



April 16, 2020

Senator Holly Mitchell, Chair
Senate Budget Special Subcommittee on COVID-19 Response
California State Senate
State Capitol
Sacramento, CA 95814
Via email: sandy.perez@sen.ca.gov

Re: LCFF Equity Coalition's COVID-19 Budget Recommendations

Dear Senator Mitchell:

Thank you for forming this special subcommittee focusing on California's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We submit these recommendations on behalf of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) Equity Coalition of civil rights, advocacy, community, parent and student organizations. We are committed to strengthening California's current K-12 school funding and accountability system to realize its promise of creating a more equitable school system.

The COVID-19 crisis turned a glaring light on the existing inequities in California's public schools. This pandemic is having an unequal and more difficult impact on our most vulnerable students and their families, especially students of color, low-income students, English learners, foster and homeless youth, and students with disabilities. We appreciate the leadership and swift efforts of the Administration and the California Department of Education (CDE) to provide guidance to local districts as they work to implement our "new normal" of public schooling. However, a laissez-faire approach that allows districts to decide what their priorities are and how to implement them disregards the needs of the most vulnerable populations, those least likely to participate as active stakeholders. Our understanding of this reality informs our recommendations below.

1. Federal Stimulus Funds should be used for a higher level of service for those who need it most.

The Legislature's COVID-19 response should build capacity for districts and schools to support those with the greatest needs, those whose needs are not being met today. We encourage you to view federal

stimulus funds as resources that should be used to allow the school system to provide a higher level of service to those whose needs are currently unmet. This will require that you identify priorities and direct how the federal funds should be used to meet those priorities. This letter sets out the issues we believe need to be prioritized so that all of California's students and their families receive the services they need in this time of crisis.

Most of the K-12 focused federal funding California will receive from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act (~\$1.6 billion) goes directly to school districts on a formula basis and should be used for specified student and emergency education response services including:

- Directly responding to needs created by COVID-19 – cleaning, sanitizing, coordination with other governments, preparedness, protective gear and training on protection
- Distance learning needs – technology, connectivity, software, and teacher training/professional development
- Addressing learning loss – summer learning and supplemental programs
- Needs of vulnerable student populations – low income, students with disabilities, English learners, homeless, foster youth and racial/ethnic subgroups
- Mental health supports

We encourage the Legislature to focus funds received through the CARES act and any future stimulus packages on the key educational needs identified here and discussed below including addressing technology and digital divide issues, learning loss suffered by students with greatest needs, supporting parents as the first line of education support, and professional development for educators.

2. Proposition 98 is a Minimum Guarantee and Not a Ceiling.

None of the current round of federal funding is available to make up for budget reductions that school districts are likely to face because of declining General Fund revenues, and thus a declining minimum guarantee under Proposition 98. We know that because of the economic impact of COVID-19 and stay at home requirements, the state General Fund will be reduced by tens of billions over the next couple of years. However, this does not mean that K-12 and community college funding should be reduced by a proportional amount. The Legislature should consider the Proposition 98 guarantee as a minimum, and not a ceiling. Thus, the Legislature should fund schools based on their needs, and not based the minimum's formula. Furthermore, California's funding level was already inadequate heading into this crisis. The learning loss this spring will only exacerbate achievement gaps and cause an even greater need for additional K-12 funding.

As the Budget Committee begins to consider the fiscal implications of COVID-19, we recommend that the Legislature ensure our schools be funded above the minimum required by Proposition 98 to meet current needs and additional financial burdens.

3. The Digital Divide should be closed as equal access to technology is essential to receive basic educational opportunity and other critical government services.

It is painfully apparent that there is a “digital divide” between students and families with and without access to technology. Access to technology and internet access is a problem in poor communities – both urban and rural. Today, many students in California do not have the opportunity to learn simply because they and their families are not connected to schools, either by telephone, email, snail mail or home visits.

We recommend that the Legislature:

- Require all LEAs to report the findings of their assessments of their students and families’ connectivity and internet access capacity that allows them to access distance learning electronically so that the state knows the extent and location of the greatest needs and can prioritize addressing them.
- Demand and ensure federal stimulus funds are used to close the connectivity gap once and for all. This condition of electronic access is a new baseline standard that California should prepare itself for now and the future. It is quite probable that COVID-19 will return in the fall and will be with us for another 12-18 months. The Legislature should not see the digital divide problem as one that will go away after the summer. Beyond education, there are other reasons that every Californian should be connected electronically—access to health care, jobs, economic and social well-being.

4. Learning and language loss must be assessed and addressed, especially for students who are already behind academically and, particularly for English-learners.

Assessing learning and language loss will be challenging without the usual assessment tools that the school system uses. The Equity Coalition supported CDE’s request to the USDOE to waive assessment and related accountability provisions of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). However, there should be some form of assessment ongoing so that students and their families can know how important their participation is in distance learning at home and in classrooms when they return to school campuses.

We recommend that the Legislature:

- Commit the funding and resources needed to conduct summer school statewide. This should be provided by the state to support students’ social emotional needs to learn, play and socialize in a safe and healthy setting. This is *not* a recommendation to extend online learning through the summer. Recognizing that traditional summer school will likely not be feasible, creative in-person restorative learning practices should be implemented in line with health and safety recommendations to protect students, families, educators, and staff.
- Share and implement the best practices of providing summer enrichment activities so that every district can provide a program that addresses language and learning loss as well as social-emotional needs.

- Provide additional resources at the start of the next school year specifically for extended learning to support students suffering from language and learning loss as a result of COVID-19 closures and disconnection.
- Very few districts report the delivery of English Language Development through distance learning which will result in English language loss for many English Learners. Most lessons are being developed and delivered for the whole class at a native speaker's proficiency level. The state should invest in professional development and identifying evidence-based practices for incorporating English Language Development into distance learning.

5. Supporting the Adults in the Education System, Including Parents:

The COVID-19 pandemic is difficult for everyone, regardless of socioeconomic status. However, as we focus on the needs of adults working in the health care system—from personal protective equipment, training, financial and social emotional support—we should also focus on the needs of adults in the education system, including parents, who are now called upon to provide their children's education.

Online learning will not replace the importance of a positive school climate. Schools are more than academic providers. Schools are places where young people learn to be engaged members of a community that fosters positive social interactions, emotional resilience, and healthy relationships. We should use the COVID-19 pandemic as a catalyst for improving and strengthening the system's beginning skills of community engagement and capacity building.

We recommend that the Legislature provide resources to:

Support adults to work more effectively with low-income communities by improving outreach and actual contact necessary to assess students' and families' needs.

- Many parents are not computer literate. Provide parents with technical support to connect computers and address technology issues. E.g. hotspots are not helping if there are multiple users in one household.
- Distance learning: Explain to parents and caregivers what it is and the options that qualify as such, and what the district/school/or teacher is providing. Clarify expectations for students, parents, and offer guidance on what schedules could look like at home.
- Provide parents with capacity building to support learning and monitoring student progress in literacy, math, or English language development.

Support adults in learning about and providing distance and online learning.

- Many school employees are also overwhelmed by having to care for their own families at the same time they do their jobs of educating and managing the education operation. Provide childcare or alternative settings while school staff are providing education.

- Provide professional development to support teachers with training on asset-based relationship building. Most educators do not receive training on family engagement which is more important now than ever before as parents and caregivers take on a more direct role in childrens' daily education.
- Teachers and support staff in charge of distance learning need professional development with a social emotional component.
- Local districts' assessments of their community's capacity to manage distance learning must be realistic. It is not realistic for parents of English learners to be responsive to distance learning emails and support their child's assignments when such information is provided in English-only.
- Language barriers between school employees are creating greater obstacles to accessing the minimum services that schools are struggling to provide through distance learning. The content of the distance learning and the links for assignments through distance learning are all in English and make no sense to parents who don't speak, read or write English. Funds should be appropriated for multilingual support services by enlisting current and laid off bilingual paraeducators, counselors and home/school coordinators to assist teachers and staff in communicating with parents who need help providing distance learning.
- Specific distance learning professional development is needed to support dual immersion and bilingual programs on how to include instruction in English and the target language of the programs.

6. Require that local control include community engagement and transparency.

We understand that schools and districts are inundated with unanticipated responsibilities and are doing their best to support their communities in these uncertain times. Nonetheless, schools will continue receiving LCFF funding, and it is more important than ever that they use those dollars to support their high-need students, many of whom are impacted most by the COVID-19 outbreak and educational disruption. As district and school leaders move forward, it remains critical that they exercise effective "local control" in these grave times in consultation with their local community rather than reverting to top-down, insular decision making.

Although not everyone has access to the internet or unlimited data plans for their phones, many parent leaders are engaging with community organizations using virtual platforms. Such virtual platforms can be utilized for school committees and public forums in lieu of in-person meetings to ensure that parent and stakeholder engagement continue to play a key role in local decision-making. Any adjustments that are made to the LCFF requirements will require balancing the need to ease the administrative burden on districts to allow them to respond to this fast-moving and challenging situation with maintaining LCFF's engagement, transparency and equity values. The Equity Coalition is in conversation with the Administration about likely changes to the LCAP process and look forward to working collaboratively with the Legislature as well.

Though California is one of the wealthiest states in the United States, we are in the bottom third of the nation in K-12 education funding. This insufficient commitment to funding public schools has serious repercussions especially in this health crisis and for communities of color and areas of concentrated poverty. The Legislature's COVID-19 response must do more than maintain the status quo of keeping the K-12 education system afloat. Every response must have equity built into it—from assessments of problems and needs to making decisions about instructional and social emotional supports needed by students, their families and the adults in the system. The LCFF Equity Coalition looks forward to working with the Legislature and the Administration as we respond to inequities further exacerbated by this pandemic.

Sincerely,

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