EDUCATORS AND ESSER

HOW PANDEMIC SPENDING IS RESHAPING THE TEACHING PROFESSION

BY PHYLLIS W. JORDAN AND BELLA DIMARCO

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Usage

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FOREWORD

While teacher shortages dominated education news coverage during the summer, the tremendous amount of federal pandemic-relief money that states and school districts are pouring into the profession—and the funding's substantial consequences for longstanding policies and practices in the more-than-three-million-member occupation—has received far less attention. Local education agencies are on pace to spend as much as $20 billion on instructional staff under the 2021 federal American Rescue Plan, making teachers the single largest investment under the plan nationwide.

To understand state and local policymakers' strategies for bolstering teaching resources in the wake of the pandemic, FutureEd analyzed the Covid-relief spending plans of 5,000 school districts and charter organizations representing 74 percent of the nation's public-school students. And we examined additional documents and conducted a range of interviews to gauge how the nation's 100 largest school districts plan to reinforce their teaching ranks with American Rescue Plan aid.

The result is a comprehensive picture of state and local spending of recovery resources on the nation's teaching force. And it's clear that momentum is building behind several spending strategies with important policy implications, including an emerging commitment to extra pay for longer hours, and bonuses that break with traditional pay schedules to combat widespread teacher shortages.

Associate Director Phyllis Jordan and Policy Analyst Bella DiMarco researched and wrote the report. Nathan Kriha provided research assistance. And Merry Alderman, Molly Breen, Jackie Arthur provided editorial and design support.

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Thomas Toch

Director, FutureEd

In rural enclaves and city centers, in red states and blue, school districts share the same top priority for federal Covid-relief aid: spending on teachers and other staff who can help students recover from the pandemic academically and emotionally. Local education agencies are on pace to spend as much as $20 billion on instructional staff under the 2021 federal American Rescue Plan. In many places, the federal support comes on top of substantial state and local teacher investments.

To understand state and local policymakers' strategies for bolstering teaching resources in the wake of the pandemic, FutureEd analyzed the Covid-relief spending plans of 5,000 school districts and charter organizations representing 74 percent of the nation's public-school students. And we examined additional documents and conducted a range of interviews to gauge how the nation's 100 largest school districts plan to reinforce their teaching ranks with American Rescue Plan aid.

The result is a comprehensive picture of state and local spending of recovery resources on the nation's more than three-million-member teaching force—including new hires, innovative ways to leverage top teachers, an emerging commitment to extra pay for longer hours, and bonuses that break with the traditional pay schedules to combat widespread teacher shortages. The challenges presented by the scale of the federal funding and the short window for spending it also emerged from the analysis.

We found seven significant spending trends.

1 Expanding Staff

When Congress approved the American Rescue Plan in March 2021, the third of three federal infusions of Covid-relief aid into the economy, school districts were required to dedicate at least 20 percent of the federal law's Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief fund (ESSER III) money to addressing learning loss, especially for traditionally underserved students. While districts are investing heavily in interventions such as summer learning, afterschool programs and tutoring, a major priority has been adding instructional staff.

Our national analysis of spending plans, using information compiled by the data services firm Burbio, found that about 60 percent of school districts and charter organizations plan to use federal relief to hire new teachers or pay teachers and other staff to expand instruction. That dovetails with what we found in our review of the 100 largest local education agencies, 65 of which intend to use a portion of their federal funds to pay salaries and benefits.

How the 100 Largest School Districts Are Using Covid-Relief Money for Teachers

65 of 100

districts are investing in

Hiring & Paying Teachers

39
Interventionists/specialists

30
Core teachers

14
ELL and special ed teachers and staff

13
Virtual teachers

The plans include money for math or reading specialists to provide more targeted instruction, additional classroom teachers for smaller class sizes, and teachers or staff to carry out new or expanded initiatives. In most cases, these positions appear to be new hires, but some districts may be shifting existing staff into new roles and using federal dollars to pay them.

Similarly, some administrators are using money from their regular budget to pay these additional staffing costs while shifting the Covid-relief aid into areas such as ventilation or technology more clearly tied to pandemic recovery, notes Kyle Arnone, who is helping local unions negotiate their response to the pandemic as director of the American Federation of Teachers' Center for Collective Bargaining.

Thirty-nine of the nation's largest districts indicate they are using Covid-relief aid to pay salaries and benefits for academic specialists who can coach students, typically in math or reading skills. Boston Public Schools, for example, expects to spend more than $10 million on 100 specialists, with schools determining what sort of academic support they need. Howard County, Maryland, is spending $1.1 million to cover three years of salary and benefits for resource teachers to focus on early childhood education and reading.

In addition, about 30 of the 100 largest districts are using the Covid-relief aid to pay salaries and benefits for classroom teachers. Florida's Manatee County Public Schools hired classroom teachers using the earlier rounds of federal funding and are continuing those contracts with an additional $5 million in ESSER III money. At least 13 districts—including Montgomery County, Maryland, Wake County, North Carolina, and Miami-Dade in Florida—are hiring or paying staff for newly established virtual academies.

Some new positions are explicitly described as short term: North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg County School District, for instance, is using $5.8 million in federal money to hire about 400 "guest teachers," essentially full-time substitutes with benefits who can cover classes when teachers are absent or fill vacancies. The positions are set to expire when the funding does.

At least 15 of the nation's 100 largest districts are using the federal aid to pay existing salaries, in many cases to avoid layoffs, an allowable use under U.S. Education Department guidance. "There are districts that are financially distressed, that maybe saw their enrollment decline during the pandemic, that actually have spent or committed their money and fairly quickly," says the AFT's Arnone.[1]

2 Smaller Classes

Reducing class sizes to provide more intensive support to students who fell behind during the pandemic is a common learning loss strategy among the 100 largest districts. Baltimore County, for instance, allocated $11.6

million over two years for 78 teachers to reduce class sizes. Several districts—New York City, Long Beach, California; Washoe County, Nevada; and Shelby County, Georgia, among them—focused their reduction efforts on the primary grades.

Two Florida districts, Volusia County Schools and Lee County Schools, are taking a different tack by offering stipends to teachers who have larger classes.

Matthew Kraft, a professor of education and economics at Brown University and FutureEd's research director, notes that parents and teachers like smaller classes. But the strategy is expensive and research suggests that the academic payoff of small reductions is minimal, Kraft says. A more sustainable strategy, he suggests, would be to have larger average class sizes, coupled with more individualized or small group work.

Dayton, Ohio, has taken a novel—and more dramatic—approach to reducing student-teacher ratios. The district is using Covid-relief money to assign two teachers to every first through third grade classroom for two years: one teacher is focused on math and the other on literacy, each working with half the class at a time. The so-called double teacher model required hiring 96 new teachers at a cost of about $10 million a year.

Dayton Superintendent Elizabeth Lolli had tried a similar approach with a phonics specialist in another school district using Title I dollars and decided to devote some of Dayton's Covid-relief funding to students in grades where reading and math achievement lagged badly during the pandemic. The model builds time into the day for small group instruction, Lolli says.

The strategy has paid dividends. The district's spring 2022 testing showed scores rebounding to 2019 levels and students showing faster academic growth than other students throughout the nation using the same test.[2] Teachers found the experience allowed for more collaboration. Lolli hopes to use her district's recurring federal Title I allotment to pay for the double teachers once federal Covid funding ends.

How the 100 Largest School Districts Are Using Covid-Relief Money for Teachers

47 of 100

districts are investing in

Retention & Recruitment

31
Offering bonuses

15
Bonuses for special ed, ELL, specific subjects, hard-to-staff schools, or effective teachers

15
Investing in teacher pipelines, including grow-your-own programs and residencies

3 Recruitment

As school districts returned to in-person instruction after months of virtual learning, many administrators realized they didn't have enough staff members to fill their classrooms. In some places, teachers had left for districts offering higher pay or left the profession entirely. In others, where schools were hiring new teachers or academic specialists, there were simply more positions to fill. And in certain communities and academic specialties, teachers have always been hard to find.

Little surprise then that about 20 percent of school districts in the national sample—and 47 percent of the largest districts—are using ESSER III money to recruit and retain teachers.

Some districts put their federal Covid-relief aid to work helping them find new teachers. Duval County, Florida, is using the federal aid to hire recruitment specialists and to support recruitment events and online recruitment. Others, like Charleston, South Carolina, are leveraging university partnerships to attract and train new teachers and allow opportunities for mentoring. Houston is waiving the $6,000 fee for its alternative teacher certification program, which allows college graduates who haven't majored in education and mid-career adults to work toward credentials as they serve as teachers.

At least 15 districts are developing teacher pipelines, work complimentary to what states are doing with their share of the federal funds. Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky and Tennessee, among others, are investing their ESSER III money in "grow-your-own" programs that recruit from the ranks of teacher aides, school support staff or local college students, a strategy designed to increase diversity and improve retention rates, especially in hard-to-staff schools.[3] The Nevada Department of Education is using $20.7 million of its ESSER money to provide tuition assistance and stipends to student teachers working in the state.[4]

Several districts are offering recruitment or signing bonuses to draw teachers to hard-to-fill specialties, expanding on a practice that began before the pandemic. In Detroit, where 80 percent of teacher vacancies are in special education positions, the district is offering recurring $15,000 bonuses for qualified instructors.

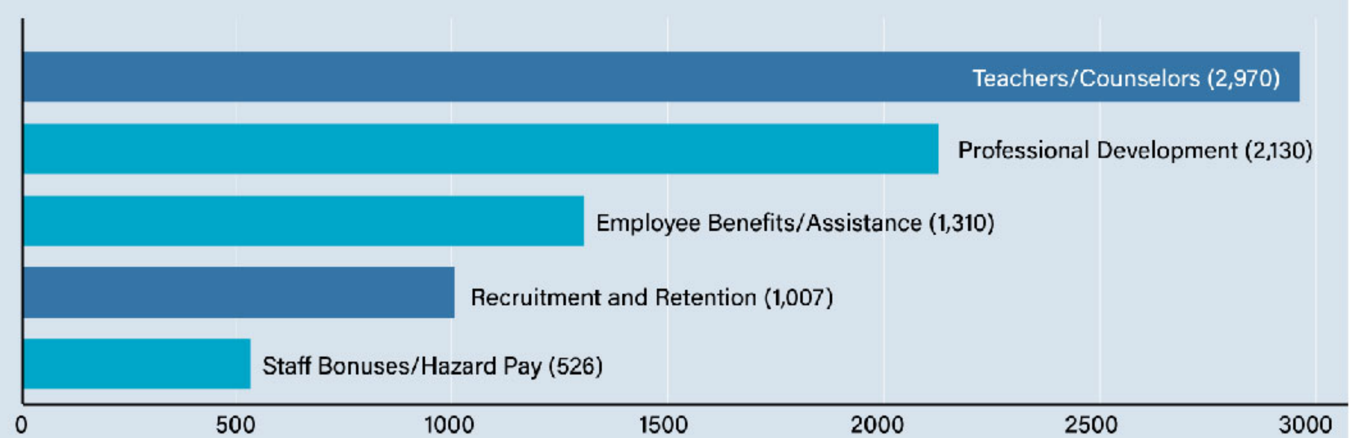
These targeted bonuses are more effective in addressing shortages while maintaining the quality of instruction than small, across-the-board bonuses for all staff members or lowering entry standards to the teaching profession by, for example, eliminating requirements that applicants have college degrees.[5]

Such bonuses are not widely used in public education, however, where teachers are traditionally paid according to how long they've been teaching and how many college credits they earn. A recent survey by the National Council on Teacher Quality found that districts are far more likely to reward a teacher for having a master's degree than a special education certification.[6]

4 Retaining Staff

Pay plays a big role in another priority for districts: holding on to the teachers they've got. Since the pandemic began, a number of state legislatures have

SCHOOL STAFFING



This chart is based on an June 7 compilation by the data-services firm Burbio of Covid-relief spending plans released by 5,004 school districts and charter schools in all 50 states and Washington, D.C. The sample represents roughly 74% of the nation's public-school students and receives $83 billion of the $122 billion in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER III) funds. The categories include spending to recruit, hire, train and reward staff members.

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approved substantial salary increases for school staff. Others are providing one-time bonuses or "hazard pay" for teachers and others.

Some state leaders are encouraging district efforts, even when local educators have other ideas for the money. Consider the tiny Mountain View School District in rural Arkansas. Even though federal law expressly prohibits states from dictating how ESSER funds are spent, an Arkansas legislative panel rescinded its prior approval of local spending plans and instructed districts to put their money toward bonuses for all teachers and staff. Mountain View had previously designated much of its allotment to capital projects, but in the wake of the state edict it polled school staff members on whether they preferred a "one-time bonus." They did, and the district is spending $1.6 million on the payments.

Altogether, about one in 10 districts nationwide is paying retention bonuses to teachers and staff, our analysis suggests, a figure that has likely increased in recent months as districts continue to struggle to fill vacancies. At least 31 of the 100 largest school districts are providing some sort of bonus to teachers. Wake County Schools in North Carolina, for instance, has pledged $49 million in ESSER III money for bonuses and has already distributed nearly 60 percent of the money, according to the state's spending portal.[7]

The problem with such across-the-board bonuses is "you are not targeting areas of acute needs," says Dan Goldhaber, director of the Center for Education Data and Research at the University of Washington and CALDER at the American Institutes for Research. "Attrition out of elementary education is less of an issue than attrition out of special education. And you're not getting much bang for your buck if you are doing things to prevent attrition of somebody who's been teaching for 20 years and is in her 50s, because the probability that she is going to leave the district is very, very low."

Instead, Goldhaber and others recommend targeting pay incentives to certain types of teachers or teachers at certain schools. At least 15 of the top 100 districts are doing that with ESSER III money, specifying bonuses in their plans for schools or teaching fields that are hard to fill or for teachers who have proven effective. Polk County in Florida, for instance, is setting aside about $3 million to supplement salaries for teachers who work in schools with high poverty rates and $782,000 to reward "highly effective teachers."

Houston Independent School District has offered $5,000 bonuses to teachers who agree to stay on the payroll for at least three years. The *Commit: HISD* payments are spread over three years: $500 in June 2022, $1,500 in June 2023 and $3,000 in June 2024. According to Jeremy Grant-Skinner, the district's chief talent officer, about 6,500 teachers, three-quarters of the teaching corps, committed to receive the longevity bonuses. While many of them are mid-career teachers less likely to leave, Grant-Skinner notes that the bonus also drew hundreds of younger teachers, a cohort where attrition is typically higher.

Houston also turned to a more traditional method of rewarding teachers: an across-the-board pay hike. Teachers in Houston are not part of a union, but the district worked with the teachers' association to develop a three-year compensation plan for improving pay through 2024. The school district then agreed to leverage $52 million in ESSER funding to speed up the plan, essentially giving teachers an 11 percent raise up front.

"In the end, a teacher's base salary is the thing that they know they can count on year after year," Grant-Skinner says. "It's actually often the piece of total compensation that teachers are making decisions on. They are not going to go and purchase a new car or a new house because they are getting a one-time stipend. But if they know that it's a base salary change that they're going to see year after year, they'll take that step."

Teacher pay scales need to rise in many school districts. Teachers earned an estimated average of just $66,397 in the 2021-22 school year, while the Economic Policy Institute recently reported that teachers' average weekly inflation-adjusted pay has increased by just $29 since 1996, compared to $445 per week for other college graduates.[8] In recent years, several governors have devoted state dollars to hikes in teachers pay, influenced in part by the Red-for-Ed rallies that teachers staged at many statehouses just before the pandemic began.[9]

Even so, targeting increases to critical shortages areas like math, science and special education is likely to pay the largest pandemic-recovery dividends, without setting the stage for layoffs once federal Covid-relief aid ends.

5 Increasing Workloads

Beyond bonuses, school districts are using federal Covid-relief aid to pay teachers for the extra work needed to help students recover academically—or simply to fill in for missing colleagues. At least 33 of the top 100 districts are earmarking federal money to pay teachers stipends for additional hours, a significant trend given the traditional commitment of unions to restricting the scope of teachers' work. At least 21 of the largest districts are using ESSER III money to pay teachers for working with students before or after school; another two are paying for work on weekends and during school breaks.

Six districts are paying teachers to tutor students, and five are paying educators to develop curricula. Miami-Dade County Public Schools, for instance, set aside $32.7 million to pay teachers to work an extra period a day for two years. Likewise, Duval County Public Schools, also in Florida, is earmarking $349,000 to buy out planning periods for secondary school instructors, so that they can teach an extra one or two classes during the day.

How the 100 Largest School Districts Are Using Covid-Relief Money for Teachers

33 of 100

districts are investing in

Additional Pay & Stipends

21
Offering extra pay for extended hours

6
Tutoring

5
Teaching additional periods during the day

5
Curriculum development/planning time

Goldhaber said this sort of approach makes sense. "You are paying people extra money for extra duties that presumably are providing extra support for students who need help," he says. "That strikes me as a much smarter kind of investment" than universal bonuses.

Arnone of AFT says local union leaders generally don't object to extra pay opportunities, "so long as it's a voluntary program and the pay makes sense."

Still, some efforts to increase learning time have met with resistance, either from parents and students or from teachers themselves. The Los Angeles Unified School District, for instance, budgeted $122 million to provide three extra days of professional development for educators and four additional days of learning for students in the current school year, with teachers and students participating on a voluntary basis. Yet the United Teachers Los Angeles voted in August to boycott the first of the learning days planned for late October, calling the effort a "waste of taxpayers' dollars." The union then filed an unfair labor practice complaint with the state labor relations board, saying the extra days were not properly negotiated.[10] Negotiations are ongoing.[11]

6 Improving Working Conditions

The pandemic has left many teachers stressed out and stretched thin. In response, some districts are using federal aid to improve working conditions, particularly allowing more time for planning and collaboration.

Houston is spending ESSER money to move teachers in 18 schools toward a new approach to school management known as Opportunity Culture. Under the model, teachers will receive $15,000 stipends annually to serve as classroom leaders across a grade level or subject within their schools. They'll teach part-time while managing teams of teachers, paraprofessionals, and resident instructors to analyze student data, adjust instruction and develop their skills.[12] The stipends are part of Houston's regular budget, but ESSER funding is being used to expedite the training and implementation of the model.

The Orange County, Florida school district is hiring additional Algebra 1 teachers and high school English teachers at its five highest-need schools as part of a pilot initiative to reduce the teaching load and allow for more planning periods. The new model–four teaching periods and three planning periods–will provide additional planning time and small-group instruction.

Philadelphia is using its Covid-relief money to give teachers 120 minutes a week in common planning time to meet with colleagues teaching the same grade level. The goal is to discuss how to approach new units of study, review data and share successes and failures.

"Collaboration time is incredibly important to our members," says Marla Ucelli-Kashyap, AFT's senior director for educational issues. "American teachers spend more time in front of kids than virtually any other place" in the world.

Kraft cautions that extra planning time needs to be managed effectively, with clear goals that engage teachers. "There are a lot more opportunities for that investment to not pan out without a lot of ongoing scaffolding and support," he says.

Philadelphia Public Schools has posted a series of videos showing how teaching teams should discuss district goals and break down new instructional units. "Sometimes when you're in the classroom by yourself, you just feel so closed off from everyone else," remarks Toni Thorn, a teacher at Emlen Elementary School in Philadelphia, in a district video. "But when we get to come together as a community, as a grade band, we get to talk about our week and what's going well in our classrooms and what's not going well."[13]

7 New Skills, Knowledge

Professional development, equipping teachers with additional skills and knowledge, has emerged as one of the most popular uses of ESSER III aid nationally, with about 43 percent of school districts and charters nationwide planning investments and about 15 percent spending on social-emotional training and materials. Among the 100 largest school districts, 82 plan to use the federal aid to train teachers on such topics as evidence-based instructional approaches, family engagement strategies, and new technology platforms. Some districts are using the federal money to contract with training providers, while others are training their teachers to coach fellow staff.

"Children's learning recovery is very much attached to adults' ability to have the knowledge and skills to not

How the 100 Largest School Districts Are Using Covid-Relief Money for Teachers

82 of 100

districts are investing in

Professional Development

55 General

35 Literacy-specific

47 Other academic training

36 SEL or mental health

17 Special ed or ELL

12 Equity or diversity

11 Technology

remediate but to get them where they need to go," says the AFT's Ucelli-Kashyap, noting that research shows peer-led training is often better received and more beneficial for teachers than that delivered by outside providers.

At least 35 of the nation's largest districts are putting ESSER money toward literacy training, including a significant focus on evidence-based practices associated with the "science of reading." The Alpine School District in Utah earmarked $6.8 million to put teachers through a literacy-instruction training program known as Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling, or LETRS. Another large Utah district, Jordan, is investing $5 million in the same program, which emphasizes evidence-based practices including structured phonics instruction. The training is intensive and costly, taking more than two years to fully complete, but is one of more widely used approaches to improving literacy instruction.

With 25 states now requiring educators to undergo professional development in evidence-based reading instruction, the one-time infusion of federal funds provides an unprecedented opportunity to build teacher skills in this area.[14] In Texas, for instance, the legislature passed a bill in 2021 requiring that primary grade teachers attend a state-provided reading academy by the end of the current school year. Districts across the state are now using ESSER funds to meet that mandate. Katy Independent School District is paying stipends to teachers to complete the specialized training, and Garland Independent School District is investing funds to expand reading academies through 8th grade.

In addition, as many as 36 districts plan to train teachers and staff on social-emotional learning curricula and best practices for responding to the increase in student behavioral and mental health challenges.

Districts such as Maryland's Howard County Public Schools are equipping teachers and staff with the tools to recognize and address early signs of trauma and mental health issues. Similarly, Omaha Public Schools plans to provide trauma-informed care training, which includes recognizing symptoms of traumatic stress and increasing awareness of its effects on the brain and body.

Other districts are providing training opportunities for culturally responsive teaching methods, restorative practices and conscious discipline, and implicit-bias training. Long Beach, California, for example, plans to use a portion of its ESSER III allotment to provide training for a districtwide restorative-justice initiative, equipping teachers with conflict-resolution strategies, cultural awareness, positive behavior supports, and other alternatives to suspensions and expulsions.

Given the one-time nature of the ESSER funds and the looming fiscal cliff, spending on professional development can be a more sustainable approach to support and improve the teacher workforce, ultimately helping to address learning loss.

Like any approach, professional development is not always effective, cautions Goldhaber of the Center for Education Data and Research. "In a lot of districts, the professional development that teachers get is very generic." He suggested that training be connected to teacher performance evaluations, so that instructors are working on skills teachers may be lacking.

Kraft from Brown suggests that the training teachers receive be tied to efforts to improve pay and working conditions. Professional development, he said, "is sustainable if you keep teachers. But if you train them and then they burn out and leave, less so."

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School districts have at least two more years to use their ESSER III money and billions more dollars to invest. Momentum has been building behind several significant spending strategies: breaking with the traditional pay scale in response to shortages, deploying teachers in new ways to maximize talent, doubling down on the science of literacy, and equipping educators with skills and knowledge to support students' mental health, a need that long predated the trauma many students experienced during the pandemic. These and other trends may result in long-term improvements in the teaching profession—and public education.

Yet we also found signs that some local Covid-relief investments in teachers could be difficult to achieve and hard to sustain. Many districts have struggled to fill new teaching slots at a time when teachers are increasingly on the frontlines of the culture war and low unemployment is creating ample opportunities for prospective educators in other fields.

Some of the new roles are short-term assignments intended to address the immediate impacts of the pandemic, including teachers to temporarily reduce class sizes in elementary grades. Others represent longer-term district investments that somehow would have to be absorbed into annual budgets once the federal Covid-relief aid expires.

Districts may not need to continue every academic recovery intervention, particularly if their investments pay dividends over the next couple of years. But some of the investments—for example, the staffing of more robust academic tutoring systems—may warrant continued funding, allowing them to become a permanent part of school districts' academic infrastructure. Even with spending extensions from the U.S. Education Department, districts will face a significant challenge to sustain these new staffing levels once the one-time infusion of funding is gone. Determining which interventions have worked the best—which Covid-relief bets to double down on post-pandemic recovery—will be a key task of education policymaking at all levels in the years ahead.

END NOTES

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