

July 21, 2020

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The Honorable Filemon Vela
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Submitted via email.

Dear Members of Congress Representing the State of Texas,

On behalf of the Texas Pediatric Society (TPS), the Texas Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), a non-profit professional organization of 4,600 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety and well-being of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults, we write to express the urgent need for increased federal education funding that schools need to safely reopen amid the COVID-19 epidemic.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recently published [Guidance for School Re-entry](#) to provide recommendations for safely reopening schools when local community viral transmission is decreasing, hopefully in the fall. The Texas Pediatric Society subsequently [issued a statement](#) supporting the safe reopening of schools. Both documents highlight how schools are fundamental to child and adolescent development and well-being. They provide students with academic instruction, social and emotional skills, safety, reliable nutrition, physical/speech and mental health therapy, and opportunities for physical activity, among other benefits.

Beyond supporting the educational development of children and adolescents, schools play a critical role in addressing racial and social inequity. As such, it is critical to reflect on the differential impact COVID-19 and the associated school closures have had on African American, Native American and Latinx children, as well as children with disabilities and those living at or near poverty. Schools also support parents by providing safe places for their children to be before, during and after school, particularly for parents who work, including essential workers.

With these considerations in mind, the AAP and TPS carefully weighed the available evidence and determined that our shared goal should be to have students physically present in school when local community viral transmission is decreasing, hopefully in the fall. The importance of in-person learning is well-documented, and there is already evidence of the negative impacts on children because of school closures in the spring of 2020. Lengthy time away from school and associated interruption of supportive services often results in social isolation, making it difficult for schools to identify and address important learning deficits as well as child and adolescent physical or sexual abuse, substance use, depression, and suicidal ideation.

Even though this will not be easy, we strongly advocate that all policy considerations for the coming school year should start with this goal in mind. This should happen with careful measures to keep students, teachers, and staff safe, and with flexibility to adapt as needed to the community's prevalence of COVID-19.

For schools in Texas to safely reopen with students in the classroom, Congress must provide sufficient funding to help schools adapt and make necessary changes and accommodations. Teachers and staff need to feel safe when teaching our children. Schools will need to follow guidance from public health officials and adhere to health monitoring and cleaning/disinfecting protocols, have sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE) for teachers, staff and students, implement new procedures for busing and transporting students to school, alter before- and after-school child care and enrichment programs, ensure that students competing in athletics and other activities are safe, make physical plant modifications, adjust staffing schedules, and put protocols in place for how a school responds when a student or teacher tests positive for COVID-19.

Texas schools need substantial additional investments to be able to reopen schools during a time when our state budget has been decimated with the loss of revenue that fund K-12 education. With the Texas unemployment rate at 13 percentⁱ and the state suffering a net loss of 237,800 jobsⁱⁱ since March (the largest loss in the nation), the Texas state budget is facing unprecedented strain due to decreased revenues and greater expenditures. Together, Medicaid and public education account for more than half of the Texas state budget.ⁱⁱⁱ Without urgent relief, we will be left with no option but to implement devastating cuts to essential health and education programs. Cuts to Medicaid threaten the viability of the health care infrastructure serving vulnerable and under-resourced communities, making it more difficult for children, families, and communities to get the care they need. This would further undermine the ability of communities to respond to COVID-19 and would hamper efforts to reopen schools and businesses. Cuts to K-12 education threaten the ability of schools to safely provide in-person instruction, which would similarly undermine communities' responses to COVID-19. Texas needs Congress to provide more federal financial support for both Medicaid and education; supporting one without the other will continue to threaten both. This additional funding is needed as soon as possible since schools are actively planning for the upcoming school year and every week they do not have funding makes it harder for them to comprehensively plan.

In addition, because of the financial hardships many families are now facing, many more students will be living in or near poverty, and a greater number are experiencing food insecurity. A recent study finds that roughly 14 million children –more than 16 percent of households with children are not getting enough to eat during the pandemic.^{iv} Children with disabilities and students with special education needs will need their individual education plans (IEPs) reassessed and school personnel will need to determine the needs for compensatory education to adjust for lost instructional time as well as other related services. On top of this, schools should anticipate and be prepared to address a wide range of mental health needs of children and staff when schools reopen. The emotional impact of the pandemic, including the loss of family members, financial concerns, social isolation, and growing concerns about systemic racial inequity — coupled with prolonged limited access to critical school-based mental health services and the support and assistance of school professionals — demands careful attention and planning as well. School health centers and school nurses will need to respond to these concerns, as well as dealing with any COVID-19 concerns within schools, and therefore will need significant new resources. None of this can be accomplished under existing budgetary conditions.

As such, the Texas Pediatric Society urges Congress to include robust funding for education in the next legislative package in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we urge \$175 billion for K-12 education through the Education Stabilization Fund and \$25 billion for IDEA, Title I and other ESSA programs that support marginalized students that are most likely to be affected by missing in-person instruction. Money must be available to all schools regardless of their timeline for reopening. Schools in areas with high rates of COVID-19 spread may need to consider delaying a return to fulltime in-person instruction, and these schools will need the same or greater federal investments, not fewer.

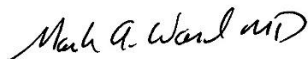
In addition, we would urge Congress to include \$500 million in the Education Stabilization Fund specifically for programs operated by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE). Native American populations face disproportionately high COVID-19 infection and mortality rates, and increased funding for BIE will be important for ensuring BIE schools are equipped to implement the necessary safety precautions to provide safe in-school services.

Reopening schools in a way that maximizes safety, learning, and the well-being of children will clearly require new investments in our schools. We call on our leaders to provide the resources necessary to ensure that funding does not stand in the way of safely educating and caring for our children. Thank you for your continued leadership in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and for your work to ensure children receive the education and health care they need. For any follow up, please contact Clayton Travis, Director of Advocacy and Health Policy with the Texas Pediatric Society at Clayton.Travis@txpeds.org.

Sincerely,



Tammy Camp, MD
President, Texas Pediatric Society



Mark Ward, MD
Chapter Chair, Texas Pediatric Society

ⁱ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (June 19, 2020) Local Area Unemployment Statistics. Available at: <https://www.bls.gov/web/laus/lausthl.htm>

ⁱⁱ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (June 19, 2020). State Employment and Unemployment Summary. Available at: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/laus.nr0.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ Texas Legislative Budget Board. (May 2020). Fiscal Size-up 2020-2021 Biennium. Available at: https://www.lbb.state.tx.us/Documents/Publications/Fiscal_SizeUp/Fiscal_SizeUp_2020-21.pdf

^{iv} Bauer, L. (March 2, 2020). "About 14 Million Children in the US are Not Getting Enough to Eat." *The Brookings Institution*, Available at https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/07/09/about-14-million-children-in-the-us-are-not-getting-enough-to-eat/?preview_id=906357&source=email.