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Lily Eskelsen García
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Executive Director

May 26, 2020

The Honorable Charles Schumer, Minority Leader
The Honorable Amy Klobuchar, DSOC Chair
The Honorable Jeanne Shaheen, DSOC Vice Chair
The Honorable Patty Murray, Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Health, Education,
Labor & Pensions
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

On behalf of the 3 million members of NEA, thank you for the opportunity to participate in the Democratic Steering and Outreach Committee's May 20 call about the impact of COVID-19 on schools, students, and educators. NEA members appreciate your commitment to dealing with the fallout from the pandemic, and addressing the glaring disparities it has underscored. We know that you fully understand that our economy cannot reopen without schools that are fully functioning and fully staffed in ways that protect students, families, and educators.

We are grateful that the House of Representatives passed the HEROES Act earlier this month, and at this point the need for Senate action is urgent. To that end, please consider the following in any forthcoming legislative package:

At least \$175 billion in Education Funding

Among other purposes, these funds can cover the additional costs of providing personal protective equipment (PPE) and disinfectant products/stations, sanitizing and cleaning schools and school buses, and a full range of counseling and mental health services for impacted students, families, and staff. When schools reopen, we will need to employ many strategies, including staggered schedules, more frequent school cleanings, and social distancing on school grounds during classes, meal time, recess, and student transport. Clearly, all of these will require additional staffing. The additional funding will help both K-12 schools and colleges meet the challenges of reopening and defray the expenses they have incurred due to the pandemic, including those associated with online learning.

In addition, NEA members ask that the Senate in its next COVID-19 package rein-in Education Secretary Betsy DeVos' wrongheaded attempts to advance her failed privatization agenda by diverting emergency resources from public schools to private and religious schools. The HEROES Act contains language that ensures Secretary DeVos does not have a slush fund which she is attempting to use for voucher-like policies, including her "microgrant" voucher proposal. It also contains provisions that roll back Department of Education guidance that requires public schools to provide a much higher percentage of funding to go to private and religious schools for "equitable services" and prevents any future attempts by Secretary DeVos to implement private school voucher

programs. We are hopeful the Senate will take similar steps to prevent the funding of vouchers and private schools at the expense of the 50 million students in public schools.

Relief for states, localities, territories, and tribes

We support the HEROES Act's \$915 billion in state and local relief and are hoping for similar relief in Senate legislation. States are facing shortfalls in the hundreds of millions of dollars, and some have either already laid off essential workers, including educators, or are planning to. We must do all we can to avoid making choices today that will cost students learning opportunities and diminish our quality of life. As I said above, the economy will remain paralyzed unless we can fully reopen schools, and that will require more—not less—funding

\$4 billion to close the Homework Gap

One of the inequities the pandemic has shed light on is the lack of internet access among as many as 12 million K-12 students, most of whom are in African American, Latino, and rural communities. This disparity impedes students' ability to participate in online learning and places them at a huge disadvantage when compared to their peers. Given the unknowns we face, we will need to offer a variety of strategies throughout the upcoming school year to ensure students are learning, wherever they are. We are grateful for calls by Democrats in the U.S. Senate to appropriate \$4 billion to help students access Wi-Fi hotspots, connected devices, and other equipment so they are not excluded from all they need to learn and grow.

Relief for Student Loan Borrowers

This time of high unemployment and reduced work hours is harrowing for student loan borrowers. We ask that you consider legislation that would cancel, up front, at least \$10,000 per borrower. We also ask that the suspension of student loan payments be extended through Sept. 30, 2021, as called for in the HEROES Act, and we seek the inclusion of commercially held FFEL and Perkins loans in all provisions for relief. In addition, we ask for immediate emergency relief for defrauded borrowers. These actions will extend a lifeline to individuals who were struggling to repay high-cost loans even before the pandemic.

Economic Support for Households

Workers are grateful for the Unemployment Insurance provisions and economic stimulus included in the CARES Act, but it is clear that much more is needed. We ask for additional stimulus payments to individuals and families, an extension of pandemic-related UI benefits through Jan. 31, 2021, as called for in the HEROES Act, full federal funding of these benefits and an increase in the federal reimbursement for extended unemployment compensation from 50 percent to 100 percent.

Nutrition/Food Assistance

With families struggling to pay their bills, food insecurity is at an all-time high. We need additional funding to enable school meal providers, as well as child and adult care program providers, to continue dispensing meals to students and to avoid shortfalls. We also need more funding for SNAP to support increases in caseloads and to raise SNAP benefit levels.

\$4 billion for Voting Rights

We must make sure during this pandemic that all voters can participate in our democracy. This means additional funds to protect voting rights, including making absentee vote-by-mail available to all voters, requiring at least 15 days of early voting, and allowing voting with a sworn statement rather than requiring an ID, to help ensure access to the polls. We also ask for legislation that would

eliminate the 20-percent match, so that financially strapped states do not have to contribute to the cost of election security.

These are some of our priorities in any pandemic legislation you consider; a full list of our priorities is available on our [Education Votes site](#). As we cope with continuing fallout from COVID-19, all of us understand that it will take years to recover and rebuild, but we must start that process now. During past challenges, members of the Senate have taken bold action to help those in need and put our nation on the path to recovery. We are looking to you for leadership and strength, and members of the NEA will enthusiastically work with you in your efforts.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lily Eskelsen García".

Lily Eskelsen García
President
National Education Association

cc: Sen. Richard Blumenthal
Sen. Sherrod Brown
Sen. Bob Casey
Sen. Chris Coons
Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto
Sen. Dick Durbin
Sen. Maggie Hassan
Sen. Mazie Hirono
Sen. Doug Jones
Sen. Tim Kaine
Sen. Tina Smith
Sen. Debbie Stabenow
Sen. Chris Van Hollen
Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse