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U.S. House of Representatives
Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

On behalf of the 3 million members of the NEA, who teach and support students in schools across the nation, we thank you for tomorrow's timely hearing, "Challenges to Safely Reopening K-12 Schools," and submit the following comments for the record.

At the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, NEA members shifted gears quickly to provide opportunities and resources to keep students learning and engaged despite the closing of school buildings. But their dedication and creativity could not overcome the hard truth: Not all students have access to the resources and tools they need. The long-standing digital divide exacerbated inequities like the homework gap—the inability of many students, particularly those in communities of color, to do schoolwork at home due to lack of internet access.

When the 2019-20 school year ended, educators began immediately planning for the coming school year, despite the many unknowns. Many education support professionals continued to prepare and distribute meals to students, clean, disinfect, and maintain school buildings, and do other work that placed them in direct contact with students and families—often without the personal protective equipment they needed, risking their own health and the health of their families.

The 2020-21 school year is already under way in some school districts, and millions more students and educators will be returning to school—whether in person, online, or a hybrid—in the coming weeks. No one wants to return to school buildings more than educators; they know that for some students, school is more than a place of learning—it is a place of stability. But schools must have the funding to reopen the right way. There are already reports that the virus has spread through schools that have reopened, and while children do not appear to contract COVID-19 as severely as adults do, they can spread the virus. We are gravely concerned given that rates of the virus are rising in half the states, just as the school year begins.

Health, safety, and equity must drive reopening

Educators believe decisions about reopening schools 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 provided in all facilities.

- **Cleanliness**—Disinfectants and PPE must be provided, and rigorous cleaning and ventilation standards implemented.
- **Detection**—Students and educators must be tested regularly, and contact tracing must be in place.
- **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 we must also expand the broadband infrastructure.
- **Funding**—Students, educators, and their families need support from policymakers to reopen schools and campuses safely.

To help reopen schools 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, and funding for PPE. To avoid layoffs of educators and other public service workers who are on the frontlines of this crisis, Congress should include the \$1 trillion in aid to state and local governments designated in the HEROES Act.

Because NEA's members are focused on reopening schools safely, we oppose waiving school districts' liability for providing safe conditions. Waiving liability without having health and safety mandates in place would encourage schools to reopen despite public health concerns, sending the message that they are, in fact, unsafe. (Please see [NEA's fact sheet on this issue.](#))

Additionally, we oppose taking critical federal funding away from public schools and shifting it to private schools through direct payments, vouchers, tax credits, or other schemes. Private schools have benefited from the Paycheck Protection Program, while public schools have had to lay off employees. We also urge you to rescind the Department of Education's guidance on the equitable services provisions in the CARES Act. Emergency education funding should benefit the overwhelming majority of students, who attend public schools. (Please see [NEA's fact sheet on these issues.](#))

We oppose tying school-district funding to the resumption of in-person instruction or using it to incentivize districts to hurriedly reopen. This makes a mockery of local control, and simultaneously forces students and staff to return to unsafe conditions while starving schools of funding for remote instruction.

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