

FEDERAL PANDEMIC FUNDING AND BUTTS COUNTY SCHOOLS

Introduction

The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been problematic for school districts. President Donald Trump declared the novel coronavirus a national emergency on March 13, 2020. One day later, Governor Brian Kemp declared a public health emergency for Georgia. Daily routines were dramatically disrupted and life as many knew it changed. Schools were closed, church services were cancelled, store shelves were emptied, and millions of Americans lost employment.

Georgia, like many other states, braced for declines in revenues and significant increases in new costs, including those related to unemployment and health care. Having delayed the 2020 Legislative Cycle due to the pandemic outbreak, the Georgia legislature passed the FY21 Budget (covering the period of July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021) with a \$1 billion dollar cut in funding to Georgia's Department of Education. Ninety-five percent of the funding cut (\$950 million) was passed on to all 181 local K-12 school systems through the implementation of austerity.

The federal government responded to the economic crisis many school systems faced by providing Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding. To date, the federal government has issued three rounds of ESSER funding to stabilize the infrastructure for K-12 education, provide resources to allow schools to safely operate, and support implementation of innovative practices to promote student learning.

When Georgia schools closed on Friday, March 13, 2020 – to abide by the Governor's recommendation for a two-week closure to mitigate infection spread – BCSS activated remote learning for all students and meal services were maintained with curbside pick-up and delivery routes were established.

Butts County Schools faced significant revenue declines as the FY21 year approached. As the events of March and April 2020 unfolded, Butts County Schools braced for declines in funding for the upcoming FY21 school year. Ultimately, Butts County Schools saw a \$ 2.4 million decrease in state revenues for Quality Basic Education (QBE) when the legislators initially passed the State's FY21 budget in June 2020 due to the following factors:

- a \$ 1.836 million reduction due to austerity
- a \$ 445,000 reduction in the equalization grant compared to prior years
- a \$ 161,598 reduction due to growth in BCSS' local fair share contribution

While there was growth in the local county digest year over year forecasted for the FY21 budget year, the \$814,555 in local revenue growth did not offset the significant loss of state revenue experienced. Further, there was heightened risk related to the collection of local property taxes.

Despite the economic challenges presented during the FY21 budget cycle, the Butts County Board of Education and Superintendent committed to:

- Be a stable employer. Butts County Schools is the largest employer in Butts County and it was paramount to mitigate economic stress to the local economy. Accordingly, the FY21 budget adopted by the Board of Education did not include any furlough days (i.e., days worked without pay). Additionally, the salary schedule was honored and any employee due a pay increase based on years of service received their earned step.
- Provide high-quality, flexible instruction and learning environments. Butts County Schools provided families with the opportunity to choose on-campus or remote learning. All students PreK – 12 were provided access to digital devices. Modifications to learning progressions and the physical learning environment (e.g., buildings) were completed.
- Ensure access to services. Butts County Schools maintained student access to physical, mental, and social services to ensure students and families had the supports necessary to navigate the pandemic. Butts County Schools continued to offer curbside meal service for students within Butts County, despite knowledge we would incur a deficit in school nutrition operations. Similarly, the Afterschool Programs and Saturday school programs were made available for students as needed.

States and their local school districts were faced with extensive, new K–12 education expenses as a result of COVID-19, including those related to providing distance learning, expanded learning, and additional food services for students. Combined with State projections of revenue shortfalls, these additional costs necessitated action by the federal government.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Trump on March 27, 2020. CARES allocated approximately \$30.7 billion to an Education Stabilization Fund administered by the US Department of Education (USDOE). Included within the \$30.7 billion total was an allocation of \$13.5 billion for K-12 entities; these funds were defined as “Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief” (ESSER) Funds. The USDOE, the grantor of the funds, provided flexibility to use ESSER funds for immediate needs, such as tools and resources for distance education, ensuring student health and safety, and developing and implementing plans for the next school year. ESSER funds were first granted to State Education Agencies (SEAs) and then sub-granted to Local Education Agencies (LEAs). SEAs were allowed to hold up to 10% of the ESSER allocation for administrative and supplemental grant purposes.

The Georgia Department of Education (GADOE) is the governing SEA for Butts County Schools – a local education agency. The USDOE granted \$457.2 million of ESSER funds to GADOE and the GADOE Board approved allocations to Georgia School systems on May 4, 2020. Butts County Schools was allocated \$808,249. Allocated funds could be applied to expenditures dating back to March 13, 2020 (the declared national emergency date).

The CARES Act authorized a broad array of potential uses of ESSER funds to prepare and respond to COVID-19, as well as provide for any activities authorized by a number of Federal education statutes, including:

- The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA),
- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA),
- the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act,
- the Perkins Act (CTE), and
- the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

Although the CARES legislation provided flexibility for school systems, there were clear expectations that ESSER funds should address needs stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, the US Secretary of Education and the Georgia School Superintendent expressed priority areas for expenditures. As the sub-grantor of the ESSER funds, GADOE provided guidance to LEAs on key considerations in prioritizing funds:

- To address the needs of at-risk student populations
- To provide distance/remote learning and supplemental learning opportunities
- To support continuity of school meals and enhance mental/physical health supports
- To address facility needs and adaptations, including the purchase of personal protective equipment
- To address professional development needs, and
- To address revenue shortfalls and allow for the continuity of core staff and services

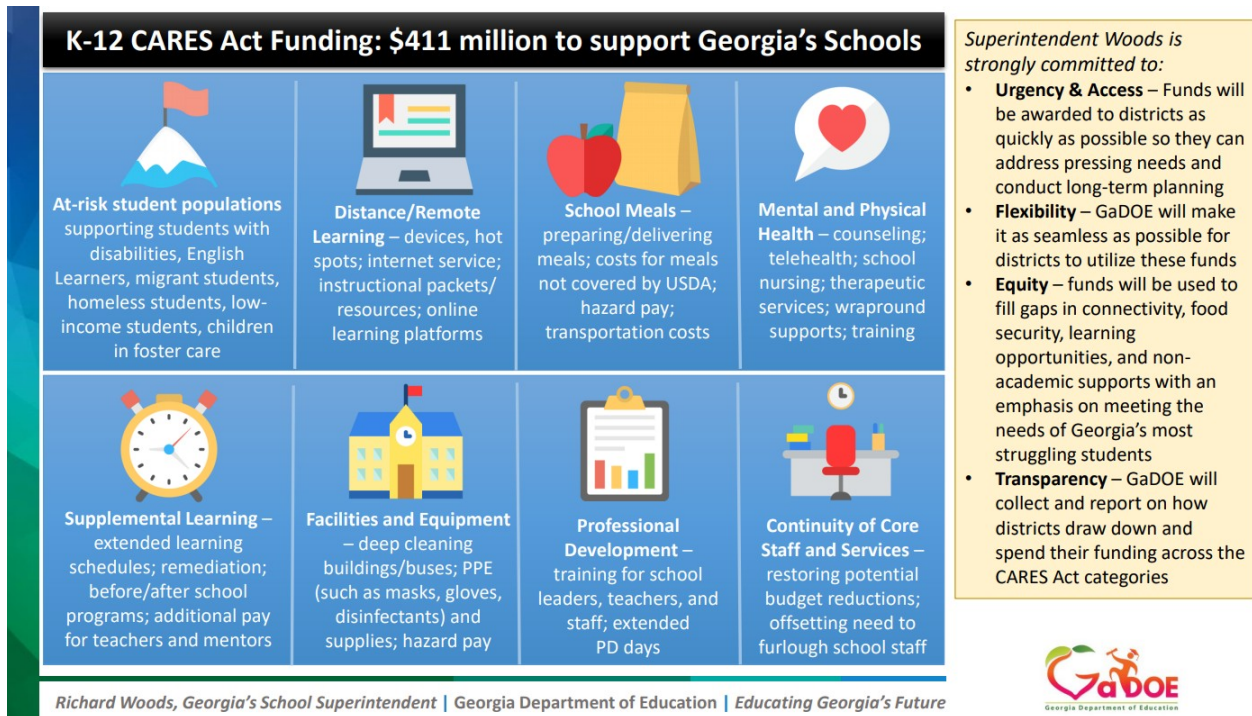
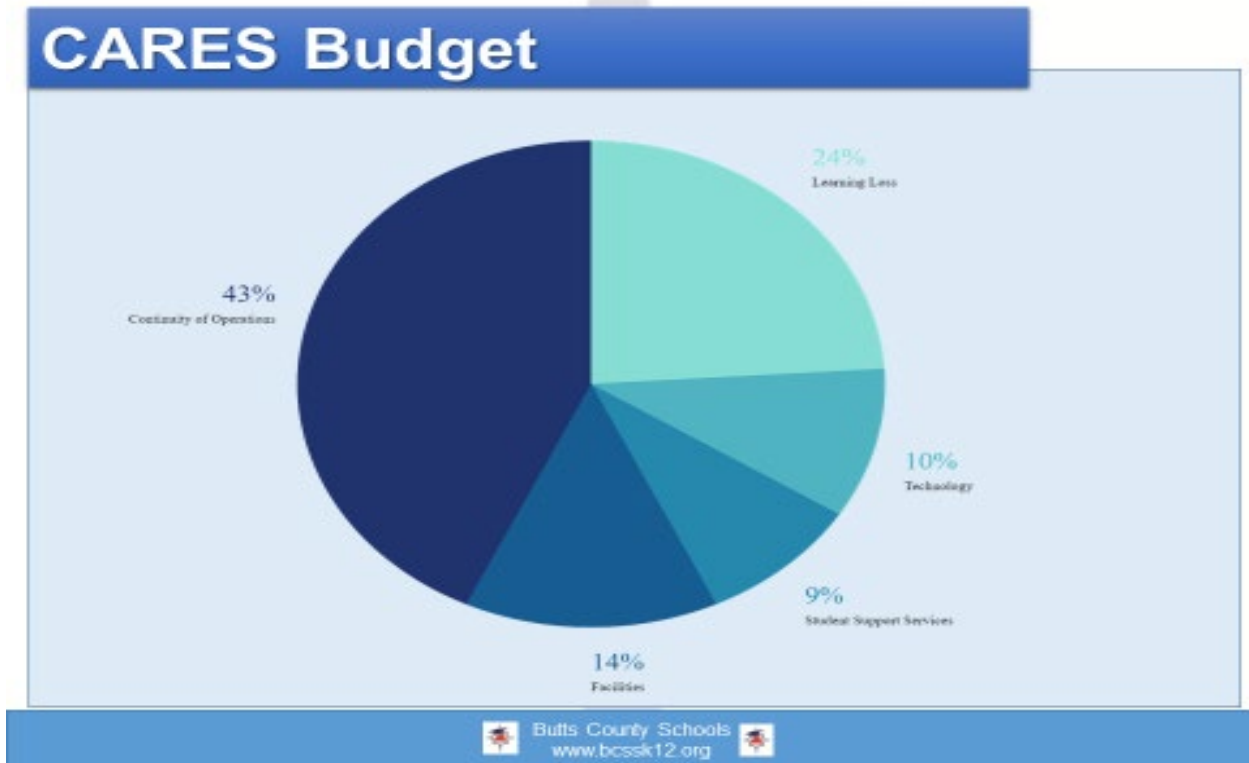


Figure 3: GADOE Infographic on ESSER expenditure priorities (7)

The Butts County Schools Leadership Team established a plan to support the system's allocation of the ESSER funds. The Steering committee's approach to planning was based on the guidance from GADOE and the Purpose and Commitments of the Butts County Board of Education.

- Summer learning recovery opportunities
- Continuity of School System Operations
- Transportation for learning recovery
- School year learning recovery / extended learning
- Instructional resource revisions and replacements
- Expanded technology access
- Supports to School staff for remote/recovery learning
- Continuity of food preparation and distribution

In consideration of the imminent priorities and FY21 State budget reductions forecasted at \$ 1,836,924, Butts County Schools established the following plan for the ESSER funds allocated by the CARES Act.



A Path to Recovery: Georgia’s Amended FY21 State Budget and ESSER II Allocations

As the 2020 calendar year came to a close, Butts County Schools initiated the FY22 budget development cycle. Given the significant loss of revenues from FY20 to FY21 and the awareness that the system could not utilize reserves alone to balance future budgets, the leadership team began scenario planning to accommodate significant expenditure reductions.

However, as Butts County Schools returned from the winter holiday break, new information regarding state and federal funding emerged.

Partial Restoration of State Austerity

The state of Georgia’s investment in education is a critical funding source for Butts County Schools, accounting for nearly 60% of the system’s budget in most years.

Each January, the Georgia legislature convenes the Legislative Session and will adopt a state budget for the fiscal year beginning in July. In the opening days of Georgia’s 2021 legislative cycle, optimistic reports regarding Georgia’s economy were shared. It was reported that the State of Georgia had not seen declines in revenue as initially anticipated when the FY21 state budget was adopted in June of 2020. Seeing strength in sales collections and relative stability in

the Georgia economy, Governor Brian Kemp called on the legislature to evaluate mid-year budget restorations to many agencies, particularly education.

In February 2021, the legislature approved a 60% restoration of the \$950 million cut from the FY21 K-12 education budget due to the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic. For Butts County Schools, this restoration translated into restoration of \$1 million of the \$1.836 million of funds withheld at the onset of the FY21 fiscal year. The \$1 million funding restoration, coupled with savings accomplished by flexible learning operations, began to significantly reduce the need to use reserves for FY21 budget. The ability to conserve and potentially invest in reserves, supports fiscal stability of Butts County Schools.

ESSER II Allocations Announced

The unprecedented impacts of the coronavirus pandemic continued to impact school systems throughout 2020. School systems were faced with new costs, revenue shortfalls, and a need to re-design the education experience all at once. Recognizing that additional aid would be required to support American economy – inclusive of supporting the re-opening and operation of schools – the federal government took additional legislative action to provide emergency funding. The Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act was passed December 21, 2020 and allocated \$82 billion to the US Department of Education (USDOE). Of the \$82 billion allocation, \$54.3 billion was earmarked as ESSER II Funds.

Consistent with the prior round of ESSER funding, these new funds were sub-granted to GADOE and an allocation of \$3.858 million was granted to Butts County Schools. Consistent with prior ESSER funding, GADOE proactively guided grantees to structure funds to respond to needs associated with at-risk populations, remote/supplemental learning, nutrition, mental/physical health, etc. One notable difference in the ESSER II funds was the elimination of the equitable service requirement for public school systems.

The formal spending plan for ESSER II funds has been under development since January 2021 and is being considered in tandem with planning for the FY22 Budget and system operations (covering July 1, 2021 through June 30, 2022). Imminent priorities for BCSS' consideration include:

- Summer learning recovery programs, including incremental enrichment programming;
- Offset of expenditures related to COVID response;
- Enhanced health and wellness supports for intensified social and emotional student needs; and
- Maintaining the continuity of operations in spite of reduction in State Funding
- Expanding access to broadband services;
- Fiscal restoration of programs/services offered to community at a deficit to include the school nutrition program and afterschool enrichment program.

Investing in learning recovery and innovative practices: ESSER III Allocation

The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) was passed March 10, 2021 and authorized by President Joseph Biden. The act provides just over \$170.3 billion to education, making this the federal government's largest ever single investment in schools. Of the \$170.3 billion allocation, \$122.8 billion was designated as ESSER III funds. Following the formula method prescribed by prior rounds of ESSER funding, GADOE has sub-granted \$53.4 million to HCS to be utilized over the next two to three years.

While there is continued flexibility to support school systems in identifying and addressing short-term needs driven by the pandemic, the ARPA legislation outlines that a minimum of 20% of funds sub-granted must be used "to address learning loss by implementing evidence-based interventions (e.g., summer learning, extended day/school year programs) to respond to students' academic, social and emotional needs. Further, there is an opportunity for school systems to invest in the structural changes that will, over the long term, make schools more equitable and whole-child focused.

A comprehensive plan for ARPA funds is under development and will be shared publically as this budget is developed. The corresponding slides provide an overview of how the funds are being allocated.

BUTTS COUNTY

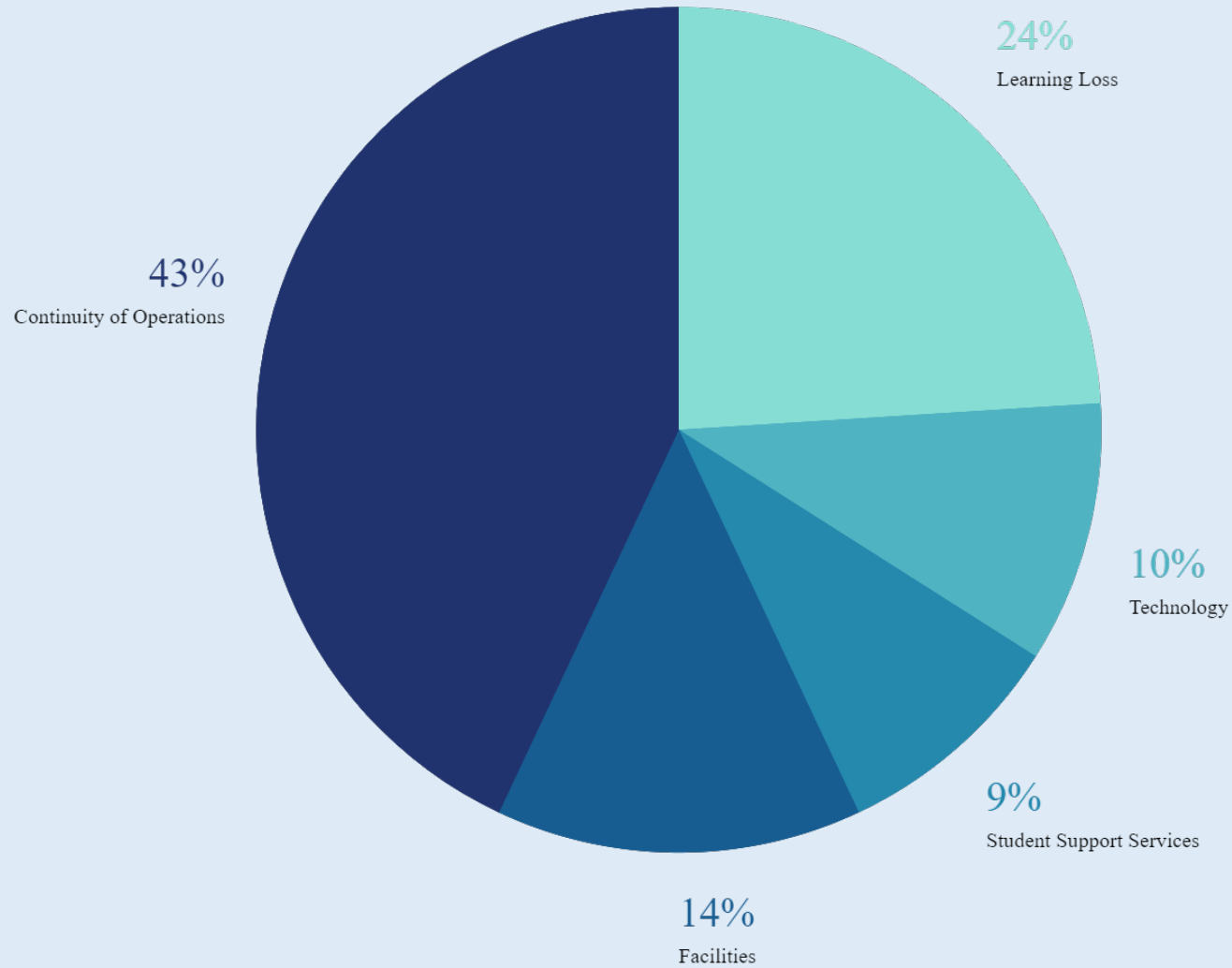
SCHOOL SYSTEM



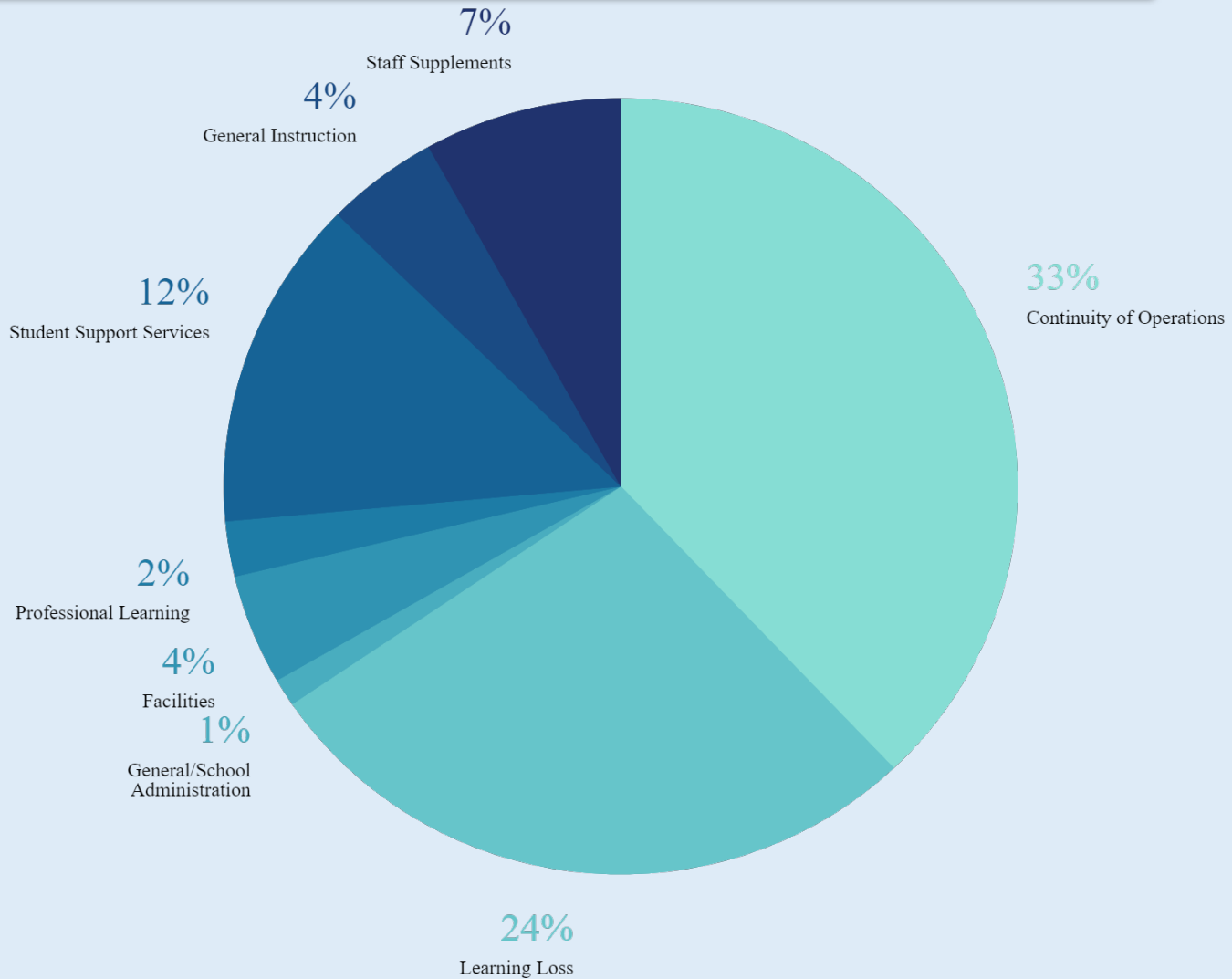
ARP-ESSER III

**Allocations Butts County School
System**

CARES Budget



ARP-ESSER III Budget



\$5,751,159 Total Budgeted amount thus far total allocation \$8,671,686



ARP-ESSER III Budget

Learning Loss

Supplemental Learning

- Summer Enrichment Camps
- Summer School
- Afterschool Tutoring
- Saturday School

Assessing Student Needs

- Assessments to determine areas of growth and to guide instruction
- Professional Learning for Staff

Student Support Services

- Character Education
- Nursing
- School Psychologist
- School Supplies



ARP-ESSER III Budget

Safe Return to School

Technology

- Additional devices for students and staff
- One-to-one initiative
- Monitoring and maintenance of devices

Facilities

- Ventilation Systems
- Sanitation and Disinfecting of facilities
- PPE

Continuity of Operations

- Transportation Services
- School Nutrition

