

SCHOOL + STATE
FINANCE PROJECT

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DISTRICT LEADER SURVEY RESULTS

Survey in Field: January 29 – March 1, 2024

About the Survey

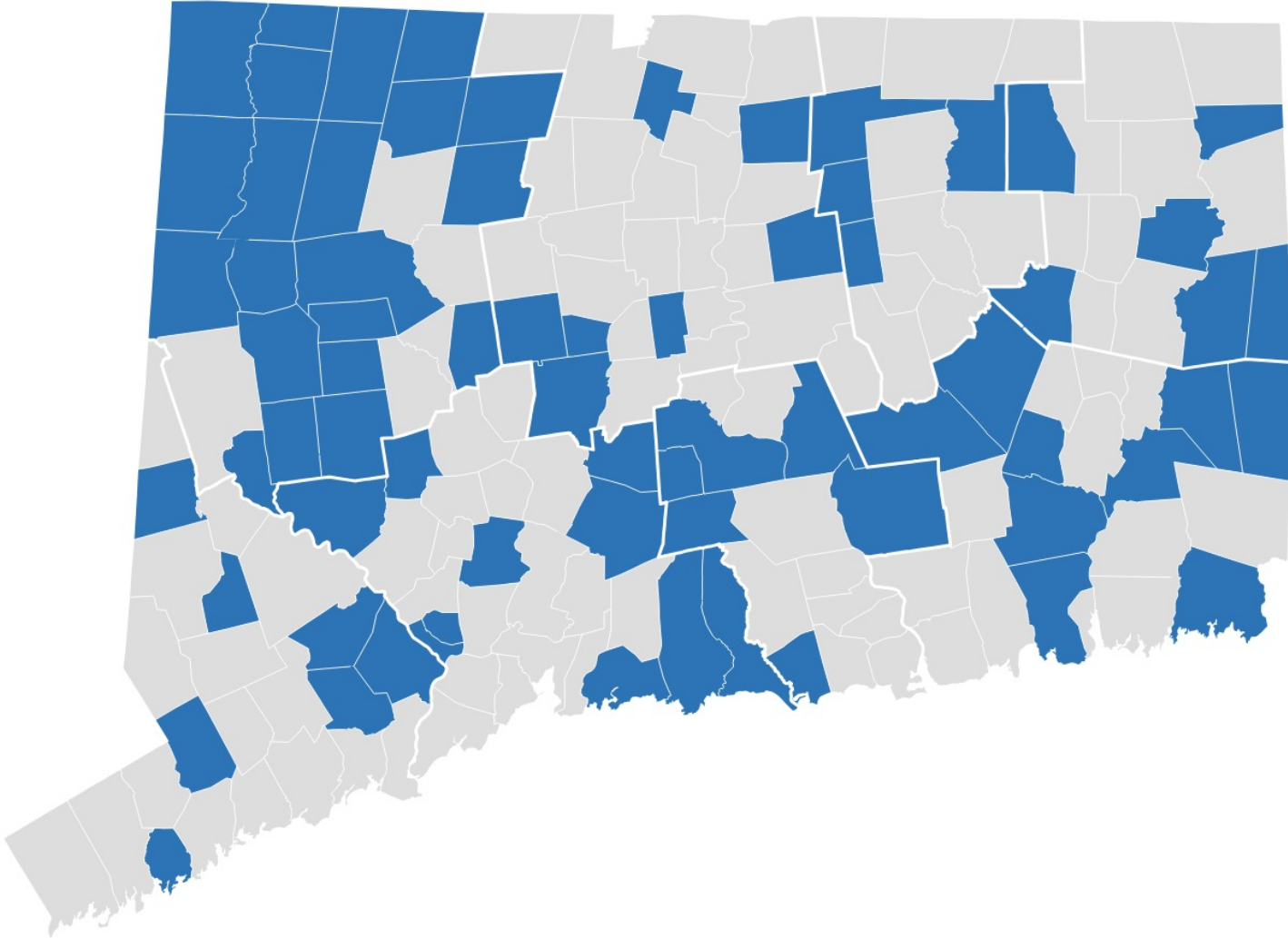
- Partnered with the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents
- Survey in the field from January 29 to March 1, 2024
- Districts across Connecticut are at risk of severe fiscal cliffs when ESSER funds expire — potentially causing significant cuts to programs, services, and/or staff if additional revenue is not realized.
- With the deadlines to allocate and use these federal relief funds quickly approaching, and recent research showing how the loss of ESSER funds will affect district finances, we created and distributed a survey to help quantify how the expiration of ESSER funds will impact districts, staff, and students.
- Aim of the survey was to learn how districts will be impacted by the loss of ESSER funds and what the expiration of this federal aid means for programs, services, and staffing levels.

Who took the survey?

- Survey was emailed to **every superintendent and RESC executive director**
- **Included 15 questions (all optional)**, plus areas at the end of each section for participants to provide additional information or comments
- **60 district leaders completed the survey**, including 14 from Alliance Districts
- **Survey representation by DRG**

DRG A	DRG B	DRG C	DRG D	DRG E	DRG F	DRG G	DRG H	DRG I	N/A
2 districts	4 districts	11 districts	9 districts	4 districts	5 districts	11 districts	1 district	1 district	11 districts

Districts Represented by Survey Participants



KEY FINDINGS

Key Findings

- **95% of district leaders** surveyed said the loss of ESSER funding will have at least some impact on students in their district, with 76% saying students would be impacted moderately to a great deal.
- **Over 80% of district leaders** surveyed believe the loss of ESSER funding will make it more difficult to:
 - Address student learning needs
 - Help students with greater learning needs (ex. students with disabilities, multilingual learners, students living in poverty)
 - Improve student performance
 - Address student mental health needs
- Tutoring/academic improvement programs, summer learning programs, and student mental health services are the **most likely programs and services to be cut or eliminated when ESSER funding expires.**
 - Cuts are estimated to **directly impact nearly 64,000 students**
- **Top three challenges districts are currently facing:**
 - Increasing student mental health needs (90%)
 - Rising special education costs (88.3%)
 - Increasing student learning needs (80%)

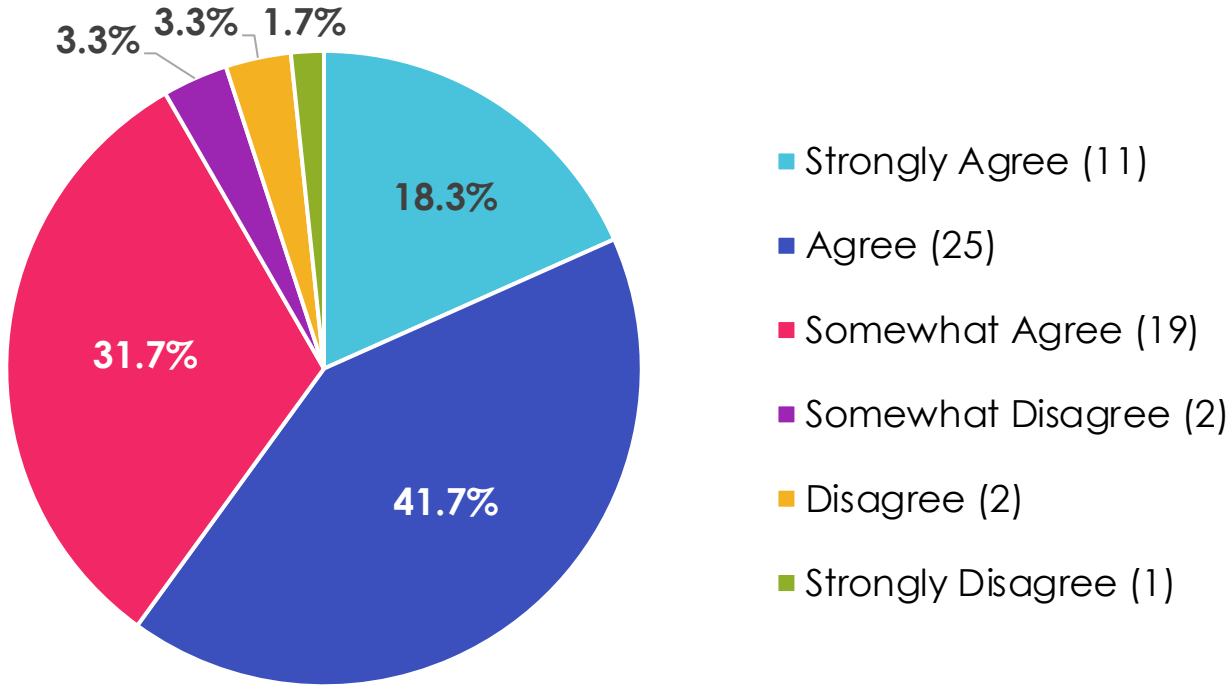
Key Findings cont.

- **Paraeducators, mental health professionals, and tutors** are the positions most likely to be cut, eliminated, or left open when districts lose ESSER funding.
 - An estimated **257 positions are expected to be cut, eliminated, or left open.**
- Teachers are most likely to be impacted by **cuts to professional development/training, cuts to support staff and teaching positions, and increased class sizes** when ESSER funds expire.
- **96.1% of district leaders** surveyed agreed at least in part that their district accomplished what it set out to achieve in its ESSER spending plans.
- While most districts did not deviate from their ESSER I and II spending plans, **41.2% of district leaders surveyed said their district did deviate from its initial ESSER III spending plan.**

IMPACT OF ESSER FUNDS

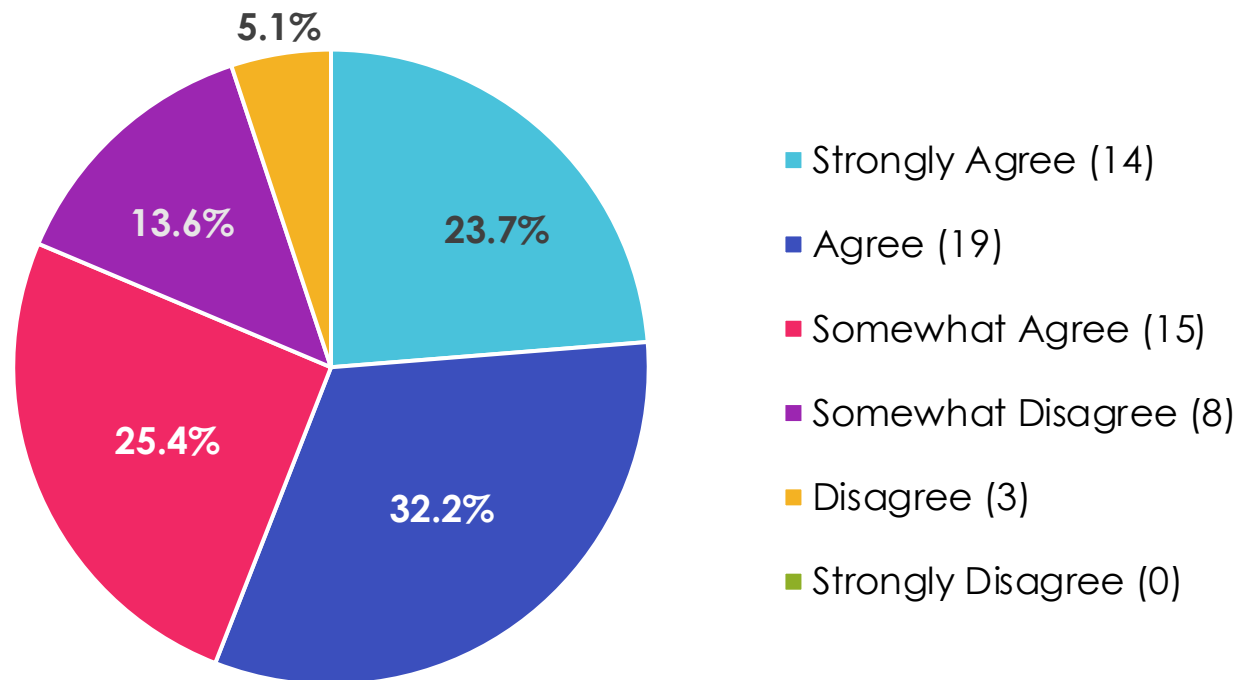
District leaders overwhelmingly said ESSER funds met the needs created by COVID-19

- **92% of district leaders** surveyed said the ESSER funds their district received adequately met the needs and challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic.



District leaders believe ESSER funds helped address existing needs and challenges

- **81% of district leaders** surveyed said the ESSER funds their district received helped address needs and challenges that were present before the COVID-19 pandemic.



Top Challenges Currently Facing Districts

Challenge	% Selected	# Selected
1. Increasing student mental health needs	90%	54
2. Rising special education costs	88.3%	53
3. Increasing student learning needs	80%	48
4. Complying with state mandates	78.3%	47
5. Financial challenges/lack of funding	71.7%	43
6. Rising general education costs (not including SpEd)	65%	39
7. Staff (non-teachers) recruitment/retention	56.7%	34
8. Need for new facilities or building renovations	55%	33
9. Chronic absenteeism	53.3%	32
10. Teacher recruitment/retention	43.3%	26
11. Declining enrollment	25%	15
12. Increasing enrollment and overcrowding	6.7%	4

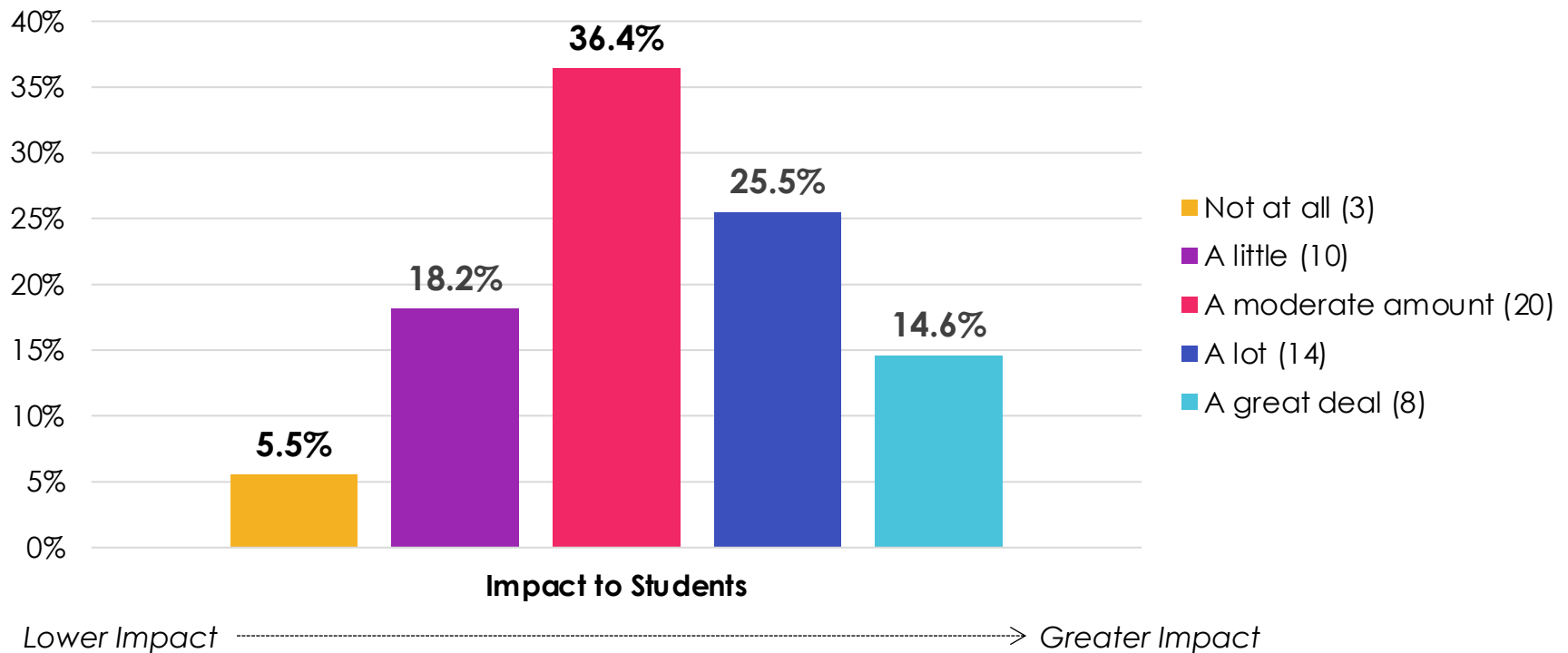
Top Challenges Currently Facing Alliance Districts

Challenge	% Selected	# Selected
1. Rising special education costs	100%	14
2. Chronic absenteeism	85.7%	12
3. Financial challenges/lack of funding	78.6%	11
T4. Complying with state mandates	71.4%	10
T4. Increasing student learning needs	71.4%	10
T4. Increasing student mental health needs	71.4%	10
T7. Staff (non-teachers) recruitment/retention	64.3%	9
T7. Teacher recruitment/retention	64.3%	9
T9. Need for new facilities or building renovations	50%	7
T9. Rising general education costs (not including SpEd)	50%	7
T11. Declining enrollment	14.3%	2
T11. Increasing enrollment and overcrowding	14.3%	2

ELIMINATION OF ESSER FUNDS: IMPACT TO STUDENTS

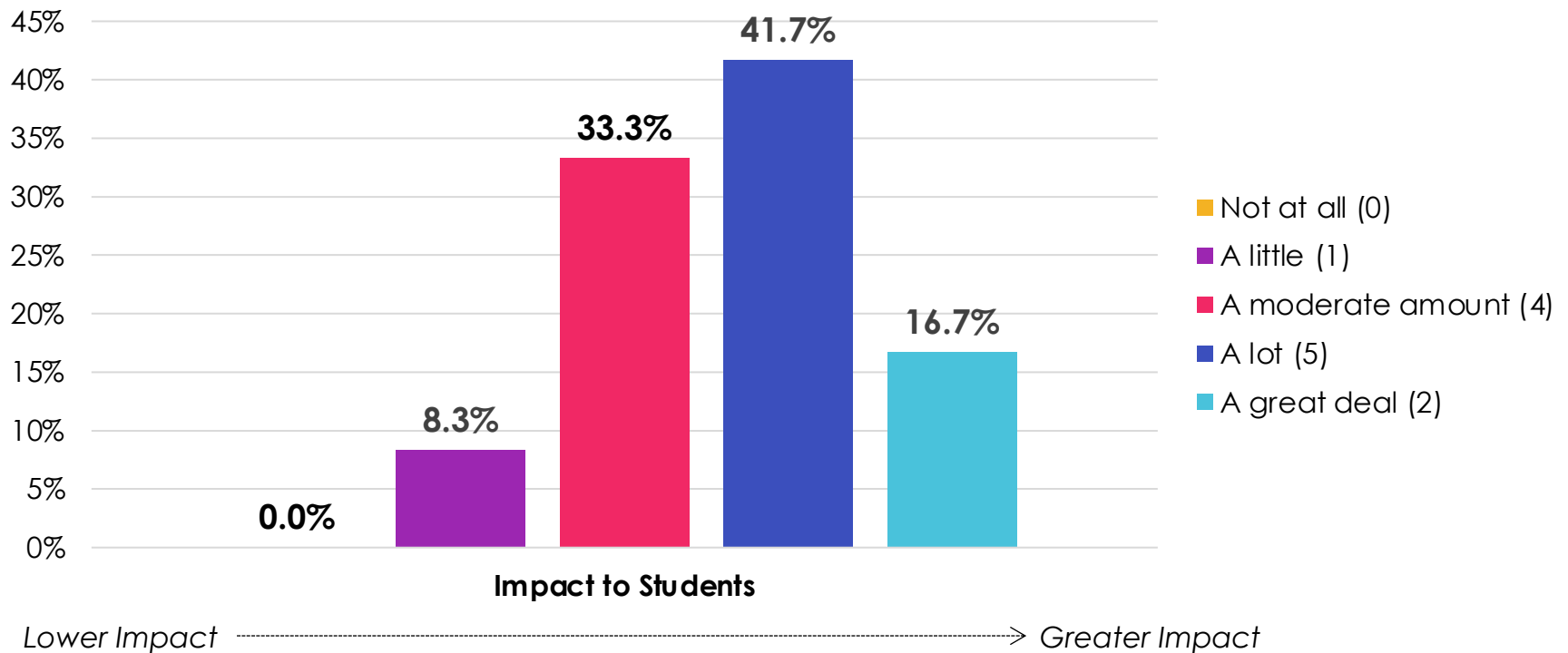
Almost unanimously, district leaders believe the loss of ESSER funding will impact their students

- **95% of district leaders** surveyed said the loss of ESSER funding will have at least some impact on students in their district.
- **76% of district leaders** said their students would be impacted moderately to a great deal.



Leaders from Alliance Districts believe the loss of ESSER funding will impact students in their districts to a greater extent than district leaders surveyed overall

- **100% of Alliance District leaders** surveyed said the loss of ESSER funding will have at least some impact on students in their district.
- **92% of Alliance District leaders** said their students would be impacted moderately to a great deal.



Loss of ESSER funds will make it more difficult to address student needs and improve performance

- The expiration of federal COVID-relief aid will make it more difficult to do the following according to district leaders surveyed.

	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	TOTAL
Address student learning needs	30.4% (17)	32.1% (18)	25% (14)	87.5% (49)
Help students with greater learning needs (ex. students with disabilities, multilingual learners, students living in poverty)	30.9% (17)	23.6% (13)	32.7% (18)	87.3% (48)
Improve student performance	26.8% (15)	44.6% (25)	14.3% (8)	85.7% (48)
Address student mental health needs	20% (11)	29.1% (16)	34.6% (19)	83.6% (46)
Reduce chronic absenteeism	25.5% (14)	32.7% (18)	10.9% (6)	69.1% (38)
Increase graduation rates	32.7% (17)	19.2% (10)	5.8% (3)	57.7% (30)

Alliance District leaders believe at even higher rates that student needs and performance will be impacted when ESSER funding expires

- The expiration of federal COVID-relief aid will make it more difficult to do the following according to Alliance District leaders surveyed.

	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	TOTAL
Address student learning needs	33.3% (4)	33.3% (4)	33.3% (4)	100% (12)
Help students with greater learning needs (ex. students with disabilities, multilingual learners, students living in poverty)	25% (3)	16.7% (2)	58.3% (7)	100% (12)
Improve student performance	41.7% (5)	33.3% (4)	25% (3)	100% (12)
Address student mental health needs	25% (3)	33.3% (4)	41.7% (5)	100% (12)
Reduce chronic absenteeism	15.4% (2)	46.2% (6)	30.8% (4)	92.3% (12)
Increase graduation rates	30% (3)	30% (3)	30% (3)	90% (9)

District leaders outlined a variety of student programs and services to be cut or eliminated when ESSER funding expires

- The expiration of federal COVID-relief aid will result in cutting or eliminating the following programs and services according to district leaders surveyed.

Program/Service	% Selected	# Selected	Est. # of Students Impacted
Tutoring/academic improvement programs	43.4%	23	11,700
Summer learning programs	35.9%	19	9,867
Student mental health services	28.3%	15	7,716
Social-emotional learning programs	24.5%	13	22,924
After-school programs	22.6%	12	2,689
Community and family engagement programs	13.2%	7	1,677
Chronic absenteeism programs	3.8%	2	366
Other program or service	22.6%	12	6,885
Not applicable	22.6%	12	-

Other programs and services to be cut/eliminated

- District leaders named the following programs and services that would be cut or eliminated as a result of ESSER funding expiring.
 - “Potential for reduced literacy and math coaches at the elementary level”
 - “Director of Curriculum and Instruction”
 - “Intervention services and coaching”
 - “Coaching to support science of reading”
 - “Instructional specialists – math”
 - “Professional development related to teaching instructional strategies”

ELIMINATION OF
ESSER FUNDS:
IMPACT TO
TEACHERS & STAFF

Loss of ESSER funding is expected to result in cuts to professional development, support staff, and teaching positions

- The expiration of federal COVID-relief aid will impact teachers in the following ways according to district leaders surveyed.

Program/Service	% Selected	# Selected
Cuts to professional development/training	47.2%	25
Cuts to support staff (ex. paraeducators, tutors)	47.2%	25
Cuts to teaching positions	32.1%	17
Increased class sizes	32.1%	17
Increased workloads	26.4%	14
Hiring freezes	9.4%	5
Other	9.4%	5
Not applicable	24.5%	13

Alliance District leaders surveyed were more likely to say cuts to professional development and support staff will occur as a result of the elimination of ESSER funding

- The expiration of federal COVID-relief aid will impact teachers in the following ways according to Alliance District leaders surveyed.

Program/Service	% Selected	# Selected
Cuts to professional development/training	81.8%	9
Cuts to support staff (ex. paraeducators, tutors)	63.6%	7
Cuts to teaching positions	27.3%	3
Increased class sizes	27.3%	3
Increased workloads	45.5%	5
Hiring freezes	18.2%	2
Other	9.1%	1
Not applicable	0%	0

Paraeducators, mental health professionals most likely positions to be cut, eliminated, or left open

- The expiration of federal COVID-relief aid will result in cutting, eliminating, or leaving open positions in the following categories according to district leaders surveyed.

Program/Service	% Selected	# Selected	Est. # of Positions
Paraprofessionals	30.2%	16	76
Mental health professionals (ex. counselors, psychologists, social workers)	28.3%	15	36
Tutors	26.4%	14	76
General education teachers	22.6%	12	43.5
Special education teachers	7.6%	4	7
Nurses	1.9%	1	1.5
Bilingual/English Learner teachers	0%	0	0
Other staff positions	18.9%	10	17
Not applicable	32.1%	17	-

Other staff positions to be cut, eliminated, or left open

- District leaders named the following other positions that would be cut, eliminated, or left open as a result of ESSER funding expiring.
 - Summer school staff and teaching positions
 - Math and literacy coaches
 - Director of Curriculum and Instruction
 - “Any staff beyond the core staff that were funded by ESSER”
 - Interventionists and coaches
 - Speech and language teacher
 - Long-term substitute teachers

Loss of ESSER funds will make it more difficult to recruit mental health professionals, SpEd teachers, and tutors

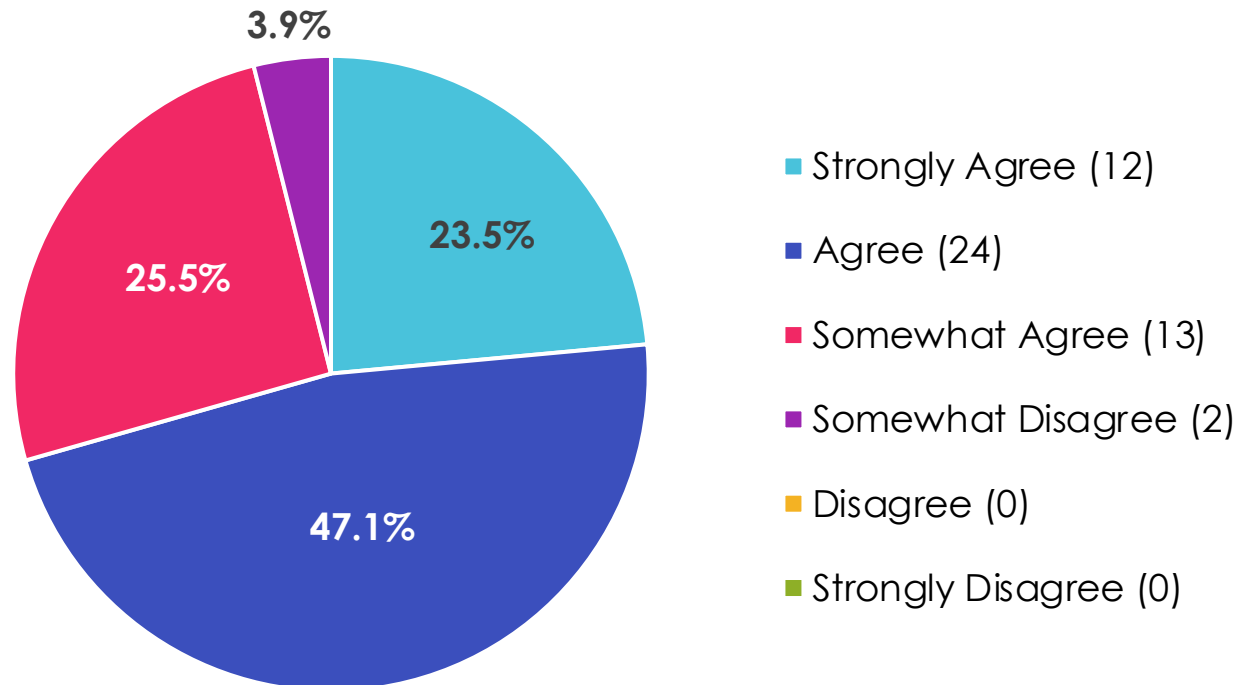
- The expiration of federal COVID-relief aid will make it more difficult to retain the following personnel categories according to district leaders surveyed.

	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	TOTAL
Mental health professionals (ex. counselors, psychologists, social workers)	31.3% (15)	16.7% (8)	18.8% (9)	66.7% (32)
Paraprofessionals	31.9% (15)	14.9% (7)	12.8% (6)	59.6% (28)
Tutors/academic interventionists	31.1% (14)	17.8% (8)	8.9% (4)	57.8% (26)
Special education teachers	27.1% (13)	10.4% (5)	18.8% (9)	56.3% (27)
General education teachers	31.9% (15)	6.4% (3)	12.8% (6)	51.1% (24)
Nurses	26.7% (12)	8.9% (4)	4.4% (2)	40% (18)

DISTRICT ESSER PLANS

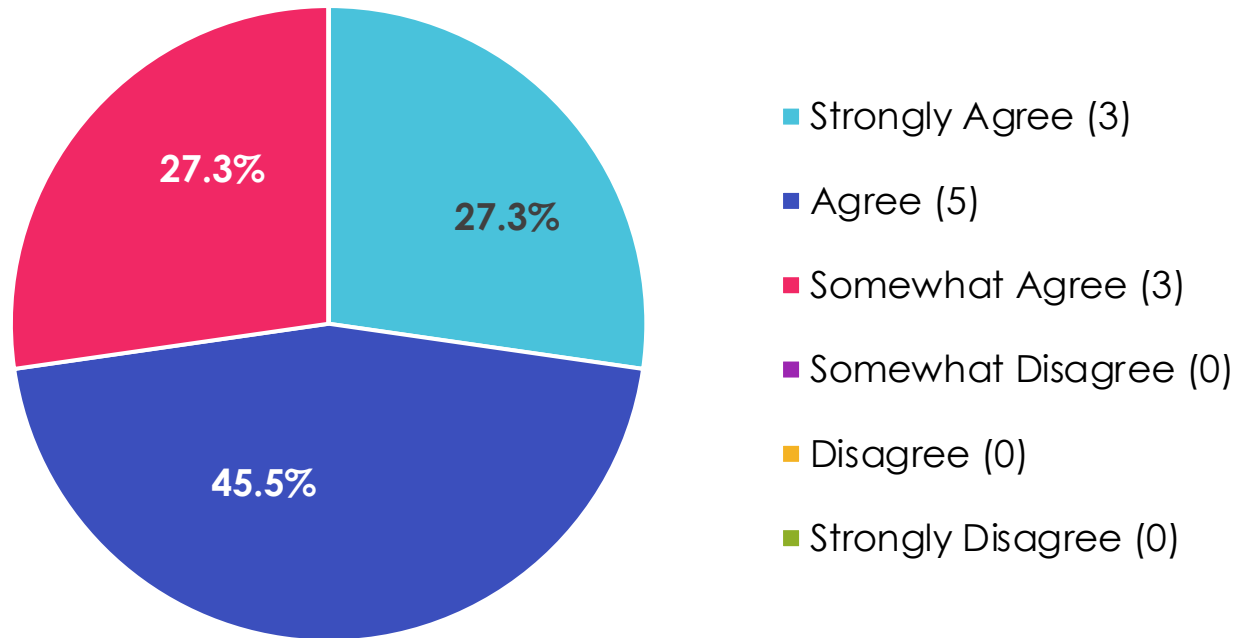
District leaders overwhelmingly said their district accomplished what they set out to in their ESSER spending plans

- **96.1% of district leaders** surveyed agreed at least in part that their district accomplished what it set out to achieve in its ESSER spending plans, with **23.5% strongly agreeing they accomplished what they planned to.**



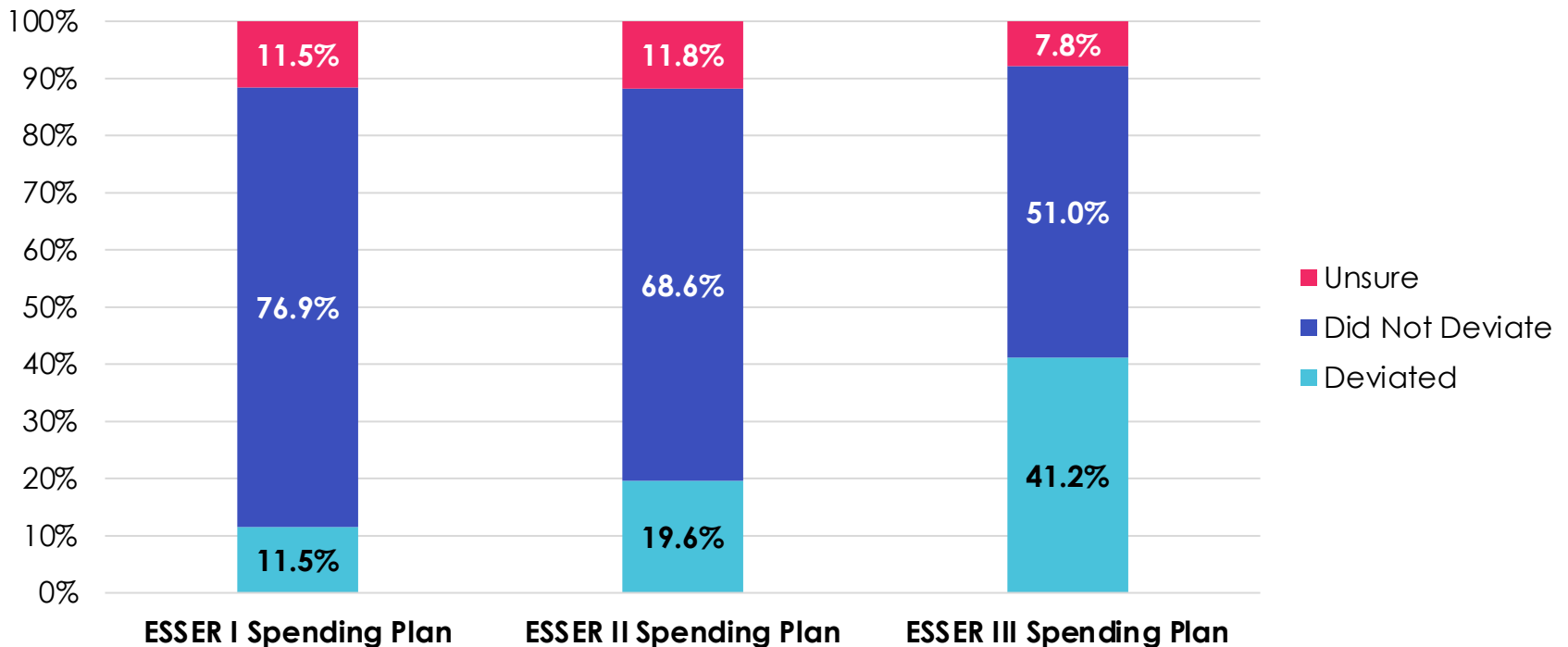
Alliance District leaders also overwhelmingly said their district accomplished what they set out to in their ESSER spending plans

- **100% of Alliance District leaders** surveyed agreed at least in part that their district accomplished what it set out to achieve in its ESSER spending plans, with **27.3% strongly agreeing they accomplished what they planned to.**



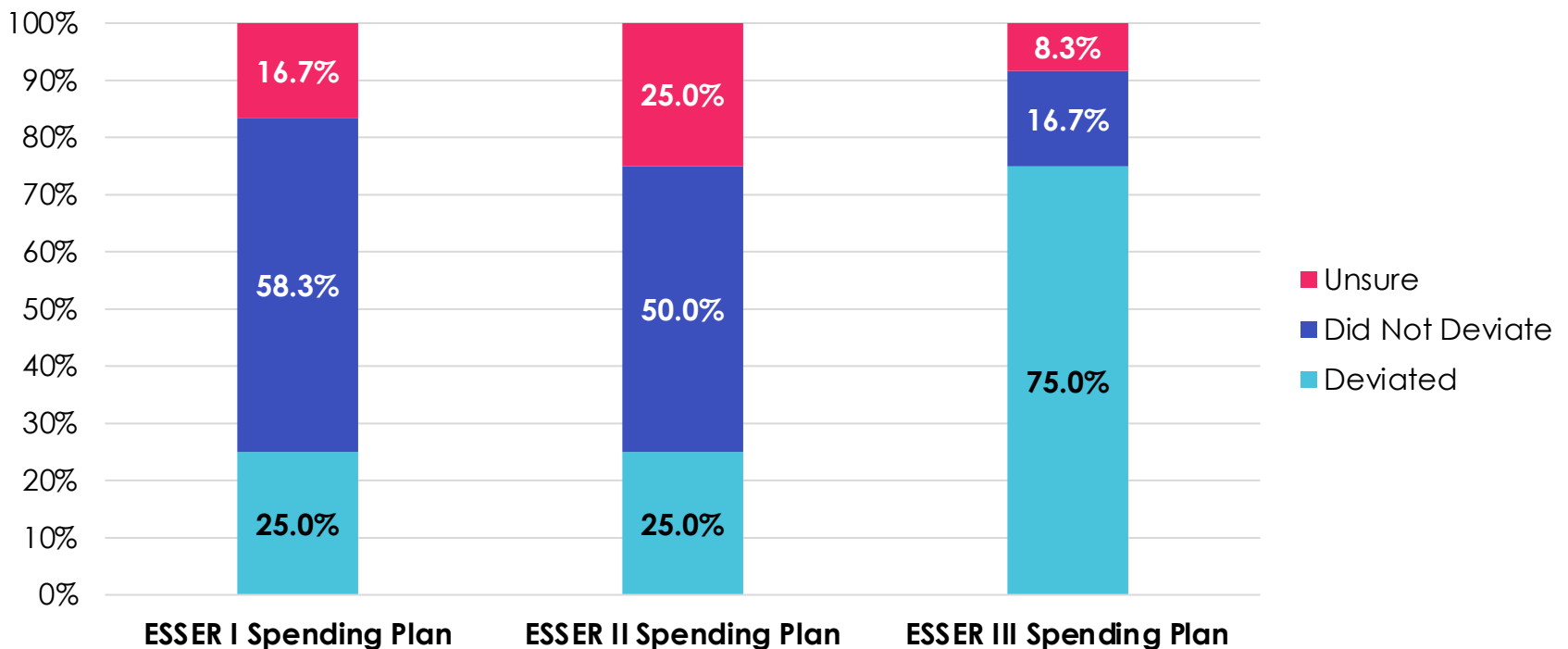
Most districts did not deviate from their ESSER I and II spending plans, but many did stray from their ESSER III plans

- While the vast majority of district leaders surveyed said their district did not deviate from its initial spending plans for ESSER I or ESSER II, **41.2% of district leaders surveyed said their district did deviate from its initial ESSER III spending plan.**



Alliance Districts deviated at higher rates from their ESSER spending plans than the overall rate of those surveyed

- While a quarter of Alliance District leaders surveyed said their district deviated from its initial spending plans for ESSER I or ESSER II, **75% of Alliance District leaders surveyed said their district deviated from its initial ESSER III spending plan.**



Factors that caused districts to deviate from their ESSER spending plans

Factor	% Selected	# Selected
Shift in district priorities	68.2%	15
Changing student needs	59.1%	13
Difficulty recruiting or retaining personnel	45.5%	10
Inflation increasing project costs	31.8%	7
Lack of staff to implement	31.8%	7
Supply chain issues	22.7%	5
Grant deadlines or requirements	18.2%	4
Teacher or staff feedback	18.2%	4
Change in number of COVID cases	13.6%	3
Community feedback	13.6%	3
Program effectiveness	13.6%	3
Political pressure or consideration	9.1%	2
State policies/emergency orders	4.6%	1
Other factor	13.6%	3

APPENDIX

Additional Selected Comments from District Leaders on Impact to Students

Additional comments from district leaders on impact of loss of ESSER funds to students

- “The majority of our ESSER funding went to programs to help support students academic and social and emotional needs”
- “We used the funds as an investment to outfit a leased space (to education specifications) and then opened a k-12 special ed and expulsion program, which allows us to maintain less outplacements and tuition in students from other school districts, thereby generating revenue for the district while the program runs in the 'black'.”
- “The district has assumed some of the ESSER-funded instructional coaches over the last year. I have approximately \$35,000 in ESSER funds to be used for salaries in the coming year. I believe this may have an impact at some point on the local tax payers who may push back and reduce staffing at some point.”
- “We will need to cut back on extended student learning supports that were funded with ESSER funds. ESSER funds allowed us to extend learning opportunities for students beyond the regular established programs and we were able to target specific student needs and help that student improve. We also added additional after schools programs for individual and small groups of students with identified learning losses.”

Additional comments from district leaders on impact of loss of ESSER funds to students cont.

- “Due to our size and demographic, we did not receive significant funding. However, the ARP ESSER funding allowed us to hire 3 literacy tutors who have significantly addressed learning loss in a way we could not have done without this essential funding. These positions are scheduled to be cut in June.”
- “While the budget process is still unfolding, I will lose at least 3.0 FTE intervention positions. Additionally, in order to maintain BCBA and ML positions that were ESSER funded, I will be cutting at least 2.0 FTE classroom teachers. The loss of ESSER funding comes at the same time as increasing costs to special education, higher salaries, and high inflation. This combined impact has resulted in a much higher than typical budget request. In addition to the loss of services for students, tax payers will be impacted.”
- “We supported 2 positions that were very much needed: School Psychologist (we only have one district wide and one SSW) and we also staffed an intervention specialist at our high school. We will be losing the intervention specialist with our cuts next year but will make a decision to cut another staff member in order to keep the school psychologist (we are not declining enrollment so a cut is actually a cut and will impact our programs). The needs for mental health support is incredibly high and it HAS to be addressed, even at the sacrifice of another program; it is a shell game.”

Additional comments from district leaders on impact of loss of ESSER funds to students cont.

- “Class sizes are likely to increase with the loss of funding. There may be fewer staff members for students to access, especially for certain needs. We paid for K-5 coordinators with these funds who support the complex needs of elementary learners due to the learning loss of the pandemic. I fear we may lose these positions in the year(s) to come. Special education teacher caseloads have increased, forcing them to work with more students with increased needs for less time.”
- “Students will not be able to benefit from the mental health support that has been afforded. This is not the time to remove the strong foundation that has been established for students and families to realize the help they desperately need in partnership with our school system. Academically, students will be staggered once again, because we will need to cut interventionist positions.”
- “The social-emotional and mental health needs of the students continue to grow and impede their access to the curricula. Without the continued funding for interventionists and mental health supports, student achievement will not reach the projected growth targets. The number of families and individuals in crisis is escalating while the helpful supplemental funding to address these issues is disappearing. The system is not sustainable.”

Additional comments from district leaders on impact of loss of ESSER funds to students cont.

- “We have created an extremely robust summer school program for students in grades pre-k-8. At the moment we have a supplemental source of grant funding to help us with this summer. However, should we not be eligible for that funding in future years, we may have to make serious adjustments or discontinue the program altogether. This would be unfortunate because the program has been a great academic support for our students, but even more importantly, a wonderful source of social emotional support.”
- “ESSER funding has provided funding to increase valuable intervention and recovery, both academically and related to mental health needs. Including those needs within the regular operating budget will be unsustainable, so some programs and services will need to be significantly reduced due to a lack of funding.”

Additional Selected Comments from District Leaders on Impact to Educators & Staff

Additional comments from district leaders on impact of loss of ESSER funds to educators and staff

- “When educators are tasked with greater workloads due to the loss of positions, it effects not only the classroom instruction or gains toward learning loss, but also the social emotional wellbeing of staff which has a tremendous impact on school climate and culture. School climate and culture has a measured impact on teacher absenteeism, which in turn impacts student social emotional wellbeing and student absenteeism, which in turn effects the family life of both staff and students. It creates a downward spiral throughout the educational community.”
- “The biggest impact will be the loss of several interventionists. We are also removing several gen ed. teacher positions through attrition in order to preserve BCBA and ML teacher positions. Loss of intervention and coaching support, especially in the area of Math.”
- “Educators will have a reduction in their paraeducator assistance in the classroom.”
- “With a reduction in funding, this will negatively impact our ability to recruit and retain positions that we have identified as a need following the pandemic.”