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

Dear Senator:

On behalf of the 3 million members of NEA who are dedicated to teaching and supporting students from K-12 through higher education, thank you for the opportunity to provide comments for the committee's hearing today, "COVID-19: Going Back to College Safely."

Since the COVID-19 crisis began, NEA members have shifted gears quickly to provide opportunities and resources that would keep students learning and engaged during the pandemic. Education support professionals working in financial aid, student housing, student counseling, and other crucial areas are assisting students and helping them make difficult, but necessary, transitions. Custodians, and other higher education ESPs responsible for the physical plant are continuing to maintain facilities, sometimes at great risk to themselves.

We believe that efforts to reopen campuses should be guided by four principles:

Health expertise

The pandemic has highlighted the important role institutions of higher education play, and that means we must prioritize safety and provide adequate staffing as campuses reopen; not doing so will only prolong this crisis. We believe that Centers for Disease Control cleaning guidelines are helpful for maintaining classrooms, residence halls, and other campus buildings. However, we are also concerned that much of the federal government's guidance lacks the specificity needed for campuses, where interaction occurs on a scale that is far different from what occurs in a grocery store, for example.

Educator voice

All levels of decision-making about how and when to reopen campuses should include faculty and staff members. They have the expertise in teaching and supporting students; any decisions must be made collaboratively, with their full participation.

Access to protection

All members of campus communities must have funded access to personal protective equipment (PPE), as well as disinfecting supplies. Institutions of higher education, already underfunded, should not be forced to pay for PPE by redirecting funds intended for other purposes.

Lead with equity

Decisions and resource allocations must prioritize racial and social justice, so that regardless of where a campus is located or students' ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, or disability status, resources and opportunities are provided that will meet their needs. In addition, we must make sure that disease prevention and mitigation on campuses does not isolate or stigmatize students in ways that promote injustice and inequity and deny them of opportunities they deserve.

We must also prioritize mental health and social and emotional support for students and staff members. Many people have experienced devastating losses and are now struggling with anxiety and other serious issues. We cannot reopen campuses without dealing with these issues.

It is crucial to note that reopening campuses requires additional assistance from Congress. The CARES Act moved us much closer to providing the funding institutions of higher education need, but NEA members are advocating for the measures in the HEROES Act, which called for \$101.15 billion for the Education Stabilization Fund, which included targeted funds for public institutions of higher education, and \$915 billion in relief for states, localities, territories and tribes to pay vital workers, including educators at risk of losing their jobs due to massive budget shortfalls.

Faculty and staff members want students to return, but they need assurances that as campuses reopen, we are doing everything possible and providing the funding necessary to keep campus communities healthy and safe. Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments for the record.

Sincerely,

Marc Egan
Director of Government Relations
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