



1201 16th St, N.W. | Washington, DC 20036 | Phone: (202) 833-4000

Rebecca S. Pringle
President

Princess R. Moss
Vice President

Noel Candelaria
Secretary-Treasurer

Kim A. Anderson
Executive Director

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U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

On behalf of the members of NEA, who teach and support students in schools and on college campuses in communities across the nation, we write to convey our extreme disappointment with the COVID-relief package brought forward by the Majority Leader. The bill does not do nearly enough to protect the health and financial stability of families; does not provide the resources necessary for public K-12 schools and colleges and universities to conduct in-person learning safely or to educate students effectively remotely; and does nothing to stabilize state and local governments and protect critical public services. We urge you to vote NO on S. 178. Votes on this issue may be included in the NEA's Report Card for the 116th Congress.

Senate Republican leadership is correct when it refers to this bill as a “targeted relief package.” But unfortunately, business is by far the major target for relief. S. 178 is not only too little, too late; it is an insult to the families that have lost loved ones to COVID-19, and to the many other families that are struggling to stay afloat. Four months have passed since the House passed the Heroes Act—four months of more sickness and death, escalating financial disarray, and rising personal hardship. During this period of inaction by the Senate, schools across the nation have reopened for in-person learning—often under pressure—without the resources to do so safely. This bill, which even eliminates economic stimulus benefits for working families and cuts the enhanced unemployment benefit in half, represents a dismal failure of leadership and vision.

Legislation is a reflection of our highest priorities and most deeply held values. Seen in this light, it is glaringly clear that Senate Republican leadership's primary focus is on shielding businesses and workplaces, including schools and campuses, from COVID-related litigation, rather than on protecting working people and families. In fact, more than one-quarter of the package's language is devoted to liability protections. Public schools and public college campuses receive scant attention in a bill that is nearly 300 pages long. Meanwhile, the majority of the bill's education-related provisions center on vouchers and other schemes that take funding away from students in public schools, including a new offering that would funnel taxpayer dollars into state tuition tax credit voucher programs through direct federal funding, *and* through a tax credit, and another perversion of the 529 program to boost well-off families who homeschool.

These are the wrong priorities when the focus should be on measures to uplift those most in need—including providing funds to close the Digital Divide/Homework Gap, which disproportionately affects Black and brown students and means these students do not have access to the technology required for remote learning.

Furthermore, although a federal judge ruled this week against the Department of Education's wrongheaded guidance on CARES Act provisions related to equitable services, we urge you to rescind the guidance to

ensure that all students have the learning opportunities they deserve and to enable public schools to conduct in-person instruction safely. Federal emergency education funding should benefit the 90 percent of our nation's students in public schools—not advance Secretary Betsy DeVos' failed privatization agenda.

We continue to call on the Senate to include in this legislation the \$1 trillion in aid to state and local governments that was part of the Heroes Act to avoid laying off public service workers—in health care, public safety, education, and other areas—who are on the frontlines of the pandemic.

In addition, while we appreciate that this package includes some funding for childcare, the amount is far below the \$50 billion that we believe is necessary to address the childcare crisis facing our nation.

We reiterate our request that the Senate 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 need this to adapt facilities for social distancing, provide PPE for students and educators, and adjust staffing and schedule patterns.

Digital Divide/Homework gap

- Provide at least 16 million K-12 students lack internet access at home. 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.

Child nutrition and SNAP

- Extend the Pandemic EBT program so 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 and between any 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.

Time is running out for a Senate response that meets the tremendous pain of this moment. Families are counting on you to act, and their patience is wearing thin. Educators are working night and day to support their students—both in-person and virtually. We ask you to vote NO on S. 178 and produce a legislative package that provides the real relief that America’s students and families desperately need.

Sincerely,



Marc Egan
Director of Government Relations
National Education Association