

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 9, 2021

Susan Rice
Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy
White House Domestic Policy Council

Jeff Zients
Coordinator
White House Coronavirus Task Force

Dear Ambassador Rice and Mr. Zients:

We look forward to working with you to help our nation's pre-K-12 schools safely and equitably return to in-person instruction. We hope that you will prioritize efforts to ensure that states have the resources and guidance they need – including by making coronavirus vaccines accessible to educators and support staff – to help schools safely return to in-person learning.

This pandemic has created extraordinary challenges for students, educators, and families across the country. School closures and the widespread use of distance learning has required many students to learn in places other than their classrooms, transformed the practices of educators, required school support staff to take extraordinary steps to support students, and forced many parents to make adjustments to work schedules to help their children learn from home. Estimates show that nearly half of kindergarten through twelfth grade students in our country attend schools that offer virtual-only learning.¹

While school closures and transition to distance learning was a necessary step to keep educators and students safe as our country worked to understand and combat the coronavirus, the disruptions in learning will have significant consequences for students. Gaps in access to broadband and reliable technology have heightened the learning challenges faced by many students, with nearly 25 percent of students still lacking full access to distance learning.² Recent data indicates that some students – particularly Black and Hispanic students, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, and students with English as a second language – began the current academic year by up to five months behind in learning due to regression caused by lost classroom time.³

The stress that has accompanied this pandemic, combined with the challenges of distance learning, has also increased the mental health challenges facing students, with one survey finding that 75 percent of educators believe that social and emotional support for students has never been

¹ Burbio. (2021, January 25). *K-12 School Reopening Trends*. <https://info.burbio.com/school-tracker-update-jan-18/>

² National Education Association. (2020, October 16). *The Digital Divide and Homework Gap in Your State*. <https://www.nea.org/resource-library/digital-divide-and-homework-gap-your-state>

³ Meckler, L. & Natanson, H. (2020, December 6) *'A Lost Generation': Surge of Research Reveals Students Sliding Backward, Most Vulnerable Worst Affected*. The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/students-falling-behind/2020/12/06/88d7157a-3665-11eb-8d38-6aea1adb3839_story.html

more important than it is now.⁴ School closures and the transition to distance learning during this pandemic has also had an impact on teachers, with a recent survey showing that 28 percent of teachers said the pandemic has made them more likely to leave teaching or retire early due to the challenges and stress they face in trying to provide a quality education for students under uniquely challenging conditions.⁵

By safely and equitably returning to in-person instruction, we begin to address learning loss, longstanding inequities in our education system compounded by this pandemic, and support the needs of our nation's educators and school staff. Doing so requires providing sufficient funding, ample resources, and clear guidance to help schools safely return to in-person instruction.⁶ Important steps include adequate testing and contact-tracing, mask-wearing and social distancing, and appropriate cleaning, disinfection, and ventilation, and other public health protocols recommended by Federal, State, Tribal, and local public health authorities.⁷

A safe and equitable return to in-person learning also requires helping states carry out their vaccination plans. As of now, at least 25 states are ensuring that some vaccines are made available for educators, based on guidance developed by the independent Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices to include teachers and school staff in Phase 1b of vaccine distribution.⁸ As the Biden Administration works towards establishing vaccination centers and deploying mobile vaccination units across the country, we hope that the Administration will work to make vaccines readily accessible to teachers and school staff.

The Administration's recently announced American Rescue Plan includes several provisions that will go a long way toward addressing the needs of students and educators and advance efforts to safely and equitably return our nation's schools to in-person instruction. The proposal includes critical investments including funding to help schools improve ventilation systems, modify spaces to support social distancing, distribute masks, and hire more custodial staff for school buses and facilities – as well as support the academic and social and emotional needs of students. Finally, we are encouraged that this plan calls for funding a critical national vaccination program, which will help get vaccines to educators and other school staff to ensure their safety in returning to their classrooms and transporting students.

Without significant focus and attention towards safely and equitably reopening our country's schools, we are concerned that many longstanding systemic inequities in education will be

⁴ American Federation of Teachers. (2020, October 21). *Educators Say COVID-19 Has Greatly Exacerbated the Grief Support Crisis in Schools, According to New Survey*. <https://www.aft.org/press-release/educators-say-covid-19-has-greatly-exacerbated-grief-support-crisis-schools>

⁵ Singer, N. (2020, November 30). *Teaching in the Pandemic: 'This is Not Sustainable'*. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/30/us/teachers-remote-learning-burnout.html>

⁶ National Education Association (2020 December). *NEA Position on COVID-19 Vaccines*. <https://www.nea.org/resource-library/nea-position-covid-19-vaccines>

⁷ American Federation of Teachers (last accessed 2021, February 3). *Reopening School Buildings Safely*. <https://www.aft.org/reopening-school-buildings-safely>

⁸ Education Week (2021, February 2). *Where Teachers Are Eligible for the Coronavirus Vaccine*. <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/where-teachers-are-eligible-for-the-covid-19-vaccine/2021/01> (including Arizona, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wyoming)

further exacerbated. As your partners in Congress, we look forward to working with you as you continue to address these issues and help students and educators safely and equitably return to in-person learning.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



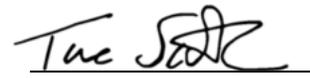
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