June 24, 2020

Honorable Lamar Alexander  
Chairman, Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander:

During the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions June 10th hearing on “COVID-19: Going Back to School Safely,” you requested that the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) submit an estimate of the projected costs that school systems will face in reopening public schools safely this fall. You also asked about the extent to which those costs can be met from existing Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding, including the Education Stabilization Fund and the Coronavirus Relief Fund. CCSSO is providing the analysis below in response to this question. **Based on the best available information at this time, CCSSO estimates school systems will need additional flexibility within the CARES Act and between $158.1 billion and $244.6 billion in total additional funding to reopen school buildings safely and serve all students in the next academic year.** This estimate reflects the devastating impacts that COVID-19 has had on students and families, and continued effects we anticipate in the coming year. We recognize the response to COVID-19 is an ever-evolving situation that will have long-term impacts on our education system as well as the economy, employment, health care and the nation as a whole, and Congress may not be able to meet the full needs described below in one piece of legislation. In this letter, we have worked to provide the best estimates possible of what school systems will need now and over the next two years as we seek to mitigate and recover from this pandemic, and remain eager to work with Congress on how to offset these additional temporary costs to ensure we can meet the needs of every child in the coming year.

Every chief state school officer is prioritizing the health and safety of students, educators and the broader community. States and local educational agencies (LEAs) attempting to safely reopen schools in the fall of 2020 will face at least three distinct challenges. The first is the costs associated with operating effective remote and in-person instruction during a time when COVID-19 will still be present in our states and communities. This requires a significant investment in technology infrastructure to ensure remote learning opportunities are available and effective, as well as health and safety protocols necessary to bring students and staff safely back into the school building. The second is the costs associated with addressing students’ academic learning loss and helping students overcome increased trauma and economic and food insecurities. States recognize that all students have been impacted as a result of COVID-19, but not all have experienced trauma or shouldered loss equally. The virus and racial injustice have particularly impacted students of color, high-poverty students, students with disabilities, and English learners, and students’ individual needs must be addressed in the next academic year if we expect them to thrive. Last but not least, we must take into account the anticipated decline in state and local funding for education stemming from reductions in income, sales and other tax revenues. As Nebraska Commissioner Matt Blomstedt noted in his testimony before your Committee, school systems currently face a “perfect storm” of increased needs and decreased resources necessary to prevent a generational harm to our nation’s youth.
Addressing CARES Act Funds
CCSSO and its members are grateful to you and other members of Congress for the passage of the CARES Act. This spring, school systems faced substantial short-term costs brought on by the pandemic, and state chiefs and local superintendents have had to use the emergency supplemental funds Congress provided under the CARES Act Education Stabilization Fund to retain existing staff and meet immediate needs such as launching distance learning systems for all students. State chiefs and governors have worked closely together to determine if any of the CARES Act funds also can be used to help prepare for the next academic year. Several states have invested funds in such areas as developing health and safety protocols to reopen schools safely, developing learning management systems, and offering professional learning to teachers focused on online delivery.

Yet states recognize this current funding will not be enough. A combination of flexibility within current CARES Act funding and additional funds will be necessary to ensure school systems can meet the needs of all students and staff. As you noted in the hearing, the CARES Act included the Coronavirus Relief Fund, which provided $150 billion to states and local governments. Under section 601(d) of the Act, this funding may be used only for necessary expenses resulting from the COVID-19 emergency and only for costs and activities not included in the most recent state or local budget (as of the date of enactment of the Act). We understand that, because of this non-supplant provision, the Coronavirus Relief Fund may not be used to replace cuts that states and localities have had to make subsequent to enactment of the CARES Act. Moreover, the local Relief Fund formula allocations flow to units of general local government, but not to the LEAs that exist independently of towns, cities, and other municipalities. These factors limit the extent to which the Relief Fund will be able to help states and LEAs recover from budget cuts as they seek to resume full school operations. While flexibility in these areas would be very helpful to states and communities, these funds are broadly applied across state government functions, which have many demands as they combat coronavirus. Therefore, these funds are not wholly or consistently directed at K-12 education at the levels required to safely reopen school buildings, and Congress must act quickly to provide additional relief for schools.

Reopening Schools in a New Environment
When the next academic year begins, schools will reopen in a completely new environment, one that will necessitate significant additional costs to safely resume effective instruction. Given the ever-evolving nature of this virus, every school must plan to serve students through two systems in the next academic year: remotely and in-person. School systems have learned many lessons over the past few months, one of which is the current state of technology infrastructure in many communities is unacceptable. In order to meet the needs of all students, schools must ensure that all students and teachers have access to reliable broadband and devices to ensure remote learning is effective. This critical investment will not only support and benefit student learning but also other important services for families and communities, such as telehealth. While many states and school districts are using CARES Act funds to invest in devices for students and professional development for teachers, every state requires additional funding to expand broadband and internet access to the students they serve. The Learning Policy Institute has estimated states will need $4 billion to cover the costs of expanding internet access and devices to the 15 percent of students across the country who still lack adequate access.

As we cited in a previous letter to leadership in the U.S. House of Representatives, access to broadband internet is an issue across rural and urban communities. In Mississippi, for example, nearly one-fifth of Mississippi households do not have a computer and nearly one-third do not have
access to broadband\(^1\). In Massachusetts, 49,000 children under 18 still do not have access to internet service at home\(^2\). In its “Reopening Florida’s Schools and the CARES Act” plan, the Florida Department of Education notes that 10.2% of Florida children do not have access to internet during the day to support learning, and that access is more challenging for students from low-income families, in rural areas, and among African-American and Hispanic families. As a result, the Florida Department of Education notes in its plan that “the new ‘subgroup’ in education are those students without reliable access to a computer or internet.”\(^3\) We know every state is facing similar challenges.

In addition, to safely return to in-person instruction, schools must also invest significantly to comply with new health and safety protocols necessitated by the pandemic and aligned with recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and state and local public health experts. AASA (the School Superintendents Association) and the Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO) have estimated the costs associated with opening schools safely under appropriate health and safety protocols will average some $1,778,000 for the average mid-size LEA. These estimates include previously unforeseen costs for hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes, no-touch thermometers, personal protective equipment including disposable masks for students and staff, and additional custodial staff and health care professionals to ensure safe and clean schools; these additional supply and staffing costs were not necessary to open schools in prior years but are indispensable in the upcoming school year to limit the spread of COVID-19 and protect vulnerable communities. Across approximately 17,000 LEAs (including regular LEAs, supervisory unions, and charter school LEAs) operating nationally, we estimate the total national cost would thus total approximately $30.2 billion.

### Closing Expanded Achievement Gaps

States and LEAs will also have to respond to the many needs of students who have been out of their brick- and-mortar classrooms for six months and have experienced substantial learning loss. This profound loss of instructional time is one of the greatest educational challenges our public schools have ever faced, especially for students of color, high-poverty students, English learners, and students with disabilities who, as groups, already faced large gaps in learning with their peers before the COVID-19 pandemic started.

Responding to this crisis is not only going to take significant attention of policymakers and educators in our classrooms, but also a significant investment in our public schools. Among the many needs facing schools and their students will be intensive academic supports for students who have fallen further behind during the period of school closures, increased staffing needs to provide necessary academic support, and providing technology and supports for students who will continue (on a full-time or part-time basis) to be educated outside of the school building.

As many states are continuing to determine when and under what social distancing requirements schools will reopen in the fall, it is difficult to provide the Committee with a specific estimate related to increased instructional needs at this time. However, our calculations suggest that between approximately $86.5 billion and $173 billion in additional assistance is needed to respond to these

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increased instructional needs. Our estimate is based on the total amount spent on K-12 education in recent years and the percentage of children who will have been out of school for the six-month period prior to school re-opening this fall that are most likely to experience significant learning losses. This population includes the 56.4 percent of all public-school children who are students of color and others who are living in poverty and are children with disabilities who are not students of color. The range in our estimate accounts for the difference between the three months of lost learning time this spring and the full six months children with the historically widest achievement gaps will have been out of school.

Safeguarding Education Funding from Projected State Budget Cuts
CCSSO has been tracking state policy and budget actions responding to COVID-19 and school reopening. These state budget decisions are evolving. At present, these are the burdens individual states are preparing to face as they seek to reopen school buildings in the fall:

- The Governor of Georgia has asked the state education agency to prepare for a 14 percent cut in funding for education (some $1.6 billion) for the fiscal year that begins July 1.4
- In Colorado, state legislators are preparing for a 15 percent reduction (some $690 million) in the state’s $4.6 billion elementary and secondary education budget.5
- In Oklahoma, the legislature has enacted a state budget cutting elementary and secondary education by 2.5%, or $78 million.6
- In Idaho, the Governor’s proposed budget would reduce education spending by 5%, almost $99 million, by freezing teacher pay and reducing technology and IT funding.7
- A Michigan state senator warned that schools should prepare for up to $1.1 billion in cuts next school year.8

Those examples illustrate the fiscal burdens that states and LEAs will face in financing K-12 education in the coming school year. They are consistent with the national findings of the National Association of State Budget Officers, which has predicted steep state revenue declines of up to 20 percent.9 Similarly, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates total state budget shortfalls could reach up to 10 percent in the current fiscal year, which ends June 30, and an estimated 25 percent in the next fiscal year.10 With respect to making up for lost revenue that state and local governments would otherwise have used for public K-12 education, the reductions in state budgets have continued to add up. While we have described the initial fiscal reactions of several states above, depending on the length of continued economic restrictions, these cuts could multiply, as would their impact on revenue available for K-12 education.

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Estimating the total reductions to state budgets for the coming year is challenging, given current economic uncertainty and rapidly changing budget analyses. If you consider the cuts already proposed for the five states above, they total nearly $3.6 billion. If you extrapolate the average preliminary cuts announced in these five states to all 50 states, Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico, states could face an estimated $37.4 billion in lost revenue for education. We know some states may not cut education funding while others will be hit harder when the effects of the pandemic on oil prices, tourism, and other heavily impacted industries are fully felt.

While the amount of federal funding that is necessary to successfully and safely reopen schools and keep K-12 education budgets whole in the coming year is substantial, it is an essential investment in the nation’s ongoing economic recovery and future competitiveness. As long as our K-12 school buildings remain closed, our country’s economy cannot get back up and running and our economy will continue to suffer trillion-dollar losses. At the same time, we must address the significant academic and social-emotional impacts on students throughout this crisis and help them overcome the considerable learning loss and trauma they have experienced if we are ever to ensure a thriving economy in the years to come.

We wanted to accurately respond to your question about projected costs to reopen schools nationally, but also understand that Congress may be unable to meet the full need described above in a single legislative vehicle. State chiefs, on behalf of the families and communities they serve, strongly urge quick congressional action on a substantial investment as soon as possible and an ongoing focus on providing necessary federal supports as the process of COVID-19 relief and recovery continues.

In closing, let me thank you and the other members of the HELP Committee for your attention to this very important issue and for the assistance the Congress has provided through the CARES Act. I appreciate the opportunity to submit the information we have assembled on the funding shortfalls that schools will experience and the needs they will face in reopening this fall and to continue to coordinate closely as we work to recover from this historic national crisis. Please contact me if I can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

Carissa Miller
Executive Director
Council of Chief State School Officers