well together in new ways during the pandemic. In addition, ESSER dollars went toward expanding the district's existing summer school programs, which district officials cited as a success during their interviews.

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 NW 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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