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December 21, 2020

United States Congress
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator/Representative:

On behalf of the 3 million members of the National Education Association, who have continued to teach and support students throughout the pandemic and have borne witness to working families' frustration and pain, we offer the following comments on the end-of-year COVID relief package. While this bill is arriving far too late for the many working families that have lost homes, savings, or even loved ones, it will help alleviate *some* of America's suffering. But much more needs to be done.

We acknowledge the additional emergency funding for K-12 public schools and higher education, for child care providers and families, as well as increases for nutrition services, such as SNAP and Pandemic EBT for families with children in childcare and meals for senior citizens. This bill includes \$600 in stimulus payments per person, which will also be provided to households with at least one EITN holder. We are grateful for the extension of supplemental Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits and other emergency UI payments.

However, this legislative response is drastically short of—and unconscionably late for—what these unprecedented times demand. The omissions in it are a federal failure. Tens of millions of Americans remain jobless, and nearly 4 in 10 children live in a household that isn't getting enough to eat or is behind on rent, according to a recent report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. State, local, and tribal governments are struggling to provide public services that are essential in this crisis, yet aid to them has been withheld. This is shortsighted, as it will likely lead to greater job losses of frontline workers and further stall any true economic recovery. The demand for a broad liability shield to protect corporations and places of work instead of protecting people was merely a ploy to prevent needed resources for those serving Americans in need.

In addition to the absence of state and local aid, the agreement leaves behind as many as 16 million students—overwhelmingly Black, Brown, Indigenous, low-income, and rural—who lack home Internet access or devices, jeopardizing their ability to learn remotely when health and safety concerns demand it. Congressional supporters of helping these students were right to reject the unreasonable demands pushed by GOP leadership to undermine the successful E-Rate program that could address the worsening digital divide in exchange for a few billion dollars for a program with no guarantee of equitable distribution to actually help students in need. The omission of this necessary funding via E-Rate—which had bipartisan support—is appalling.

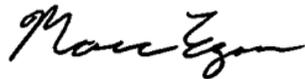
Therefore, we urge Congress to consider this COVID-19 package as merely an emergency down payment on efforts to fully address our health and economic crisis and assist the millions of people whose struggles compound daily.

The NEA has called for *at least* \$175 billion for the Education Stabilization Fund to fill budget gaps and enable school districts and college campuses to safely reopen for in-person learning; this legislation includes less than half that amount. The legislation also provides \$2.75 billion for private K-12 schools, and although guardrails limit how that money can be spent, which is critical, we believe federal dollars should be used to support students in public schools.

The agreement should have extended student loan relief for millions facing burdensome debt during these difficult economic times, but their needs were ignored. We hope the incoming Administration will tackle the problem, given Congressional inaction. The agreement should have done more to cover and extend paid emergency sick leave. The half-measure included in the bill could potentially force people to keep working when they have COVID-19 so they can continue receiving a paycheck, at the risk of exposing others to the virus and contributing to its spread. This omission and many others must be corrected swiftly in another COVID relief package.

Holiday season is here, and it is a time of desperation—not celebration—for millions of Americans. This bill represents a hopeful end to a tumultuous and tragic year, but its shortcomings are many. We look forward to additional and expeditious COVID-19 relief and stimulus legislation in the New Year that will truly help families and our nation recover and rebuild.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Marc Egan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Marc" being more prominent than the last name "Egan".

Marc Egan
Director of Government Relations
National Education Association