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July 28, 2020

Committee on Indian Affairs  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

On behalf of our 3 million members and the 50 million students they serve, we thank you for tomorrow's timely hearing, "Preparing to Head Back to Class: Addressing How to Safely Reopen Bureau of Indian Affairs Schools," and submit the following comments for the record.

### **Native students need internet access, rely on school meals**

Students, educators, and administrators are preparing for the new school year—now just weeks away—in the midst of a largely uncontrolled COVID-19 pandemic. To avoid worsening an already bad situation, it is essential to consider the conditions under which in-person instruction can safely resume, as well as what is required to provide meaningful online instruction.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a spotlight on a hard truth 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, reports the National Center for Education Statistics, 36 percent of Native Americans do not have internet access at home, compared to 18 percent of their peers. The problem is even greater on tribal lands where 39 percent of households lack broadband access, compared to 31 percent nationwide wide, according to the Center for Indian Country Development at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis.

The [National Indian Education Association \(NIEA\)](#) stresses the importance of preserving access to school meals during the COVID-19 pandemic. "Nearly 4 in 5 American Indian and Alaska Native students rely on school meal programs to provide affordable and healthy meals for their children throughout the school year," NIEA says.

### **Health, safety and equity must drive reopening**

Educators are eager to get back to their students. At the same time, they agree decisions about reopening schools and campuses must be driven by health, safety, and equity—not an arbitrary start date. NEA's guide to [intentional planning for school success during COVID-19 and beyond](#) has identified six key issues:

- **All hands on deck**—Educators, families, medical experts, and policymakers need to work together so our students can learn safely.

- **Buffers**—Social distancing standards of six feet must be accounted for in all school and campus plans.
- **Cleanliness**—Disinfectants and personal protective equipment (PPE) must be provided, and rigorous cleaning and ventilation standards implemented.
- **Detection**—Students and educators must be tested regularly, and their contacts traced.
- **Equity**—To ensure all students have access to learning, regardless of the color of their skin or where they live, we must equip them to go online and expand the broadband infrastructure.
- **Funding**—Students, educators, and their families need support from policymakers to reopen schools and campuses safely.

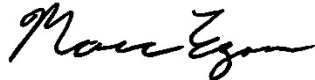
### **Next steps**

The HEROES Act, passed by the House more than two months ago, is a good start. It would provide \$20 billion in direct funding to tribes to counter coronavirus impacts. Moreover, the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund includes a \$450 million set aside for programs operated or funded by the Bureau of Indian Education.

To help reopen schools and campuses safely, NEA is urging Congress to provide at least \$175 billion to stabilize education funding, at least \$4 billion to equip students with hot spots and devices to help narrow the digital divide and close the homework gap, funding for personal protective equipment (PPE), and relief for student loan borrowers.

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

Sincerely,



Marc Egan  
Director of Government Relations  
National Education Association