

SPECIAL REPORT:
The Cost of Republican Inaction,
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Getting Back to School Safely: America's Students Need Action Now

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented educational disruptions across the country. It has closed schools, colleges and universities, shifted many classes online, and exacerbated educational inequities for our most vulnerable students.

We also know that nothing is more important than the safety and health of our children and students. As the new school year approaches, the health risks of reopening schools for in-person instruction are weighing heavily on students, parents, and educators alike.

Additionally, reductions in state and local revenues are placing enormous strain on the budgets of public schools and colleges and other social services.

We can't fully reopen our economy if parents can't return to work. And parents can't return to work if they aren't confident that their children will be safe in their schools.

Getting our schools up and running in a safe way will require immediate funding: one analysis by the American Federation of Teachers estimates that in addition to the cost of stabilizing education funding, public schools could require an additional \$116.5 billion to reopen safely.¹

Unfortunately, Republican inaction in Congress is forcing states and schools to lay off educators, paraprofessionals, and other staff and cut critical educational services. Already, the U.S. has lost nearly 500,000 public education jobs², which will have devastating consequences for our children, in particular children with disabilities and students who have faced the most significant learning loss during the pandemic. According to a recent report, state budget shortfalls could total \$615 billion over three years – far greater than the \$283 billion ten years after the 2008 recession - which means more education loss as a result of COVID-19.³

While Senate Democrats are fighting for additional aid to our nation's schools and colleges, Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has said he and other Senate Republicans have not "yet felt the urgency of acting immediately."⁴

Our schools, students, and economy can't wait. School districts and institutions of higher learning need clear guidance to reopen safely and flexible funding to offset the costs related to COVID-19 and help keep educators in our classrooms. Our future is at stake.

America's Students and Schools Need Immediate Federal Assistance

The COVID-19 crisis has caused unprecedented educational disruptions, forcing more than 124,000 schools across 48 states to close abruptly in the spring of 2020 for the remainder of the academic year. These closures affected over 55 million children, or more than 99 percent of students enrolled in public school.⁵ Colleges and universities also suspended or cancelled in-person classes, switching to online formats to help stop the spread of the coronavirus.

States, school districts, colleges, and school leaders are working to figure out when and how schools will re-open for the 2020-21 school year and how to cover the additional costs necessary to implement public safety guidelines to keep students, educators, and other school employees safe. Many schools will continue to offer distance education to many students and require additional investments to make sure every student has access to high-quality instruction, whether in-person or remotely. The costs for reopening safely are compounded by massive shortfalls in state budgets and looming cuts to education funding.

The challenges associated with the COVID-19 crisis are disproportionately felt among students of color, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, Native students, students experiencing homelessness, English learners, migrant children, children and youth in the foster care system, and students involved in the juvenile justice system.

Students are Falling Behind

Widespread school closures and the uneven shift to distance learning around the country are expected to cost students several months of academic progress. Even more alarming, educators fear this "learning loss" will worsen existing achievement gaps across income levels and between white students and their Black and Latinx peers. Surveys have also shown that undergraduate students are also worried about being able to stay on track with their studies and graduate. This is especially true among Black and Latinx students. In fact, higher percentages of Latinx and Black college students have already canceled or modified their education plans, including by delaying enrollment or reducing coursework.⁶

According to one estimate by the education nonprofit NWEA, Brown University, and the University of Virginia, the average student in grades 3-8 could begin the next school year having lost as much as a third of the expected progress from the previous year in reading and half of the expected progress in math.⁷ While learning loss related

to the coronavirus pandemic will be widespread, it will be disproportionately felt among low-income students and Black and Latinx students, who are more likely to live in poverty.⁸

If full in-class instruction does not resume until January 2021, the average student could fall seven months behind academically. Low-income students could fall 12 months behind.⁹

A recent analysis by McKinsey & Company found that learning losses could exacerbate existing achievement gaps by 15 to 20 percent.¹⁰ Learning losses during this pandemic may also cause significant long-term economic damage. McKinsey & Company estimates that the average K-12 student could lose somewhere from \$61,000 to \$82,000 in lifetime earnings. These costs are even worse for Black and Hispanic students compared to their white peers. The analysis by McKinsey & Company also found that white students would earn \$1,348 (or 1.6 percent) less per year over a 40-year working period, while Black students would earn \$2,186 (3.3 percent) less annually, and Hispanic students would earn \$1,809 (3 percent) less annually.

Students with disabilities are also likely to face learning loss. As the new school year begins, educators must assess students' individualized education plans (IEPs) to see how much learning was lost compared to present levels of performance when the IEP was written. Students with disabilities do have a marker for progress with IEPs but may have faced more significant barriers in accessing education during the pandemic, discussed in detail later. Despite some reports of students with disabilities being denied their educational rights during this time, most schools have made efforts to provide some education. Educators will need to work with parents, assess the learning lost, and develop a plan to get students with disabilities back to their previous levels of performance and make progress toward their IEP goals.

Internet Access and Connectivity

As schools and colleges have shifted to distance learning to stop the spread of COVID-19, many have relied on online instruction for students. Educators are now running virtual classrooms, uploading class materials to online learning platforms, and increasingly relying on online content such as YouTube videos to assist students with remote learning. However, many students still face obstacles to accessing online learning, leaving them at risk of falling further behind their peers. These digital inequities prevent students from accessing online distance learning tools during school closures and disproportionately impact low-income students and students of color.¹¹

Estimates show that 9 to 12 million students lack access to high-speed internet at home.¹²

A Pew Research Center analysis of 2015 Census data found that 15 percent of all children ages 6 to 17 lack high-speed home internet. This number is more than double for students living in households earning less than \$30,000 per year. Additionally, the analysis found that Black and Hispanic children were more than twice as likely as white children to lack high-speed internet across all levels of income.¹³ Native students living on Tribal lands also face additional challenges to accessing high-speed internet for remote learning. In 2018, 41 percent of people living on Tribal lands lacked access to high-speed internet. In rural Tribal areas, 68 percent reported not having access.¹⁴ Many students in higher education also do not have broadband access at home, making it difficult if not impossible to attend virtual classes and download course materials reliably.

Without access to high-speed internet, these students are cut off from educational and economic opportunities. Given the likelihood that many schools and colleges will continue to face intermittent closures to contain the virus in the fall, ensuring these students have access to the same tools as their peers is necessary to prevent them from falling further behind.

School Nutrition and Childhood Food Insecurity

For many students, the only healthy meals they have access to are at school. In the United States, about 1 in 7 children are food insecure.¹⁵ However, for some, this rate is much higher. For example, 1 in 4 Native American children experience food insecurity.¹⁶ Almost 30 million children rely upon school meals for nutrition each year,¹⁷ and with schools closed, many students are at risk of food insecurity, which impacts their ability to learn and grow. Students without reliable access to food are more likely to repeat a grade in elementary school, experience developmental issues related to language and motor skills, and have more social and behavioral problems.¹⁸

While many school districts across the country are continuing to serve meals and find creative solutions to fill the gap, many students still face barriers to accessing these meals, such as a lack of transportation. As a result, Congress provided additional flexibilities for schools to continue to provide meals outside of school time and established the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program, to provide funding to children to cover the cost of school meals for those who would normally receive free and reduced price meals at school. It is critical that we extend these flexibilities and benefits to support children during the summer and into the next school year.

Unemployment has spiked during the pandemic, and many families are struggling to

put food on the table. Democrats have been pushing to increase SNAP benefits by 15 percent and to increase the minimum benefit from \$16 to \$30 until the economy improves. SNAP is a critical tool to both feed hungry Americans and to lift them out of poverty.

Nutrition programs are critical to supporting children. SNAP was an important tool during the Great Recession to improve the economy and reduce food insecurity. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 increased and extended SNAP benefits, which resulted in food insecurity dropping for households with very low food security in 2009 despite the economic conditions at the time.¹⁹

On top of the challenges already facing Americans as a result of the pandemic, the Trump Administration is also working to finalize a number of rules that would make it harder for Americans in need to access SNAP benefits and free school meals.

Schools are Unable to Implement COVID-19 Protections Because of Severe Budget Cuts

Ninety-two percent of K-12 education funding comes from state and local budgets,²⁰ which have been hit hard by the ongoing spread of COVID-19 and the economic recession. As revenues decrease and Republicans continue refusing to act, states and school districts face difficult decisions to cut education spending, eliminate school staff positions, and reduce crucial services for students and their families. **Now states and school districts need more funding to make the critical changes and purchase the PPE to open their schools safely.**

States are slashing K-12 and higher education budgets:

- In May, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine announced a \$355 million immediate K-12 education cut, with more expected in the next fiscal year.²¹
- Nevada is preparing to move forward with an \$82 million cut to K-12 education and a \$69 million cut to higher education.²²
- Alabama Governor Kay Ivey recently signed into law a state budget with about \$300 million less for education than what was proposed at the beginning of the state's legislative session.²³
- Iowa lawmakers cut \$8 million from the state's budget for public universities.²⁴
- Georgia Governor Brian Kemp is expected to soon sign into law a state budget with a 10 percent funding cut to state agencies.²⁵

Some school districts are preparing for budget cuts as high as 25 or 30 percent, more than double the 8 percent average cut during the worst year of the last recession.²⁶ **Right now, school districts are reassessing their budgets in the face of impending cuts to state and local education funding.** In New York City, the mayor has proposed cutting nearly \$642 million from the city's education department in the next fiscal year, and education officials have told principals to prepare for a 3 percent cut to their individual budgets. One principal at Castle Bridge School in Washington Heights worries this cut will mean she will need to cut professional development, staff coaches, or after school programs.²⁷ In Florida, Broward County Public Schools have announced a hiring freeze, anticipating cuts from the state between \$35 million and \$150 million.²⁸

Click [HERE](#) for the impact of COVID-19 on education funding by state.

State budget cuts to education will also impact institutions of higher education, which are also bracing for declining enrollment and a corresponding decrease in tuition dollars. Funding for higher education was slashed during the last recession – by nearly 50 percent in some states – and most states never recovered. In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, many colleges and universities have already cut academic programs. In early June, the University of Alaska system announced it will cut 39 academic departments, including degree programs in sociology, creative writing, chemistry, and environmental science.²⁹ Additional program cuts, as well as broader college closures, will likely occur as financial pressures continue.

In 2018, 41 states were still spending less per student in higher education than they were in 2008.³⁰ The American Council on Education, which represents colleges and universities nationwide, has estimated that enrollment for the next academic year will drop by 15 percent, including a projected decline of 25 percent for international students, resulting in a revenue loss for institutions of \$23 billion.³¹ To make up for budget cuts during the last recession, most public colleges and universities increased tuition and fees³² – thereby shifting the burden onto students, worsening the student debt crisis, and disproportionately affecting low-income students and students of color.

Educators are Bracing for Devastating Layoffs

In the face of these massive school budget cuts, educators and school staff are bracing for devastating layoffs. During the Great Recession, the United States lost more than 120,000 teaching positions from 2008 to 2010 alone. This number would have been even greater had the federal government not stepped in to provide

public schools with \$97.4 billion through the Federal Recovery Act, which saved or created approximately 275,000 education jobs, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Despite this legislation, the United States still has fewer public school teachers today than in 2008.³³

Education advocates are now sounding the alarm that the United States could see an even greater loss of education jobs due to the coronavirus pandemic and its strain on state budgets. Already, the Bureau of Labor Statistics has reported nearly 500,000 public education jobs were lost in May alone.³⁴

The Learning Policy Institute has estimated that a 15 percent reduction in state education spending could result in about 319,000 fewer educators in classrooms next year, an 8.4 percent reduction in America's public school teaching force.³⁵ Another analysis by the National Education Association warns **the U.S. could lose 1.9 million education jobs over the next three years – approximately one-fifth of the public education workforce** – without federal assistance for state and local budgets.³⁶

Click [HERE](#) for potential education layoffs in your state.

Students with Disabilities Face Unique Challenges

Throughout this pandemic, many school districts and special educators have struggled to extend online learning and other critical services to the 7.1 million children with disabilities across the United States.³⁷ Students with disabilities face additional challenges and barriers transitioning to distance learning, and some schools have struggled to adequately provide services to students with disabilities without in-person teaching. These barriers include a lack of accessible technology in online platforms, which has prevented students with disabilities from being fully included in the school learning environment. Students with disabilities may use assistive technology to support access to the curriculum. In some school districts, it took time to get that technology from the classrooms to homes. In other instances, students needed technology they had not used before, and budget constraints prevented students from receiving the technology, further limiting access to learning.

As schools consider reopening in the fall, they must consider the individual needs of students with disabilities. Some students with disabilities have underlying health conditions that put them at higher risk for COVID-19. Other students with disabilities need more physical support from staff and do not have the ability to socially distance. Several states proposed first bringing back students with disabilities when reopening

in an effort to meet their needs first, recognizing the lack of support in distance learning. However, schools must be thoughtful about the health needs of students with disabilities while providing them the least restrictive environment. Students with disabilities should still be educated with their peers (as much as possible) for educational and emotional purposes.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires school districts to provide a free and appropriate education to students with disabilities. This includes related services such as occupational, physical, and speech therapy. IDEA continues to be chronically underfunded since its initial passage in 1975. The federal underfunding of IDEA and looming budget cuts have caused many districts to lay off critical special education support staff, including paraprofessionals who provide one-on-one and group services to students with disabilities. Without supplemental funding specifically for IDEA, districts will struggle to meet the growing demand for services during the pandemic.

Schools Need Resources to Reopen Safely

In addition to managing the overwhelming and urgent demands associated with school closures, distance learning, and devastating budget cuts, educators and college and school leaders must now contemplate the additional costs of reopening in the fall. It is clear that when in-person instruction resumes, schools will not look the same.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has issued interim guidelines³⁸ for reopening schools that lay out three phases to gradually scale up operations. Among many new health practices, the guidelines recommend:

- Increased hand-washing
- Intensified cleaning and disinfecting
- Staff use of face coverings
- Daily temperature screenings or symptoms checking
- Staggering arrival times
- Closing communal spaces like playgrounds and dining halls and serving meals in classrooms
- Spacing seating 6 feet apart and turning desks to face the same direction
- Keeping students and staff gatherings as static as possible by having the same group of children stay with the same staff
- Seating children at a distance from each other on buses

Complying with the CDC and state and local guidelines will be expensive. **A conservative analysis by the School Superintendents Association found that an average school district needs up to an additional \$1.8 million.**³⁹ These projected costs are divided into four categories:

- Health monitoring, cleaning and disinfecting;
- Additional staff to carry out health and safety protocols;
- Personal protective equipment; and
- Transportation and childcare

The American Federation of Teachers estimates the cost to reopen public schools could be \$116.5 billion on top of the financial resources needed to stabilize education funding.⁴⁰ The AFT analysis factors in a broader array of items needed to adequately educate K-12 students in the fall including additional costs associated with addressing the digital divide, providing nutritional support, and expanding learning time for students (Table A).

Table A

Preliminary Estimates of Additional Costs For Reopening

Element	Cost
Instructional staff	\$35 billion
Distance learning	\$3.8 billion
Before- and after-care	\$2.4 billion
Transportation	\$9.6 billion
Personal protective equipment	\$8.3 billion
Cleaning and health supplies	\$1.6 billion
Health staffing	\$5.6 billion
Custodial/cleaning staff	\$6.6 billion
Children’s social and emotional needs	\$7.6 billion
Additional academic supports to students	\$36 billion
Total	\$116.5 billion

Source: [American Federation of Teachers](#)

Colleges and universities also face high costs for reopening for in-person instruction, which include changes to campus housing as well as classrooms. As institutions begin to chart a path toward reopening, they are set to spend billions on reconfiguring dormitories, installing physical barriers, providing personal protective equipment,

and hiring staff to conduct temperature screenings and deep cleaning.⁴¹ Costs – and the ability to pay for them – will vary dramatically between institutions, with under-resourced colleges, like HBCUs, Tribal colleges, and community colleges, struggling to meet those costs without additional federal assistance. **An estimate by the American Council on Education estimates that colleges and universities will spend an additional \$73.8 billion in additional costs specific to addressing COVID-19 on their campuses this fall.**

Senate Democrats are committed to ensuring that schools and educators have the immediate resources necessary to reopen safely in the fall and continue to provide critical services for vulnerable students.

Senate Democrats are fighting to:

- **Provide \$175 billion for K-12 schools** through the Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief Fund that was established under the CARES Act. This funding will help ensure that schools and educators have sufficient resources to provide a quality education to all students, whether in-person or remotely, and to reopen schools while keeping students, families, and school staff safe and healthy.
- **Provide \$132 billion in financial support to higher education** so students facing complex financial emergencies can remain on a path to degree completion. Funds would also be used to combat the ongoing financial uncertainty stemming from enrollment declines and state budget cuts that threaten the financial stability of institutions of higher education, including HBCUs, Tribal Colleges, and other Minority Serving Institutions.
- **Close the homework gap and improve digital equity** by dedicating \$4 billion in E-Rate funds to ensure that all K-12 students have adequate home internet connectivity during this pandemic.
- **Support robust funding for Child Nutrition Programs** to provide emergency financial relief to school meal providers and USDA's Child and Adult Care Food Program and extend and expand flexibilities necessary to continue to give food assistance to students when schools are closed through programs like Pandemic EBT.
- **Provide an additional 15 percent increase to SNAP and stop harmful SNAP rules** proposed by the Trump Administration that take food away from families and include requirements that disproportionately impact college students.
- **Increase special education funding under IDEA by approximately \$12 billion**, with \$11 billion going to IDEA Part B, \$500 million to IDEA Part C (early childhood programs), and \$400 million to IDEA Part B Sec.619 (preschool programs) to ensure that children with disabilities continue to receive necessary educational supports and services.

Endnotes

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