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June 9, 2020

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Oversight and Reform
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

On behalf of the 3 million members of NEA who teach and nurture students across our nation, thank you for holding the hearing, “No Worker Left Behind: Supporting Essential Workers.” We are grateful for this opportunity to submit these comments for the record.

Educators should be designated as essential workers in our society for this simple reason: No matter what crisis or tragedy strikes, we cannot (nor would we want to) “pause” educating and supporting students any more than we would want to halt the other crucial work that holds communities together. **Preparing our students for the future is, in fact, critical to the future of our nation.**

Educators have a deep understanding of and respect for this tremendous responsibility. Therefore, they quickly transitioned lesson plans to online platforms, taught themselves new technologies, and also continued to engage the many students with no access to technology at home. But many who work in education cannot perform their jobs remotely.

These essential, frontline workers are, for example, preparing meals for students and families in need; delivering meals to students’ homes or to sites such as churches and community centers; cleaning, sanitizing, and maintaining school property; performing critical administrative functions that can only be accomplished on-site; and maintaining computer networks. Unfortunately, many of them are doing this work without the personal protective equipment (PPE) that would help keep them and others safe from contracting COVID-19.

It is incumbent upon Congress to designate educators as frontline workers, and as such, prioritize providing them with adequate PPE, such as masks, gloves, and disinfecting materials. In addition, schools and school districts must have specific funding to purchase PPE and disinfecting items; without dedicated funding, districts may have to purchase PPE by shifting resources from other areas, or educators may be forced to continue working on the frontlines without the materials they need.

In addition, we know that many people face particularly high risks for contracting COVID-19, especially those with underlying health conditions or weakened immune systems. These individuals, as well as people who are caretakers for loved ones in high-risk categories, may feel

unsafe returning to work—especially when there are no guarantees that their workplaces are meeting health standards established by the Centers for Disease Control and other federal and state authorities, or providing adequate PPE. Workers who feel unsafe and vulnerable are not *choosing* to stay home from work; they are being left with no choice but to guard their health and safety at the risk of losing their jobs. Unemployment insurance should not be taken away if workers feel unsafe going back to jobs where working conditions could compromise their health.

Across the country, educators are making countless sacrifices to continue their important work. We must do everything we can to make sure that as frontline, essential workers, they have the tools and the resources to do their jobs. Thank you again for the opportunity to provide comments for this hearing.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marc Egan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Marc Egan
Director of Government Relations
National Education Association