

I went to school as a child while experiencing homelessness, *without a pandemic*.

I write this piece as a mother, community member, and leader who has the privilege of walking alongside our nation's children and youth experiencing homelessness. I also write this from a place of frustration, disappointment, resolve, anger and direct empathy for our nation's kids.

Headlines and newsreels are loud with voices opining on what learning should look like for our state's children amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Most certainly, we must make data-informed, properly advised, risk-conscious decisions for the protection of not only the health of our precious children but also their families, our teachers, cafeteria workers, school nurses, and critical janitorial and administrative staff. As we do this critical work though, we must speak for and raise up the voices of our most vulnerable children and youth, putting their welfare first.

As schools returned to online learning this fall, California students still needed more than 1 million computers and hot spots according to state officials¹. Pre-pandemic, in 2019 the California State Auditor found that schools and school districts reported 270,000 homeless children (though the Auditor opined that number is likely closer to 370,000), equating to roughly 10 percent of all low income students in California schools.²

Barriers brought on by homelessness are not only exacerbated during this pandemic but have become laid bare as these students attempt to access and engage in their education virtually while living in a motel, car, doubled up or in a shelter. We know that a child experiencing homelessness is 87% more likely to drop out of high school than their housed peers. We also know that a high school diploma makes a youth almost 400% *less* likely to be homeless as an adult.³ A homeless student's ability to obtain a high school diploma often predicts whether or not they will become California's next homeless adult.

According to a recent study by the Los Angeles Unified School District, low-income students lag 10-20 percentage points behind their more affluent peers in their online learning participation rates. Students identified as homeless, or who are in foster care, are found to have a weekly attendance rate of merely 50% or lower.⁴ These disparities become even greater when the data is separated out by race and ethnicity with white middle school students showing 88% online participation and white high school students with 85% online participation compared to 67%/73% for Latinos and 67%/71% for Black students respectively. These findings are consistent with those seen throughout California. And, as a recent 60 Minutes investigation revealed, hundreds of thousands of students are not showing up at all for online learning and are unaccounted for entirely.

¹ *A Generation Left Behind*, Los Angeles Times, August 13, 2020.

² *Schools Fail to Identify Thousands of Homeless Children, State Audit Finds*; EdSource, Carolyn Jones, November 27, 2019.

³ *Hidden In Plain Sight: Homeless Students In America's Public Schools*. ES Ingram, JM Bridgeland, B. Reed, M Atwell - Civic Enterprises, 2017

⁴ *Student Engagement Online During School Facilities Closures: An Analysis of L.A. Unified Secondary Students' Schoology Activity From March 16 to May 22, 2020*; Independent Analysis Unit, Los Angeles School District, July 2020

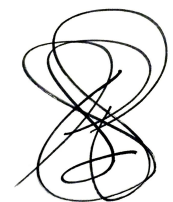
The gaps and barriers brought on by homelessness have not changed much since I was a child, and in fact they have worsened. We are talking about an alarming number of kids sleeping in cars, shelters, couch surfing, and crammed with multiple families inside small apartments or motel rooms. In fact, outside of school, many of them lack breakfast and lunch each day. They lack kitchen tables to sit alongside their parents to do their homework, Wi-Fi connectivity, and the technology needed to access and meaningfully participate in online learning not to mention the mental health toll isolation is causing.

I've been going out to motels throughout Orange County since the first safer-at-home order issued in March of 2020, distributing Chromebooks, prepaid Wi-Fi hotspots, and school supplies homeless students need to do homework. I implore you to not allow for the great equalizer of the conditions of our children's futures and the hope that springs from education to be taken from them. When I went to school, I got to be just like everyone else. Economic disparities are now on full display during live video calls. Let most of us dare not suggest that our challenges rise to the same level as the mom I met in a crowded Anaheim motel room using her spotty cellular data & outdated iPhone to bring her three children online to access their education.

On behalf of our state's homeless children and youth, I implore our elected officials to open our schools. It must not be that children with economic means may attend full time in person instruction while our state's poor can not. *That separation is clearly unequal.* Having personally gone from homelessness to a law firm partnership, I can tell you that Horace Mann was right when he claimed that education is the great equalizer.

We must take ourselves and political considerations out of the center of the circle and place our children in the middle. Until we do that, we will continue to rob our poor and homeless children from one of the greatest remaining equalizers and catalysts of hope that our nation has, education.

For the kids,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a final horizontal stroke at the bottom.

Jennifer Friend Smith
Chief Executive Officer

Author Bio: JENNIFER FRIEND, CEO – PROJECT HOPE ALLIANCE

Prior to becoming CEO at Project Hope Alliance (PHA), Jennifer Friend enjoyed a successful career as a partner at a large law firm representing national and international clients throughout the civil courts of California. While practicing law, she became involved in PHA's board and was actively engaged in the organization's expansion and strategic growth. In 2013, Jennifer answered her calling, left her partnership and became Project Hope Alliance's full time CEO. Her personal experience as a homeless child in Orange County which inspired the Broadway play Nomad Motel, fuels her deep-rooted passion and commitment to homeless children and youth, while her ability to cast vision, think strategically, and lead and direct broader systems change uniquely qualify her to serve as Project Hope Alliance's CEO.

Jennifer holds a JD from Whittier Law School and a BA in Criminology, Law, and Society from the University of California, Irvine. She currently serves as a Trustee of the UCI Foundation; Appointed member of the Fiat Lux Alliance; a Member of the Susan Samueli Integrative Health Institute Advisory Board; and is a proud parent volunteer for the Newport Harbor High School Marching Band and Davis Magnet School.