

K-12 Schools, Recession, and COVID-19: Addressing the Educational Needs of Children in a Federal Stimulus Package

A great school is a community that nurtures, protects, and empowers all children to be their best. But this is not the experience for too many of our children, because policymakers have failed to address inequities in school funding driven by class, sex and race. And now, the spread of COVID-19 has unleashed a health and economic crisis that threatens to leave even more children disconnected from a school community. More than 90 percent of schools in the U.S. have closed and moved to online instruction—creating and worsening multiple academic, social, and emotional barriers for children, especially those in families struggling to make ends meet. Congress must act now to provide the necessary resources to ensure that in the wake of the pandemic and ensuing recession, children have the resources they need to thrive in a nurturing school community.

COVID-19 STIMULUS RELIEF MUST INVEST \$75 BILLION IN STATE EDUCATIONAL AGENCIES TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF ALL CHILDREN

Before a national emergency was declared, too many students attended schools that provided too little social and emotional support—and many schools misused too many of their limited resources on criminalizing children instead. In fact, [1.7 million students attended schools with police, but no counselors](#). And academic resources fall short for many students. For example, Native American, Pacific Islander,

Black and Latina girls are more likely than white girls to [attend high schools with fewer math and science courses](#). These schools are unlikely to have the capacity to convert to distance learning without additional resources. And more than 10.3 million children do not have home internet access needed to participate in distance learning. That's 14 percent of children nationwide, and nearly 20 percent of Black and Latinx students and 37 percent of Native American students.

COVID-19 has also caused great disruption in children's lives, putting their emotional and mental health at risk and threatening families' ability to meet children's basic needs. Yet, nationally the [student-to-counselor ratio is 482-to-1](#)—nearly double the 250-to-1 ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association. Some students have needs that require greater investments. For example, [Latina girls—who report higher rates of sadness and hopelessness](#) due to a variety of social and cultural experiences—and children who have experienced harassment, assault or other trauma would benefit from resources that help them balance mental wellness and educational obligations. Students who are pregnant, parenting, or homeless will likely need assistance to meet basic needs (such as housing, food and child care) to prevent further disruption to their education. In this time of crisis, it is more important than ever that Congress provide school districts with targeted resources to help students thrive.

To adequately address the needs that vulnerable students face during this national emergency, policymakers must take immediate action to reduce the impacts of school interruptions. Although the CARES Act provided \$13.5 billion to state educational agencies and \$3 billion for governors to distribute to public colleges and schools, this is not nearly enough to address the needs of vulnerable children. Congress should provide an additional \$75 billion in aid to K-12 schools that:

PROTECTS THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF MARGINALIZED STUDENTS

- In this moment of crisis, Congress should focus on ensuring that the needs of marginalized students are protected. For this reason, under no circumstances should Congress grant the Secretary of Education authority to waive provisions of federal civil rights law or special education law. Additionally, Congress should direct the Secretary not to finalize any proposed non-emergency rules until after the national emergency has ended and schools have resumed their regular operations. Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act and the Higher Education Act, sufficient waiver authority already exists to provide flexibility for schools to continue meeting their federal obligations during this national emergency. Additionally, the CARES Act already expanded narrow waivers related to annual testing and accountability requirements in ESEA and HEA provisions that would have penalized students unable to complete the school year. As such, Congress should not further expand existing waiver authority in these federal education laws.

PROVIDES ADDITIONAL FUNDING FOR SCHOOLS TO CREATE OR ENHANCE DISTANCE LEARNING PLATFORMS AND TO PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH THE TECHNOLOGICAL ASSISTANCE TO ACCESS DISTANCE LEARNING

- This is particularly important for under-resourced schools with a high concentration of children from families that are struggling to make ends meet or suffering from job instability during this crisis. Although the CARES Act included this as an allowable use of funds, more resources are needed to make sure all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status, have access to technology and assistance to continue learning during school closures.

ENSURES THAT CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN PK-12 SCHOOLS CONTINUE TO RECEIVE QUALITY EDUCATION

- This includes providing financial support for schools to continue providing free appropriate public educations in compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and to ensuring that students with disabilities at all education levels receive accessible online instruction in compliance with the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Although the CARES Act included continuity of IDEA services as an allowable use of funds, it also dangerously opens the door for the Secretary to recommend additional waivers to IDEA and the Rehab Act. Rather than waiving any provisions of the law, Congress should ensure that school districts have the additional funds they need to help meet the needs of students with disabilities.

REQUIRES THAT THE FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION'S E-RATE PROGRAM BE USED TO FUND HOME INTERNET ACCESS FOR STUDENTS

- Allowing E-rate to fund home internet access for students would reduce access inequities inherent in distance learning for low-income students, Native American students, and Black and Latinx students. More than [7,500 education leaders](#) have called on the FCC to make these changes to the program, but Congressional action and additional funding would force the FCC to act.

PROVIDES FUNDING FOR SCHOOLS TO PROVIDE VIRTUAL MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING FOR CHILDREN

- Students with mental health needs must not be ignored during this pandemic. Indeed, the need for counseling and support during this time of crisis has likely only increased. Although the CARES Act included this as an allowable use of funds, more resources are needed to meet children's mental health needs. At a minimum, Congress should increase funding for the National Child Traumatic Stress Network to address stress and mental health needs associated with the spread of the virus. Any funding increases set aside for school supports should include a provision to incentivize diverting funds typically used for police in schools to increase counselors and similar supports. This will help push schools to focus on children's mental health needs once they return to school, not their criminalization. For this reason, no stimulus funds should be used to increase the role of law enforcement in schools.

CONTINUES TO INCREASE FUNDING AND FLEXIBILITY FOR CHILDREN TO ACCESS SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS AND OTHER SOCIAL BENEFITS

- It is crucial that during this pandemic, students do not go hungry due to the disruption in food programs. Although the CARES Act provides more than \$15.8 billion for SNAP, Congress should [authorize changes to the program](#) to ensure that programs that provide free and reduced-price meals to children have the funding and flexibility to continue in healthy and accessible ways.

ENSURES EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS STAY OPERATIONAL, INCLUDING ASSISTANCE WITH EMERGENCY STAFFING NEEDS.

- Although the CARES Act included the provision of early childhood education as an allowable use funds, [more resources are needed to ensure the child care needs](#) of frontline workers, educators and student parents are met.

INCREASES FUNDING FOR PROGRAMS THAT SUPPORT STUDENTS WHO FACE MULTIPLE BARRIERS, SUCH AS HOMELESS AND FOSTER YOUTH AND PREGNANT AND PARENTING STUDENTS

- This crisis will likely create further instability for homeless and foster youth. And students who are pregnant or parenting will face additional barriers during this time. In addition to navigating school closures and distance learning inequities, these students face additional challenges juggling child care, medical needs, housing, and job instability. Although the CARES Act said that states may use funds to increase services under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, more resources are needed to make sure students who are pregnant, parenting, homeless or in foster care are connected to necessary resources and assistance during this time.

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The COVID-19 crisis should be a wake-up call to the need to ensure that every child has access to a school that allows them to thrive.