



May 13, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
1236 Longworth H.O.B.
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
House Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
2468 Rayburn H.O.B.
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
317 Russell S.O.B.
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Senate Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
322 Hart S.O.B.
Washington, D.C. 20510

Via E-Mail

RE: COVID-19 AND THE NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THIS CRISIS

Dear Members of Congress:

The spread of COVID-19 is a national emergency that threatens millions of people across the country – and it is felt especially hard by young people. We write on behalf of Advancement Project National Office and the Alliance for Educational Justice (AEJ) to urge you to provide funding and resources in the next COVID-19 stimulus packages that will significantly help and support our nation’s young people as they navigate this crisis. Our organizations are committed to ensuring that racial justice will be clearly factored into any attempts to achieve educational equity, which starts with the opportunity for students of color to be safe, healthy and supported in their schools and home environments. While the previously passed COVID-19 stimulus relief will provide some funding for education to governors and states, we write to ensure that the most pressing issues facing our young people, especially young people of color, in the midst of this pandemic are addressed and included in the next relief packages.

The Advancement Project National Office is a 20-year-old racial justice organization based in Washington, D.C. that works with communities of color to ensure that all students receive a free, quality public education in which they can thrive. The Alliance for Educational Justice is a national network of 35 youth and intergenerational organizing groups of color across 12 states and 14 cities dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline. Our organizations have partnered with grassroots organizations across the country in order to fight for the schools we believe are possible for our communities.

School Meals

In response to this crisis, most states have closed schools, many through the rest of the school year. This has disrupted the lives and routines of millions of young people across the country who depend on schools to meet a variety of their needs. The situation is especially dire for families that are food insecure or who are experiencing homelessness. For far too many young people across the country, schools were the only place they felt safe or could depend on a reliable meal.¹ We know that young people of color bear the brunt of this burden and are more likely than their white peers to receive Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL).² The cities that have been hit the hardest by this pandemic are also the ones where the vast majority of public school students are Black or Brown and are on FRPL. It is inhumane to let our young people go hungry at any time – but especially in this time of crisis. As is currently being done in New York City, schools should provide food for anyone who needs it.³ The next stimulus package must include funding for all students and their families to be able to receive free meals at their local school, including providing transportation or delivery of those meals for those who cannot venture outside of their home.

Disruption of Education and Online Learning

This crisis has already disrupted the education of young people. There is no uniformity among the country's school districts as it relates to the provision of distance or online learning. Many school districts have chosen to continue the school year through online learning – requiring the use of technological devices such as laptops and tablets along with access to the internet. These mandates have ignored the fact that there is a digital divide and not all households have access to the internet – according to one 2018 study, half the country lacks high-speed internet at home.⁴ We know that poor families and young people of color are even more affected: “only 56% of households making less than \$20,000 have home broadband, and Black and Hispanic households lag behind their white counterparts even when we control for income differences.”⁵ This pandemic has made it clear that the internet is a public utility. Congress must act to ensure that all households in the U.S. have access to the internet – as it has increasingly become a cornerstone of functioning in our society.

Even for households with internet access, there is no guarantee that they have the laptop or tablet required to engage in the online learning provided by their school. Some school districts have distributed laptops and tablets to their students. While we applaud this development, we are highly critical of the implementation and transparency around these programs. Schools in many places have been closed for weeks, but in New Orleans, for example, the distribution of devices has been

¹ Alex Abad-Santos, *How US schools are (and aren't) providing meals to children in the Covid-19 crisis*, Vox (Mar. 28, 2020), <https://www.vox.com/2020/3/28/21197965/coronavirus-school-shutdown-free-meals>.

² Janie Boschma and Ronald Brownstein, *The Concentration of Poverty in American Schools*, The Atlantic (Feb. 29, 2016), <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/02/concentration-poverty-american-schools/471414/>.

³ ABC 7, *Coronavirus News: NYC providing free meals to anyone who needs food*, Eyewitness News ABC 7 NY (Apr. 3, 2020), <https://abc7ny.com/nyc-free-meals-new-york-coronavirus-mayor-de-blasio/6072252/>.

⁴ Erin Mansfield and Shelly Conlon, *Coronavirus for kids without internet: Quarantined worksheets, learning in parking lots*, USA Today (Apr. 1, 2020), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2020/04/01/coronavirus-internet-speed-broadband-online-learning-school-closures/5091051002/>.

⁵ Dana Floberg, *US students are being asked to work remotely. But 22% of homes don't have internet*, The Guardian (Mar. 23, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/23/us-students-are-being-asked-to-work-remotely-but-22-of-homes-dont-have-internet>.



slow, and some students are still waiting to receive one.⁶ In families with multiple school age children, this issue is exacerbated as children may need to share devices with their siblings. Congress should allocate funding in order to provide the necessary resources for school districts across the country to distribute devices to students as soon as possible.

In addition, we are very concerned with the trends we have seen regarding the surveillance of young people, and especially students of color. The shift to digital learning has not been accompanied by the robust accountability and transparency measures that are required to ensure that students' privacy and civil rights are protected. Prior to this pandemic, we know that school districts across the country have contracted with third party companies like GoGuardian, Bark, and Gaggle to monitor student activity on laptops and on their personal social media accounts.⁷ Despite having no evidence that these measures actually work,⁸ school districts have relied on them under the guise of promoting "school safety." In the rush to adapt to the social distancing and stay-at-home orders, school districts have shifted to online learning without any transparency about whether that surveillance and monitoring is continuing during this pandemic.

We are further concerned about the involvement of law enforcement in this surveillance and monitoring. We are already familiar with school policing in the United States and the on-going harms that students – particularly Black and Brown, LGBTQ, and differently-abled – face at the hands of school police officers and policing infrastructures more generally.⁹ Our organizations believe in supporting real school safety – safety that does not involve placing students at risk of criminalization and physical harm.. At a minimum, Congress should explicitly prohibit the use of any stimulus relief funds towards online surveillance and monitoring. Young people are experiencing the same trauma and crisis as the rest of our communities, and should not have to worry about whether they will be arrested or harassed by police simply for choosing to continue their learning online.

Mental Health Supports

The systemic problems that this pandemic has shed light on affects all of us – including young people. For many young people, schools were the only places where they had access to mental health counseling and support. Our organizations have been pushing for school districts to prioritize real school safety for years – which includes providing more resources, more counselors and more mentors. In the wake of the Newtown, CT, and Parkland, FL, campus tragedies, we urged more psychologists, therapists, counselors, social workers, and nurses be placed at every school in

⁶ Marta Jewson, *Orleans schools still distributing laptops, hotspots*, The Lens (Apr. 15, 2020), <https://thelensnola.org/2020/04/15/one-month-into-closure-new-orleans-schools-still-distributing-laptops-hotspots/>.

⁷ Todd Feathers, *Schools Spy on Kids to Prevent Shootings, But There's No Evidence It Works*, Vice (Dec. 4, 2019), https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/8xwze4/schools-are-using-spyware-to-prevent-shootingsbut-theres-no-evidence-it-works.

⁸ Faiza Patel, Rachel Levinson-Waldman, Jun Lei Lee, and Sophia DenUyl, *School Surveillance Zone*, Brennan Center for Justice (Apr. 30, 2019), <https://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/school-surveillance-zone>.

⁹ See Advancement Project and AEJ, *We Came to Learn* (Sept. 2018), <https://advancementproject.org/wecametolearn/>.



order to best respond to the social and emotional needs, and well-being of students.¹⁰ As this pandemic continues, we are already seeing school districts either making or anticipating significant cuts as a result of budget shortfalls.¹¹ We cannot throw our young people under the bus and remove vital support needed for their growth and development – especially at a time when it is most needed.

We know that one consequence of these cuts includes schools increasing reliance on law enforcement at the expense of the crucial health and safety services that students need. In March 2019, *Education Week* reported that 1.7 million students attend schools with police officers but no counselors; 3 million students attend schools with police officers but no school nurses; 6 million are in schools with police officers but no school psychologists; and 10 million are in schools with police officers but no social workers.¹² Even under “normal” conditions, this is woefully inadequate, given that the American School Counselor Association recommends a counselor-to-student ratio of 250:1.¹³ Young people are facing the biggest crisis of their lifetime and need trained professionals with the knowledge and skills to be able to address their trauma and mental health concerns, including through virtual means. We implore Congress to prioritize young peoples’ well-being and incorporate funding in the next COVID-19 stimulus package that is explicitly for the provision of these mental health supports.

Preparing for Education Post-Pandemic

While we find ourselves in an ever-changing reality as a result of the pandemic, many of the issues we are tackling in our communities are not new, and they will not disappear once the pandemic is over. The systemic inequalities in public K-12 education in the U.S. are decades-long issues that will require years of progressive commitment. We therefore demand that Congress take the following actions:

1. Make **school meals free for all students** and their families in public schools across the country;
2. Declare the internet a public utility, and provide **free high-speed internet access for all public school students;**
3. Provide **free laptops to all public school students;**

¹⁰ Advancement Project, Dignity in Schools, Alliance for Educational Justice, and LDF, *Police in Schools are Not the Answer to School Shootings*, (Mar. 2018), <https://advancementproject.org/resources/police-schools-not-answer-school-shootings/>.

¹¹ Alex Zimmerman and Christina Veiga, *De Blasio proposes over \$221 million in NYC education cuts, including pre-K and school budgets*, Chalkbeat New York (Apr. 7, 2020), <https://chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2020/04/07/budget-cut-tk/>; Max Larkin, *In Randolph, Officials Cited Coronavirus As They Made State’s First Cuts to School Staff*, WBUR (Apr. 15, 2020), <https://www.wbur.org/edify/2020/04/15/randolph-school-furloughs>; Chris Jones and Nadia Pflaum, *Utah schools could lose up to \$30 million in coronavirus budget cuts*, KUTV (Apr. 13, 2020), <https://kutv.com/news/beyond-the-books/coronavirus-leading-to-cuts-in-utah-school-funding>.

¹² Evie Blad, *1.7 Million Students Attend Schools with Police But No Counselors, New Data Show*, Education Week (Mar. 4, 2019), http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rulesforengagement/2019/03/17_million_students_attend_schools_with_police_but_no_counselors_new_data_show.html.

¹³ See American School Counselors Association website, <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/press>.



4. Increase funding for Title I;
5. Prohibit the use of all federal education funds for law enforcement;
6. Ban the use of all surveillance and monitoring technology on students, including social media monitoring;
7. Prohibit the use of all COVID-19 stimulus relief for surveillance and monitoring of students;
8. Provide funding for mental health support for young people, including counselors, psychologists, nurses, and social workers;
9. Mandate that all COPS program funding to schools be applied towards mental health supports for students; and
10. Provide funding for on-site school clinics and trauma centers.

In this time of crisis, we all have the responsibility to care for and support our most vulnerable communities. Young people and their concerns have often been left out of relief efforts, despite their vulnerability to crisis as they are developing and growing into their own. We urge you to support our communities and provide the resources that they need most during this pandemic and beyond. If you have any questions, please reach out to Jessica Alcantara, Staff Attorney, at jalcantara@advancementproject.org or Maria Fernandez, Senior Campaigns Strategist, at mfernandez@advancementproject.org. We believe this is what it will take to ensure our young people are safe, healthy, and thriving in their schools and their communities during and after this crisis.

Sincerely,

Judith Browne Dianis
Executive Director
Advancement Project National Office

Jonathan Stith
National Director
Alliance for Educational Justice

Jessica Alcantara
Staff Attorney
Advancement Project National Office

Maria Fernandez
Senior Campaigns Strategist
Advancement Project National Office

The **Alliance for Educational Justice** is comprised of the following organizations:

- Baltimore Algebra Project, Baltimore, Maryland
- Black Organizing Project, Oakland, California
- Boston Youth Organizing Project, Boston, Massachusetts
- Brighton Park Neighborhood Council, Chicago Illinois
- Californians for Justice, Statewide, California
- Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, San Francisco, California
- Community Coalition, Los Angeles, California



DRUM: Desis Rising Up and Moving, Queens, New York
Future of Tomorrow, Brooklyn, New York
Inner City Struggle, Los Angeles, California
Kenwood Oakland Community Organization, Chicago, Illinois
Labor Community Strategy Center, Los Angeles, California
Youth Organizing Institute, Raleigh, North Carolina
Padres Y Jovenes Unidos, Denver, Colorado
Philadelphia Student Union, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Power U Center for Social Change, Miami, Florida
Project South, Atlanta, Georgia
Rethink, New Orleans, Louisiana
Sistas and Brothas United, Bronx, New York
Tenants and Workers United, Alexandria, Virginia
Youth Empowered in the Struggle, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Youth Justice Coalition, Los Angeles, California
Youth Together, Oakland, California
Youth United for Change, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Puente Human Rights Movement, Phoenix, Arizona

CC: Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin (D) Sen. Bill Cassidy (R)
Sen. Charles E. Schumer (D) Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D)
Sen. Cory Gardner (R) Sen. David Perdue (R)
Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D) Sen. Edward J. Markey (D)
Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D) Sen. John Kennedy (R)
Sen. Kamala D. Harris (D) Sen. Kelly Loeffler (R)
Sen. Kirsten E. Gillibrand (D) Sen. Kyrsten Sinema (D)
Sen. Marco Rubio (R) Sen. Mark R. Warner (D)
Sen. Martha McSally (R) Sen. Michael F. Bennet (D)
Sen. Patrick J. Toomey (R) Sen. Richard Burr (R)
Sen. Richard J. Durbin (D) Sen. Rick Scott (R)
Sen. Robert P. Casey Jr. (D) Sen. Robert P. Casey Jr. (D)
Sen. Ron Johnson (R) Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D)
Sen. Tammy Duckworth (D) Sen. Thom Tillis (R)
Sen. Tim Kaine (D)

Rep. Adriano Espaillat (D) Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D)
Rep. Ayanna Pressley (D) Rep. Barbara Lee (D)
Rep. Barbara Lee (D) Rep. Bobby Rush (D)
Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D) Rep. Cedric Richmond (D)
Rep. David E. Price (D) Rep. Diana DeGette (D)
Rep. Donald S. Beyer Jr. (D) Rep. Donna Shalala (D)
Rep. Dwight Evans (D) Rep. Dwight Evans (D)



Rep. Eliot Engel (D)
Rep. Grace Meng (D)
Rep. Gregory Meeks (D)
Rep. Hakeem Jeffries (D)
Rep. Jesus 'Chuy' Garcia (D)
Rep. John Lewis (D)
Rep. Karen Bass (D)
Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard (D)
Rep. Max Rose (D)
Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D)
Rep. Ruben Gallego (D)
Rep. Yvette Clarke (D)



Rep. Frederica Wilson (D)
Rep. Greg Stanton (D)
Rep. Gwen Moore (D)
Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D)
Rep. Jimmy Gomez (D)
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Rep. Thomas Suozzi (D)