



Council of the Great City Schools®

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March 22, 2020

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

The Council of the Great City Schools, the coalition of the nation's largest central city public school districts, is extremely concerned that the Administration and Congress are overlooking the pivotal role that public schools perform in responding to crises and helping our local communities recover after emergencies.

Our nation's public-school districts, particularly those school districts where populations are densest, have stepped up to the plate with no additional promise of assistance during the coronavirus outbreak to provide millions of emergency meals every day to children, families, and local community members. These school districts are also developing and distributing, electronically and in hard copy, instructional lessons to homes across the country. And they are developing innovative strategies to meet the academic needs of our poor students, English learners, students with disabilities, and homeless students. We have not ironed out every challenge, but our public schools are committed and determined to address the needs of all children.

At the same time, most school districts were prepared to be out of session for several weeks—not to be closed for the remainder of the school year. The strain that this will put on our schools is hard to quantify at this point, but it will be substantial, since many of the nation's schools are just now reaching the same funding levels that they had before the 2008 downturn. In April—next month—we will be contractually obligated in most places to notify staff of their positions for the next school year, but it is highly likely that a recession will drain local and state education coffers of the revenues that schools require to sustain current staffing levels. In addition, schools will need to catch students up on what they have missed being out for months. The prospect of compensating for unfinished learning at the very time that we may have to lay off thousands of teachers for the upcoming school year creates an untenable educational crisis for the country, one that may take years to recover from.

The federal government has put several remedies in place to address the needs of the private sector, but it has barely touched the unfolding financial crisis developing in our nation's public schools. In fact, the second supplemental appropriations bill specifically excluded school districts along with state and local government agencies from the financial support that private sector employers are receiving from the federal government.

The truth of the matter is that nation's school districts who are now stepping up in so many unsung ways to provide for their children and families risk a serious financial breakdown later in 2020 and beyond without immediate, substantial, and direct federal aid.

With state and local revenue sources drying up quickly, the nation's public schools will need a substantial infusion of direct federal financial assistance to maintain staff into the upcoming school year and deliver instruction and support services at current levels. The recent Family First Coronavirus Response Act established a new federally required expenditure for additional paid emergency sick leave and family and medical leave, but prohibited school districts and other governmental entities from receiving the same federal payroll tax credit subsidy that private sector employers will receive for identical emergency paid leave expenditures.

State and local governments, including school districts, are responding during this national crisis with emergency medical, police, fire, public health, and food services in their communities. For its part, the federal government has added new financial burdens to already overloaded and understaffed public agencies without commensurate federal support.

A variety of federal funding mechanisms could be used to directly help the nation's public schools provide essential education, food, and support services during the nationwide school closures and ultimate recovery. The federal government could utilize the Title IV-A program of pass-through grants to school districts under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act with minimal modifications to provide broad-based education and support services, academic enrichment, technology and digital learning, and security assistance; create a new federal formula grant with flexible funding to ensure the continuity of local instructional and support services; or establish something similar to the 2009 State Fiscal Stabilization Fund (SFSF) with minor modifications to ensure that public school services are not disproportionately reduced or supplanted as frequently occurred in many states during the 2008 economic recession.

The Council of the Great City Schools and its members are working feverishly to help the nation overcome the scourge of coronavirus, but it stresses that public education in this nation will immediately need tens of billions of dollars in direct and targeted financial assistance to school districts from the federal government. The nation's public schools must retain their capacity to serve the nation's school children, families, and neighborhoods as the indispensable public institution in every American community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Casserly". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

Michael Casserly
Executive Director