



May 7, 2020

The Honorable Lois Frankel, Co-Chair
The Honorable Jackie Speier, Co-Chair
The Honorable Brenda L. Lawrence, Co-Chair
The Honorable Veronica Escobar, Vice Chair
The Honorable Deb Haaland, Vice Chair
Democratic Women's Caucus
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congresswomen Frankel, Speier, Lawrence, Escobar, and Haaland:

Thank you for inviting me to participate in the May 4 Democratic Women's Caucus briefing about the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on women and families. I was honored to represent NEA's 3 million members, most of whom are women. These educators carry major caregiving roles in their families and are also dedicated to supporting, guiding, and nurturing their students, especially in times of crisis.

NEA members appreciate your advocacy for funds to address the urgent needs of women and families in a supplemental coronavirus relief package. We will continue to uplift and support your efforts to assist the millions of people who are hurting today and will continue to struggle even after this emergency officially comes to an end. We also appreciate your interest in supporting students and educators and doing all we can as a society to address the glaring disparities that the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored.

NEA members are rising to new challenges at this uncertain time. Many are on the frontlines engaging and teaching students, making and delivering school meals, driving WiFi hotspots on school buses to help bridge the digital divide, and coaching parents who are now "substitute" teachers. In many cases, these educators are risking their own health to stay in contact with students who need them. NEA members are also very concerned about the "missing kids"—those who are not participating in online classes either because they don't have access to the internet at home, or because they are taking care of younger siblings while their parents are working, or have other caretaking duties. These students were already vulnerable before the pandemic, and now they are perilously close to being left behind.

To remind you, our priorities for any future COVID-19 related legislation include:

- **At least \$175 billion more for the Education Stabilization Fund.** States and local governments are projected to suffer their worst budget shortfalls in history in fiscal year 2021 and deep budget cuts beyond due to COVID-19 related costs and a steep drop in tax revenues. Without this additional appropriation for the ESF, essential public services will face cuts that will surpass those during the Great Recession, and students will not have access to the resources or individual support they need. School finance experts predict hundreds of thousands of education jobs lost, exacerbating the deep hole schools found themselves in a decade ago.
- **Emergency funding to close the homework gap and digital divide, including support for Rep. Grace Meng's Emergency Educational Connections Act (H.R. 6563), to provide at least \$2 billion for an emergency fund, administered through the E-Rate program, for distance and remote learning.** As I said during the briefing, we are grateful for Congresswoman Meng's legislation to help close the homework gap for the 12 million students, roughly 1 in 5, who cannot do schoolwork at home because they lack internet access. A disproportionate share of these students are African American or Hispanic, live in low-income households, or live in rural areas.

- **\$56 million in additional PPE funding for education support professionals and educators in direct contact with students.** These professionals are continuing to prepare and distribute meals; clean, maintain, and secure school buildings; oversee technology needs; and perform other vital work during the pandemic. They should be considered frontline workers whose jobs are essential, and that means having the PPE to protect themselves, as well as their families and communities, from infection.
- **Cancellation of student loan payments throughout the COVID-19 crisis followed by at least \$30,000 in student loan forgiveness per student after the emergency ends.** Our student loan crisis has held back the economy and crushed millions of American families, leading to defaults, loan balances that never shrink, homes that cannot be purchased, and delays in starting new businesses. Women hold two-thirds of the nation's student debt and on average borrow \$3,000 more than men to attend college, according to the American Association of University Women; furthermore, the wealth and wage gap makes it even harder for women to repay their loans. Canceling at least \$30,000 in student loan debt will assist women and their families, help America regain our economic footing, and position our nation for growth.
- **At least \$4 billion to help states prepare for the 2020 elections.** The pandemic must not be a barrier to voting. To that end, we must ensure safe and accessible methods for all eligible voters to cast a vote by expanding early in-person voting, vote-by-mail options and protections, and safe and viable in-person options. We must also fund voter education to inform voters of new practices. Without these steps, many voters, particularly those in marginalized communities, will not have a say in our democracy.

Our nation will be forced to reckon with the fallout from COVID-19 for years to come, and that is why NEA members believe that Congress must prioritize students, public schools, and educators in the next COVID package. I believe that by taking the steps outlined above, we can emerge from this crisis stronger, with a greater awareness of the longstanding disparities that exist in many communities and the determination to finally address them.

Sincerely,

Lily Eskelsen García
President

cc: Rep. Alma Adams
Rep. Joyce Beatty
Rep. Suzanne Bonamici
Rep. Julia Brownley
Rep. Judy Chu
Rep. Katherine Clark
Rep. Susan Davis
Rep. Debbie Dingell
Rep. Rosa DeLauro
Rep. Mary Gay Scanlon
Rep. Marcy Kaptur
Rep. Carolyn Maloney
Rep. Grace Meng
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