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U.S. Senate
Health, Education, Labor & Pensions Committee
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

On behalf of our 3 million members and the 50 million students they serve, we would like to submit for the record the following comments in connection with the June 10 hearing, “Going Back to School Safely.”

Physically opening schools at the beginning of the 2020–21 school year is the goal of most districts and states, but the decision to reopen must be rooted in health and safety—not driven by an arbitrary start date. To reopen schools safely, we will need to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) for students and educators; modify classrooms, cafeterias, and school buses to permit social distancing; intensify instruction and support for students traumatized by the impact of the coronavirus on their families and communities; and more. Doing so will require significant investments at a time when schools are facing budget cuts that are expected to far exceed those during the Great Recession.

Looming state budget shortfalls

America officially entered a recession in February, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research. More than 40 million Americans are jobless. The unemployment rate is nearly 14 percent, the highest since the Great Depression. States and localities are struggling to fund public education in the face of dramatically rising costs and sharply declining tax revenues as consumers dial back spending on virtually everything except groceries and Netflix subscriptions.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 500,000 public education jobs have already been lost. If the economic damage wrought by the coronavirus pandemic goes unchecked, nearly 2 million educators—one-fifth of the workforce—could lose their jobs over the next three years, according to a [new analysis by the National Education Association](#).

These job losses would profoundly impact the 50 million students who attend public schools, their families, and communities—especially low-income students whose schools rely on Title I funding to lower class sizes, hire specialists, and offer a rich curriculum. By comparison, 300,000 education jobs were lost during the Great Recession. In other words, the COVID-19 recession could be more than six times as bad for education as the 2008 financial crisis.

Students need more—not less

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a spotlight on a hard truth that our members across the country already knew: Not all students have access to the educators, resources, and tools they need. It has also fully revealed the long-standing digital divide and exacerbated inequities like the homework gap—the inability to do schoolwork at home due to lack of internet access. Nationwide, as many as

12 million students are affected—roughly 1 in 5—and a disproportionate share are African American, Hispanic, live in rural areas, or come from low-income families.

To help contain the spread of COVID-19, public schools in nearly every state shut down and abruptly switched to online instruction, putting students without access to the internet at even greater risk of falling behind their peers. Taking into account all these factors, McKinsey & Company estimates that African American students could lose the equivalent of 10 months of learning, Hispanic students nine months of learning, and low-income students more than a full year of learning due the COVID-19 pandemic.

Instead of addressing these issues, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos has used resources provided by the CARES Act to push her failed privatization agenda, which has been repeatedly rejected by Congress. “Microgrants,” her latest scheme, are just another name for vouchers that divert taxpayer dollars from public to private and religious schools.

Next steps

Decisions about reopening America’s schools should be grounded in health experts’ findings and recommendations, input from educators, access to protection, and equity—treating racial and social justice as an imperative, not an expendable aspiration.

The HEROES Act recognizes this is the right approach. It includes \$915 billion in direct relief for state and local governments that can be used to pay vital workers such as educators and \$90 billion in additional education funding that could save more than 800,000 education jobs at all levels from kindergarten to postsecondary. The HEROES Act would also ensure that taxpayer dollars go where Congress intended: to the public schools that educate 9 out of 10 students.

To help reopen schools safely, NEA urges Congress to provide at least \$175 billion more for the Education Stabilization Fund, at least \$56 million in directed funding for protective equipment, and at least \$4 billion to create a special fund, administered by the successful E-Rate program, to equip students with hot spots and devices to help narrow the digital divide and close the homework gap.

We thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments and stand ready to work with Congress to reopen America’s schools safely.

Sincerely,



Marc Egan
Director of Government Relations
National Education Association