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House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis
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Chairman Clyburn, Ranking Member Scalise—thank you for inviting me to offer testimony today on the COVID-19 pandemic, and how we can bring the full resources of our federal government to bear on helping the millions of students, families, teachers, and school staff who have had their lives and educations upended since schools were closed in the spring.

We are confronting not one or two, but several crises at once. The first is the pandemic itself, which began as a natural disaster. The second is the abject failure of leadership from the federal government, which inflamed that natural disaster into a man-made catastrophe that has led to the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression—a crisis that is wreaking havoc on the state and local budgets that schools count on. At the same time, we're also facing a much-needed reckoning with America's long history of systemic racism, which has some of its most pernicious effects in our nation's schools.

Today, these multiple crises have all come to a head at once. And some of the Americans who risk paying the highest price are our children.

The central question that sits at the intersection of these crises is one we all know: how can schools reopen in the midst of a pandemic—especially when some parts of the country are experiencing a dramatic spike in cases, and the rest of the country still lacks access to rapid testing and contact tracing, making today's safer areas more likely to become tomorrow's hot spots?

Look, we all want our children to go back to school in person. Everyone is united on that—parents, students, teachers. All of us. Schools aren't just places where students learn and grow. They also provide meals for students in need and a safe place to go for students experiencing homelessness. But we can only allow students to return to school in person once it is safe.

And everyone is looking to our federal government to show some leadership here. Because in the absence of a clear plan and coherent guidelines, superintendents are being left to navigate these decisions, largely on their own.

Stop and think about that for a moment. As a nation, we are asking superintendents to solve problems that the federal government has been making worse.

We're asking them to make potentially life-and-death public health decisions—not just on behalf of students, but on behalf of millions of professional staff. Teachers, bus drivers, custodians, administrators.

We're asking 15,000 school districts to become 15,000 health care providers, each of them doing testing, each of them conducting tracing, each of them isolating students, without any clear guidance or coordination, without any real resources, without any expertise.

We're asking them to sanitize and secure their physical infrastructure, redesign food systems, rethink entire transportation systems, and reengineer mental health systems that are already strapped.

And by the way, we're also asking teachers, some of whom may be at high risk, to go to school every day, where they might catch COVID-19 and bring it home to their families.

Let's be clear: schools are part of a community. The teachers and staff who work there, the students who attend classes there, the parents who put their kids on the school bus—they aren't in a bubble. They go to grocery stores. They go to the pharmacy. Some are essential workers. Many of them need childcare, too. So even if we do miraculously manage to secure our schools, the truth is, if we don't keep the rest of our communities healthy and safe, we will all remain at risk.

The bottom line is, if we want kids to go back to school safely—and we all want that—the single most important thing we can do has nothing to do with education at all—and that is, defeat the virus.

Because if we had done what was necessary in the spring—wearing masks, socially distancing, keeping only the most essential workplaces open, testing at scale, contact tracing—we could have brought students back earlier in the summer to recoup lost learning time.

If Congress had appropriated a deep investment in schools back in the spring, our local communities could have immediately deployed dollars to address glaring equity gaps that COVID-19 has been exacerbating.

Man-made catastrophes are tragic. But they can also be repaired. And the time to start is now. Here's where we ought to begin.

First, Congress needs to quickly deploy funds where they're needed most. That should include:

- At least \$200 billion in funds to states and districts, which should be targeted to low-income schools. And it should be structured to incentivize states to continue investment in education and prevent disproportionate funding and staffing cuts to low-income schools.
 - Funding should be targeted to students experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities, and English Learners, as has been done in previous disaster relief bills.
 - Funding should also be targeted to a National Tutoring Initiative. If there's ever been a time to think boldly and creatively, this is it. We have millions of college students, recent graduates, and retired individuals who could serve as a nationwide resource to provide core tutoring to students who need to regain lost learning time. The federal government could spur this idea into action, in partnership with private sector leaders.
- \$50 billion in childcare funds should be included so this essential system can continue to serve our communities, including our teachers and school staffs.
- \$7 billion in E-rate funding to close the digital divide that exacerbates inequities between the haves and have-nots. Every child needs access to devices and WIFI so they can learn anything they want, anytime, anywhere—especially since even schools that do open will be just one outbreak away from becoming remote again.

Across all of these initiatives, we need to learn from The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act we passed in 2009—and deploy these stimulus dollars rapidly in a way that's tailored to meet local priorities. Even though COVID-19 has been with us for months now, this is still an emergency, and it's long past time for us to act like it. When it comes to the education of our children, every day counts. So let's deploy this funding as quickly and efficiently as we can.

And let's also support shared learning across school districts. While school districts are being affected differently by COVID-19, they are all grappling with how to phase reopening; how to address equity and student needs; how to protect the rights of students with disabilities; how to build relationships and a sense of community in an online environment; and how address instructional loss, among many other issues.

Many districts, like San Antonio ISD, are taking a staggered approach to re-opening—starting with all virtual learning, and phasing in students returning physically to school. Other districts are focused on making sure younger students and students with disabilities are the first ones returning to school.

So, that's what we should be doing. And here's what we should not be doing:

We should not be delaying the school year. Our kids have lost far too much valuable learning time already. School needs to start. But how it starts—whether it's in-person, remote, or some hybrid model—will vary from community to community.

And let's be honest. It's almost inevitable that sooner or later, in just about every district, someone will get sick. That's why we need a clear protocol of what to do when that happens—and we need to establish a specific point at which we will need to close schools down.

In that sense, our goal can't just be opening schools. It must be keeping them open.

Because if we just open them up only to close them a short time later, that will just create more instability, more chaos, and more confusion. And we don't need that. Students, parents, teachers, and staff—they need stability.

We also shouldn't surrender to the idea that distance learning is a failed experiment. We can and must improve at this. The reality is that many students—especially those with underlying health conditions—won't have the chance to go back until we are finally through this pandemic. Teachers need enhanced professional development to ensure that all students are receiving rigorous instruction, regardless of where they are seated.

I wish we could all go back to earlier this year and change the way this pandemic was managed from the start. But we can't. What we can do is act now so we don't keep making matters worse. What we can do is put our students—our children—front and center in how we make decisions.

Don't they deserve that? Don't the American people deserve that?

Thank you again, Chairman Clyburn and Ranking Member Scalise. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today, and I look forward to taking your questions.