



September 1, 2020

To School Districts, Councilmembers, Congresspeople, and other Stakeholders:

It has now been six months since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. – and it continues to be a national emergency that threatens millions of people across the country. As the beginning of a new school year approaches, young people are once again being asked to bear the brunt of our federal government’s incompetence, and put their lives on the line under the misguided idea that schools across the country should go back to business as usual. We write on behalf of Advancement Project National Office to urge you to recognize that there is no safe way to physically reopen schools in the vast majority of the country. As a racial justice organization, we have been fighting for over 20 years for true education justice, which starts with the opportunity for students of color to be safe, healthy and supported in their schools and home environments. While the COVID-19 stimulus relief packages that have been passed provided some funding for education, this crisis has exacerbated the pressing pre-existing issues facing students, especially children and young people of color.

Advancement Project National Office is a 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 environments where they can thrive. We have partnered with grassroots organizations across the country in order to fight for the schools we believe are possible for our communities.

Schools are microcosms of our society, and they impose the same racist, classist, and patriarchal structures that our country does upon Black and Brown communities. The promise of *Brown v. Board of Ed* has yet to become a reality, and too many of our young people across the country attend schools that are under-valued and under-resourced. Tragically, the one area schools have not neglected in their funding priorities is police. Since 1999, the federal government has subsidized the placement of police in schools by over \$1 billion, resulting in about 46,000 “school resource officers” across our nation’s schools. We know that the mere presence of police in schools reinforces and accelerates the school-to-prison pipeline, an issue that our organization has been working to combat since our founding. Across the country, thousands of Black and Brown children attend schools with cops but no counselors, nurses, social workers, or any of the other socio-emotional supports that they need to learn in a welcoming environment. Long before the pandemic, the reality was that Black and Brown students were far more likely than their white peers to be disciplined in schools, and this is not due to higher rates of misbehavior, but because of systemic racism. On top of these issues, students are forced to learn in school buildings that are old, dilapidated, and in many cases - toxic. In 2018, a series of investigations in Philadelphia schools revealed “chilly classrooms without heat, burst pipes spilling water onto [students] backpacks, mice and rats in the bathrooms, and a cockroach crawling out of a milk carton...” in addition to asbestos and lead. Similarly, in Baltimore, where schools lacked heat in and air conditioning, in 2019 there was an estimated \$3 billion maintenance backlog. These problems are rampant throughout the country as well - as a Senate survey in 2015 revealed that nearly 70% of school



districts reported schools with asbestos. These are some of the myriad problems that our nation's schools were dealing with before COVID-19 hit the U.S.

Once we realized how dire the COVID-19 crisis would be, and how it very quickly upended the public school system causing massive widespread school closures, we highlighted the resources that would be needed in order to continue providing education to our nation's children for the second half of the school year. In that [letter in March](#), we urged Congress to provide funding for school meals for all children and families, internet connectivity to meet students' online learning needs, to end the use of school police – particularly surveillance and monitoring technologies on loaned devices, and most importantly the necessary mental health support to children so that they are equipped to handle these troubling times and are able to cope with the trauma that our society faces. While Congress did allocate some funding for education, most of our demands were not met - and the provision of school meals and online learning throughout the nation was haphazard at best.

However, the one area in which we did see progress, especially over this past summer, was in the fight for Police-Free Schools. We have been proud and humbled to see the victories of youth organizing groups across the country who demanded that their school districts end their contracts with police departments and instead provide the support they need for real school safety. Through their leadership we witnessed Minneapolis, Denver, Seattle, Oakland, Portland, Madison, and countless other cities take historic action to remove police from schools, demonstrating that a police-free schools future is both possible and necessary to protect the safety and humanity of Black and Brown children. This youth-led movement prompted the filing of The Counselors not Criminalization bill, which will hopefully end the use of federal funds for police in schools while providing support for improving school climate for young people through funding for counselors and restorative justice programs.

It is now September, and we find ourselves facing the same uncertainty we did earlier this year – except it is now with increasing pressure to ignore the recommendations of scientists and doctors and physically “reopen” schools. We will not stay silent while our communities are put at risk for greater suffering by politicians who couldn't care less what happens to our children and families. After decades of underfunding and under-resourcing our schools, this crisis has revealed what too many have long ignored about our nation's schools – that they are our society's anchors – vital places of learning, growth, development, and support – they are the lifeblood of our communities.

We adamantly oppose the physical reopening of schools while this crisis continues. Once this pandemic is abated, and there is a scientific consensus that indoor spaces are safe again, we wholeheartedly support the opening of schools provided they meet the following basic needs:

- School meals are free for all students
- Guaranteed basic income for parents so they do not have to choose between working to survive, educating their children who are at home and the health of their families
- High speed internet access is provided free for all students at home



- Police prohibited from working in school buildings, including but not limited to as “school resource officers” or “school safety agents”
- All surveillance and monitoring technology in schools is banned, including but not limited to social media monitoring and facial recognition technology
- PPE for all staff and students who must physically return to schools
- Infrastructure updates to school facilities
 - Including the addition of air conditioning and/or heating systems with filters
 - Removal of mold, lead and asbestos
 - Access to clean drinking water in fountains
 - Clean, working bathrooms equipped with toilet paper, soap, sanitizer
 - All schools have nurses, counselors, psychologists, and social workers at the ratio recommended by the respective professional organizations
- Schools create on-site medical and mental health centers

Many of the issues that our communities face now are problems that have existed before the pandemic, and they will not disappear once this crisis is over. The systemic racial inequalities in public K-12 education in the U.S. are decades-long issues that will require years of progressive commitment. 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. 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 long after this crisis.

Sincerely,

Judith Browne Dianis
Executive Director
Advancement Project National Office