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July 23, 2020

U.S. Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

On behalf of the 3 million members of the NEA, who teach and support students in schools and on college campuses, we write to convey the dire and growing needs of America's students as the COVID-19 pandemic continues unabated. NEA members have remained in contact with students throughout this crisis, witnessing the hardship they and their families face firsthand. They are suffering. Our nation is suffering. And the time for Senate action to address the reality of this crisis has long since passed.

It is clear now that there is broad agreement that the next COVID package must include funding for schools. However, we have several significant concerns about what the Majority Leader is planning to put forward, and we are dismayed that another week has now ended without meaningful progress toward legislation that can actually pass, despite the urgency that should be apparent to everyone.

First, we oppose any legislation that would tie funding of school districts to the resumption of in-person instruction or would incentivize districts to hurriedly, haphazardly reopen. Educators, more than anyone, want schools to reopen—but we believe this must occur safely. Holding education funding hostage makes a mockery of local control, and could force students and staff to return to unsafe conditions. This could prolong the pandemic—particularly in high-poverty communities and communities of color that are already hard-hit by the virus—and ultimately make resuming in-person learning more difficult, while also starving schools of the funding they need to provide remote instruction.

As you consider measures specific to public schools and campuses, please note that the NEA has created principles, "[All Hands on Deck: Initial Guidance Regarding Reopening Schools](#)," for resuming in-person learning *the right way*. This requires incorporating these ABC's: **All Hands on Deck** guidance should be followed; **Buffers** of six feet must be present in all school and campus facilities; **Cleanliness** must be emphasized through rigorous cleaning and use of disinfectants; **Detection** of COVID must be a priority through regular testing and contact tracing; **Equity** must be ensured through accessible learning opportunities for all students; and **Funding** must be provided that will meet these goals.

Second, we strongly oppose proposals that siphon critical federal emergency education funding from public schools and shift it to private schools, whether through direct payments, voucher schemes, tax credits or any other program. As you may be aware, many private schools have already received relief funding through the Paycheck Protection Program. Meanwhile, public schools across the nation have been forced to lay off employees, and additional layoffs will surely occur without additional relief funding. To ensure all students have the learning opportunities they deserve and to enable public schools to safely resume in-person instruction, we also urge you to rescind the Department of Education's wrongheaded guidance on the provisions related to equitable services included in the CARES Act. Federal emergency education funding should go to our public schools and educators to benefit the 90 percent of the nation's students who attend public schools—not to advance Secretary Betsy DeVos' failed privatization agenda.

Third, we oppose waiving school districts' and higher education institutions' liability for providing safe conditions for teaching and learning. Waiving liability without having federal or state mandates in place to protect health and safety would encourage schools and campuses to reopen despite public health concerns, and would send the message that they are, indeed, unsafe. At this time of upheaval, the Senate's actions must engender trust, not uncertainty.

We call on you to include in this legislation the \$1 trillion in aid to state and local governments that was part of the HEROES Act. If we are to avoid laying off frontline public service workers—in health care, public safety, education, and other areas—who are dedicated to helping us overcome our national crisis, this aid is imperative.

Not only is urgency required; it is abundantly clear that bipartisan and bicameral agreement is necessary to accomplish this work. In addition to the above considerations, we ask that you support students and educators by incorporating the following priorities in COVID-19 legislation:

### **Education funding**

- Provide at least \$175 billion for the Education Stabilization Fund to distribute to states, allocated by formula, for public pre-K through post-secondary education to fill budget gaps caused by declining state revenues. School districts and college campuses will need this funding to adapt facilities for social distancing, provide PPE for students and educators, and adjust staffing and schedule patterns as necessary.

### **Digital Divide/Homework gap**

- At least 16 million K-12 students lack internet access at home, and 1 in 3 Black, Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native families do not have high-speed internet. To help schools and public libraries procure and distribute Wi-Fi hotspots, connected devices, and other technology for these students, appropriate at least \$4 billion to the established, trusted, and equitable E-Rate program, administered by the Federal Communications Commission.

### **Worker protections, including PPE**

- Provide funding for PPE for students, teachers, faculty, education support professionals, and other staff who interact with students and their families.
- Task the Occupational Safety and Health Administration with crafting emergency standards to help protect frontline workers at risk of contracting the virus.

### **Higher education**

- For the duration of the COVID-19 national emergency, cancel monthly federal student loan payments and interest accrual, including commercially held Federal Family Education Loans (FFEL) and Perkins Loans held by institutions of higher education.
- After the national emergency ends, cancel at least \$30,000 in student loan debt per student.
- Provide additional assistance for community colleges to compensate for CARES Act's funding methodology, which uses the number of enrolled Pell grant recipients to prioritize allocations (many community college students are eligible for Pell grants, but don't apply for them).

### **Child nutrition and SNAP**

- Extend the Pandemic EBT program to ensure it reaches all children who may miss out on meals at school.
- Provide schools with maximum flexibility and resources to continue serving meals to all children through the 2020-21 school year, whether teaching and learning are in-person or remote.
- Provide a 15-percent boost in the SNAP maximum benefit and increase the SNAP monthly minimum benefit from \$16 to \$30.
- Suspend SNAP time limits and rules changes that would cut SNAP eligibility and benefits.

### **Rural education**

- Provide Secure Rural Schools (SRS) payments for 4,400 schools in 775 rural counties located near national forests in 41 states.

### **Health care and paid leave**

- Provide extended COBRA premium relief that includes federal, state, and local employees.
- Provide more time to obtain reimbursement for services covered by flexible spending accounts (FSAs).
- Include the paid leave provisions of the HEROES Act, such as ensuring that workers are provided with a full 12 weeks of paid emergency Family and Medical Leave and that such leave does not count toward their 12 weeks of nonemergency unpaid FMLA and extending the availability of FMLA benefits from Dec. 31, 2020 to Dec. 31, 2021.

### **Voting rights**

- Provide at least \$4 billion more in funding to ensure all eligible voters can actually vote in November, while protecting public health and safety.

### **Immigration**

- Automatically extend work authorization for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) holders.
- Halt implementation of new public charge rules that deter people from immigrant families—including U.S. citizens—from seeking COVID-19 testing and treatment.

### **Economic help for individuals & households**

- Provide a second round of stimulus payments of at least \$1,200 per person, as under the CARES Act, and expand/ensure eligibility for young adults, all seniors, and immigrants—and children who are U.S. citizens but were excluded from receiving CARES funds—who were not covered by the first round, or whose payments were delayed.
- Extend the unemployment insurance provisions of the CARES Act.
- Modify “between terms” restriction to allow instructional, research, or principal administrative employees of institutions to receive payments during the summer, between two successive academic years or terms.
- Continue to cover laid-off workers who are not normally eligible, such as adjunct and contingent faculty at colleges and universities (our review indicates they should be covered by the CARES Act).
- Provide additional funding to help prevent homelessness, evictions, and foreclosures.

NEA members desperately want to return to in-person instruction for the good of all students; at the same time, we know there is a direct correlation between opening schools and reviving the economy. But none of this is possible without strictly implementing health guidance from scientists and medical professionals that informs us of how to reopen schools *safely*, nor is it possible without congressional aid/federal assistance.

This health and economic crisis is not ending, and it is ravaging more and more families and communities. We are approaching the point at which, without your prompt action, full recovery will take generations. **There is no more time to waste—we must have a robust congressional response immediately.**

Sincerely,



Marc Egan  
Director of Government Relations  
National Education Association