



July 23, 2020

The Honorable Robert P. Casey, Jr.
Member
United States Senate
393 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C 20510

The Honorable Pat Toomey
Member
United States Senate
248 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C 20510

Dear Senators Casey and Toomey:

As Congress returns to Washington this week, our students and public school employees are preparing to return to their classrooms, buses, and cafeterias. And across the commonwealth, school administrators and school boards are struggling to piece together adequate budgets for the upcoming school year.

When the U.S. Senate unveils the next round of COVID-19 legislation, we believe the intention will be to provide additional supports and resources to citizens and to help state and local governments to address the fiscal crises they have encountered due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since this legislation is absolutely critical to Pennsylvania’s public schools, we wanted to summarize just why federal emergency aid to public education is so vital and explain why the nation’s K-12 schools and colleges and universities need \$175 billion in federal emergency aid.

We need to make high-quality education to our students a top priority. There is no doubt that the COVID-19 emergency has impacted our commonwealth’s students. While we are extremely proud of the incredible work that the professionals we represent did this Spring while teaching and serving our students remotely, we must plan for the reopening of our schools in just a few weeks.

Each school entity in Pennsylvania is required to adopt a school reopening plan that considers guidance issued by the state departments of Education and Health and the advice provided by the Centers for Disease Control. We have approached this planning with the seriousness it deserves, because each of these plans must include not only instructional plans but also health and safety plans aimed at reducing health risks.

This has been a daunting project for every school entity, and the costs of implementing these plans and reopening schools in a way that is safe for students and staff is staggering.

Just a few short months ago, we could not have imagined the challenges that the spread of the coronavirus have posed to public education. Now, health and safety precautions that were unfathomable are now essential to reducing health risks to our students and staff. The costs of regularly sanitizing schools, buses, and classrooms, reducing class sizes to enforce social distancing, ensuring students have access to high-speed internet and technologies, securing face coverings and other personal protective equipment, and offering much-needed health, mental, and counseling services will put an unprecedented strain on our school district budgets.

There is no rational way to cut costs and not pay for these essential activities and products. If schools are to reopen, we simply must have them. And that carries significant cost.

To make matters worse, we project that Pennsylvania's school districts will see a \$1 billion loss in local revenues in FY 2020-21 because of the economic impacts of the pandemic. We are fortunate that, even though state revenues are in similar crisis, Gov. Tom Wolf and the General Assembly enacted a state budget that provides a full year of funding to public education at FY 2019-20 levels. This is particularly notable since the state Independent Fiscal Office estimated on June 22 that state revenues for FY 2019-20 had declined by \$3.5 billion.

Compounding the impact of the loss in revenue is the likely exodus of families choosing to enroll their students in cyber charter schools. School districts did not budget for a mass departure of students to leave their brick-and-mortar schools and will be required to pay cyber charter tuition based on the last year's budgets. This amount is projected to increase by about \$200 million over FY 2019-20 before factoring in potential enrollment increases. Though some school districts across the commonwealth have created their own cyber academies, offering an in-house cyber education, it may not be enough to save some school district's budgets from literally running out of money by December 2020.

Unfortunately, there is little more that school boards and state government can do to secure additional revenues. School property tax increases are capped, and additional state revenues just won't be available this year. That is why we are looking to the federal government for urgent assistance. A \$175 billion nationwide investment in public education is necessary to fully protect and support our students, schools, and staff, and to ensure Pennsylvania's K-12 schools and colleges and universities can reopen safely this fall.

Congress has provided unprecedented assistance as Americans have struggled with the myriad financial, health, and social impacts of this pandemic. Your support for these initiatives has absolutely made a difference in the lives of Pennsylvanians, and we commend you for it. But we are not out of the woods yet, and we need your help again.

We know that educating the commonwealth's students is a priority for you, just as it is a priority for us. And we want you to know that we simply can't do our students justice – protecting their health and providing them with a high-quality education – without significant, timely, and urgent federal emergency aid.

As the Senate begins to consider this aid package, we encourage you to keep this in mind and to recognize that the commonwealth's public schools have nowhere else to turn for the resources we need. Please approve a federal emergency aid package of \$175 billion for public education and help us to educate Pennsylvania's students in the best and healthiest way possible.

Sincerely,

Pennsylvania State Education Association

Pennsylvania School Boards Association

Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officials

Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators

Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units

Pennsylvania Principals Association

Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools

Pennsylvania Association of Career and Technical Administrators