

May 7, 2020

Hon. Ron DeSantis

Governor

400 S Monroe St.

Tallahassee, FL 32399

Via email:

GovernorRon.Desantis@eog.myflorida.com

Richard Corcoran

Commissioner of Education

325 West Gaines Street

Tallahassee, Florida 32399

Via email: Commissioner@fldoe.org

Dear Governor DeSantis and Commissioner Corcoran:

The over 20 undersigned organizations, representing diverse members including students, educators, families, and advocates from communities across our state, write to urge you to ensure that Florida's share of federal funds for education relief during the COVID-19 pandemic is focused on students who are impacted the most by this crisis.

We know this crisis presents many challenges for educators and schools across our state, and we appreciate the work you are doing to ensure the health and safety of students during this difficult time. This moment has also made clear the importance of our public schools in not just teaching and learning, but also in making sure students have access to food, physical and mental health supports, and robust enrichment opportunities. As so many students and families are struggling to access education and essential services, we urge you to use the significant funds from the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act proactively to ensure schools can address the needs of students who are most marginalized during and after this crisis. We offer our assistance and support as you work to use the new CARES Act federal funds to help students and families during this crucial period.

As you know, many students already did not have the benefit of an equitable opportunity to learn before the COVID-19 crisis began, including low-income children, children of color, children with disabilities, English-language learner children, children in immigrant families, children in foster care, migrant children, children experiencing homelessness, LGBTQ children, and children in the juvenile justice system. It is likely that these children in particular will face significant barriers to accessing the education services and other supports they need during school closures.

The pre-existing opportunity gap is likely to be exacerbated due to inequities in access to technology, space to learn, and caretakers to support their learning and provide specialized services, including for students with disabilities. Further, children and youth are facing additional stress and trauma caused by the crisis and that impact their ability to focus on learning. The impact of this crisis may be long-term: research found that it took two full years to recover learning loss that occurred following school closures during Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

The options for uses for the new federal funding that will be available to the State and to Local Education Agencies (LEAs) must be used to advance equity for and support the needs of

children and families who are disproportionately impacted. **We urge you to engage with families, students, educators, and communities across the state in how these funds are used, and to take all needed steps to ensure that these new federal resources advance equity for students, including by:**

Requiring LEAs to put equity at the center of LEA plans for the use of these new federal funds.

This can be accomplished through the State requiring LEA plans to:

1. Demonstrate, with specificity, how the LEA plan is targeting the new federal financial resources to the schools with the highest proportion of students who are low-income children, children of color, children with disabilities, English-language learner children, children in immigrant families, children in foster care, migrant children, children experiencing homelessness, LGBTQ children, children in alternative schools, and children in the juvenile justice system.
2. Demonstrate, with specificity, how the LEA plan is using the new federal funds to support evidence-based approaches to reducing education inequities for students during the COVID-19 school closure, over the summer, and once schools re-open.
3. Proactively engage with families, students, educators, and school communities on needs and the development of the LEA plans, and then provide maximum transparency on planned uses of the new federal funds (posting plans on LEA websites and the SEA website in languages accessible to students/families in the district).
4. The State must also require LEAs to report, with specificity, how the LEA used the new federal funds to reduce or eliminate education inequities for students, during the COVID-19 school closure, over the summer and once schools re-open, and to provide maximum transparency on reported uses of federal funds (posting reports on LEA websites and the SEA website in languages accessible to students/families in the district).

Ensuring that the State puts equity at the center of its plans for the use of these new federal funds, including the Elementary and Secondary School Relief Fund and the Governor’s Fund.

This includes ensuring these funds are targeted to schools with the highest proportion of marginalized students, and that the funds are used on evidence-based approaches to reducing or eliminating education inequities. The State also must provide transparency on their State plans for the funds and their State reports on how funds were used, including by timely posting these items on the Department’s website. Finally, we encourage the State to keep all public funds for education in public schools, and to ensure these federal funds supplement, not supplant, state resources for education.

Ensuring that the “education working group” of the COVID-19 Task Force is composed of parents/guardians, educators, students, counselors, disability rights advocates, and other education experts from racially, economically and geographically diverse backgrounds to help the State and LEAs navigate this crisis. This working group should have as its charge ensuring that equity is at the forefront of all of the State and LEA’s plans -- and the implementation of those plans – during school closures and for transitioning back to school once that is safe.

Providing State leadership in helping districts collaborate and learn together by working with the Task Force to:

1. Provide guidance on effective strategies for reducing education inequities and addressing learning loss during the COVID-19 school closure, over the summer and once schools re-

open, including working with districts to ensure that students who rely on school meals continue to receive them, to coordinate supports and compensatory services for students with disabilities, and to ensure students have technology, mental health supports, and other services;

2. Gathering and sharing informational resources on effective strategies for reducing education inequities and addressing learning loss during the COVID-19 school closure, over the summer, and once schools re-open; and
3. Providing training for district and school leadership and for educators on effective strategies for reducing education inequities and addressing learning loss during the COVID-19 school closure, over the summer, and once schools re-open.

The State also should apply for additional months of emergency allotments from the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). This would come at no cost to the State and would help ensure that SNAP benefits continue to reach communities.

Throughout all of the above federally-funded activities, the State must ensure that students most impacted during this crisis are prioritized for instructional and socio-emotional support and opportunities, which includes through:

1. McKinney-Vento program services for homeless children,
2. education services under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act for children with disabilities,
3. addressing the technology gap for low-income children and children of color, educational materials and resources in the child's/family's native language,
4. meaningful and substantive education for children in detention,
5. and ensuring students receive needed health and mental health services.

We are ready to work with you to see that the needs of Florida's children are addressed during this extraordinary time. We welcome the opportunity for a meeting to discuss this with you and to answer any questions you may have. Please contact Bacardi Jackson at bacardi.jackson@splcenter.org or Carrie Boyd at carrie.boyd@splcenter.org if we can answer any questions or provide any support.

Sincerely,

American Civil Liberties Union of Florida
ADL Florida
Disability Rights Florida
Florida Badass Teachers' Association
Florida Center for Fiscal and Economic Policy
Florida Council of Churches
Florida Immigrant Coalition
Florida PTA
Florida People's Advocacy Center
Florida Policy Institute
Fund Education Now
Intercultural Development Research Association
League of Women Voters of Florida

League of United Latin American Citizens of Florida
New Florida Majority
NAACP Florida State Conference
Pastors for Children
Pastors for Florida's Children
Power U Center for Social Change
SOUL Sisters Leadership Collective
SPLC Action Fund
United We Dream