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May 14, 2020

U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

On behalf of the 3 million members of NEA across the nation, all of whom are dedicated to supporting students and staying connected with families during this pandemic, we urge you to vote YES on the HEROES Act. Votes on the HEROES Act (H.R. 6800) may be included in NEA's Report Card for the 116th Congress.

Given that at least 36.5 million Americans are out of work and unemployment is higher than at any time since the Great Depression, Congress must act decisively to stave off further disaster. For many families, however, it is already too late: They have lost jobs, homes, and hope.

This is why we urge you to quickly pass the HEROES Act, a tribute to those whose work holds us together—the essential frontline workers such as first responders, health care professionals, and educators that every community depends on, especially in time of crisis. Like so many other workers, educators have risen to the challenge of this pandemic, finding creative ways to reach out to students and even putting themselves in harm's way to deliver meals and learning materials to students. The funds and provisions in the HEROES Act will help protect educators' jobs, and their health and safety by assisting states and school districts in purchasing personal protective equipment (PPE) and other critical items to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

NEA members enthusiastically support the HEROES Act; in particular, we call your attention to the following:

\$915 billion in relief for states, localities, territories, and tribes

Our economy cannot reopen in any significant way without schools that are fully functioning—and that means schools that are fully *staffed*. Students returning to schools will need the best learning environments and opportunities we can provide. They will need not only academic support, but also a full range of services to nurture their social and emotional well-being. This funding can help avoid massive budget cuts and pay essential frontline workers, including educators, preventing widespread layoffs.

\$100.15 billion for the Department of Education, including \$90 billion to stabilize funding

Among other purposes, these funds can be used to help cover the additional costs of providing PPE, sanitizing and cleaning schools and school transportation, and providing support—including counseling and mental health services—for impacted students, families, and staff. The funds for public campuses will help to defray expenses they have incurred because of the pandemic and assist them in meeting the variety of needs their students have at this time.

In addition, NEA members are grateful that the HEROES Act reins in Education Secretary Betsy DeVos' wrongheaded attempt to use ESF funds for "micro-grants" and other schemes to put money into vouchers and private schools, at the expense of the 50 million students in public schools.

\$1.5 billion for the Homework Gap-Digital Divide

We are disappointed with the proposed appropriation and ask for the full \$5 billion that is authorized. Some 12 million students do not have Internet access at home; this lack of access is particularly acute in African American, Latino, Native American, and rural communities. We must ensure that all students have access to Wi-Fi hotspots, connected devices, and other equipment through the upcoming academic year so that they are not excluded from learning opportunities.

Relief for Student Loan Borrowers

The legislation extends the CARES Act's suspension of student loan payments and interest to September 2021, and also extends those protections to those with commercially held FFEL loans and institutionally held Perkins loans. It cancels \$10,000 in student debt for the highest-need borrowers of U.S. Department of Education loans and grants emergency relief to defrauded borrowers. These and other provisions will be a lifeline to individuals who were struggling to repay high-cost loans even before the financial upheaval caused by the pandemic.

COBRA

The nine months of full premium subsidies will allow many workers to maintain their employer-sponsored coverage if they are eligible for COBRA, granting peace of mind in a period of widespread illness.

Unemployment Insurance Benefits and Stimulus Funds

The extension of the periods for Pandemic Unemployment Compensation, Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, and Pandemic Extended Unemployment Compensation benefits and the additional stimulus funds will provide working people with financial help they desperately need to weather this crisis.

Educator Tax Credit

Increasing the educator tax credit from \$250 to \$500 recognizes the sacrifices educators make for their students and will help those who are having to purchase equipment for virtual learning.

Nutrition/Food Assistance

The \$3 billion in additional funding to provide emergency relief for school meal providers, and child and adult care program providers, will enable these programs to provide nutritious meals to more individuals. Several other provisions will increase access to meals, including: the extension of Pandemic EBT for students eligible for free- and reduced-price meals through the summer and until schools reopen; a \$10 billion appropriation to SNAP to support caseload increases; increases to SNAP benefit levels; an additional \$300 million to states over two years to administer SNAP; and a two-year waiver of SNAP work requirements.

Voting Rights

The many provisions to protect voting rights—including making absentee vote-by-mail available to all voters, requiring 15 days of early voting, and allowing voting with a sworn statement rather than requiring an ID—will help ensure access to the polls. Eliminating the 20-percent match eases the pressure on financially strapped states to contribute to the cost of election security.

The HEROES Act recognizes that while our nation is strong and leads the world in many respects, America is not invincible. This is not a time to be tentative or timid; our future depends on the actions you are willing to take right now. In past times of hardship, members of Congress have courageously stepped forward to provide leadership that has steadied us and restored hope. We urge you to vote YES on the HEROES Act so that America can begin the long, difficult recovery ahead.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marc Egan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "M" and "E".

Marc Egan
Director of Government Relations
National Education Association