

May 20, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Senate Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, and House Minority Leader McCarthy:

On behalf of state think tanks across the U.S., thank you for your leadership and efforts to ensure that learning continues for the nearly 60 million K-12 children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the past two months, state education policy leaders have been examining the impact this pandemic is having on education within their respective states. They are also reaching out to colleagues in other states to compare their findings and to brainstorm potential solutions to common issues. Additionally, these policy experts are in regular communication with local families, schools, and other stakeholders to assess both the immediate impact and the potential long-term challenges of COVID-19 on education. Together, these experts are working to develop solutions that will ensure every child receives the education that best meets their individual needs—both now and in the future.

To date, Congress has provided substantial funding through the CARES Act to keep the learning going during this time. The undersigned member think tanks across the country firmly believe that the role of government should be limited; however, in extraordinary times such as these, we also recognize that Congress would like to provide thoughtful assistance to ensure that every child receives the greatest possible continued access to a quality education. Should Congress approve a future stimulus package, below are policy recommendations that we believe would provide the greatest temporary assistance to K-12 education while being fiscally responsible:

Enable School Choice and Provide Direct Support to Families

No one has been more impacted by the closure of schools than the families who are unexpectedly attempting to support their children's education at home. These solutions would provide support to families at a critical time and would be valuable during the 2020-2021 school year for any unplanned closures.

- Expand the use of 529 education accounts to be utilized for K-12 homeschooling and other educational expenses.
- Allow for the direct distribution of funds to families to be able to continue and support their child(ren)'s education via Emergency Education Savings Accounts or microgrants. Education Savings Accounts should be interoperable with state tax credit scholarships as well as any new Education Freedom Scholarships.
- Create a "Student Check Up" Account that provides parents with funds to use over the summer for tutoring, testing, or other expenses to assess student progress and to provide a plan to ensure their children are progressing academically.

- Allow states to use any new K-12 allocations to fund Student Safety Scholarships for families that do not wish to send their child back to their local public school this fall for safety-related reasons.

Support Private Schools

If 20 percent of private school students have to be reabsorbed into the public system next fall, it would cost the public system roughly \$15 billion. Supporting private schools during this crisis will help mitigate what could be a significant financial burden to states and also support parents and students who wish to remain in their current private school but may be adversely impacted by the economic impacts of COVID-19.

- Provide a federal tax credit for donations directly to private schools. Allow non-itemizers (who use the standard deduction) to deduct up to \$2,000 or more in cash donations to private schools from their federal taxes.
- Provide a temporary refundable tax credit for low income families to assist with private school tuition.
- Require that any proposed funding to Local Education Agencies (LEAs) be equitably shared with nonpublic schools and charter schools.
- Require State Education Agencies (SEAs) to inform all private (and public charter schools) of the amount of funding accessible.
- Require the state ombudsmen, created under ESEA 1117(a)(3)(B), to administer equitable shares for private schools.

Improve Internet Access for Families that Need It

Nearly 12 million children live in homes without broadband access. When considering the expected duration of the coronavirus crisis and the impact of the 2020-2021 school year, it is clear that digital learning is likely going to be a part of education for the foreseeable future. Any future stimulus package should aim to address this significant infrastructure challenge.

- Address online equity issues for low-income and rural communities by expanding E-rate and providing incentives to spur broadband infrastructure. Options may include simplifying the permitting process and providing financial incentives for contractors that meet deadlines. A competitive grant program could aid the creation of broadband infrastructure in rural communities and should include local community support from parents, schools, and local governments.
- For any additional E-rate funds appropriated, allow Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to be eligible only if they demonstrate they are actively working to educate students if the school year is still in session or, if the school year has ended, are developing plans for the 2020-2021 school year to accommodate distance learning as needed.

Support Teachers and the Transition to Distance Learning

Teachers have been asked to change their medium and style of teaching very quickly and with little training. Congress should encourage more teachers across the United States to obtain professional development in virtual and online learning so that students are receiving the best education possible.

- Provide a stipend (microgrant) for teachers to learn to develop and deliver distance learning. Florida approved \$200 stipends for up to 10,000 teachers to get them trained to adapt traditional in-person curriculum to digital/online instruction. Private, charter, and public school teachers could be eligible. The percentage of stipends to private, charter, and public schools would be no less than the percentage of private and charter schools to the general school population.

We, the undersigned, are available to answer any questions you may have on the above recommendations. Should you wish to schedule a call or meeting, please reach out to Katherine Bathgate, Senior Policy Advisor for State Policy Network at bathgate@spn.org.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our recommendations with you. We look forward to working together to meet the educational needs of our nation's children.

Sincerely,



California Policy Center
(California)



Center of the American
Experiment (Minnesota)



Civitas Institute
(North Carolina)



Commonwealth Foundation
(Pennsylvania)



Empower Mississippi
(Mississippi)



Freedom Foundation of
Minnesota (Minnesota)



Georgia Center for
Opportunity (Georgia)



Georgia Public Policy
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