

May 6, 2020

Hon. Kay Ivey

Governor

600 Dexter Avenue

Montgomery, AL 36130

Via email: Nick Moore, Education Policy Advisor, nick.moore@governor.alabama.gov

Eric G. Mackey, Ed.D.

Superintendent of Education

50 North Ripley Street

P.O. Box 302101

Montgomery, Alabama 36104

Via email: emackey@alsde.edu

Dear Governor Ivey and Superintendent Mackey:

The undersigned organizations write to urge you to ensure that Alabama's share of federal funds for education relief during the COVID-19 pandemic is focused on students who are most adversely affected by this crisis.

We know this crisis presents many challenges for educators and schools across our state, and we appreciate the work you are doing to ensure the health and safety of students during this difficult time. This moment has also made clear the importance of our public schools in not just teaching and learning, but also in making sure students have access to food, physical and mental health supports, and robust enrichment opportunities. As so many students and families are struggling to access education and essential services, we urge you to use the significant funds from the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to ensure schools can address the needs of students who are most marginalized during and after this crisis. We offer our assistance and support as you work to use the new CARES Act federal funds to help students and families during this crucial period.

As you know, many students already lacked the benefit of an equitable opportunity to learn before the COVID-19 crisis began, including low-income children, children of color, children with disabilities, English-language learner children, children in immigrant families, children in foster care, migrant children, children experiencing homelessness, LGBTQ children, and children in the juvenile justice system. It is likely that these children in particular will face significant barriers to accessing the education services and other supports they need during school closures.

The pre-existing opportunity gap is likely to be exacerbated due to inequities in access to technology, space to learn, and caretakers to support their learning and provide specialized services, including for students with disabilities. Further, children and youth are facing additional stress and trauma caused by the crisis and that impact their ability to focus on

learning. The impact of this crisis may be long-term: research found that it took two full years to recover learning loss that occurred following school closures during Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

The options for the new federal funding available to the State and to LEAs in Alabama must be used to advance equity for and support the needs of children and families who are disproportionately impacted. We appreciate the Alabama Department of Education's survey seeking input on the use of these funds. **We urge you to continue to engage with families, students, educators, and communities across the state in how these funds are used, and to take all needed steps to ensure that these new federal resources advance equity for students, including by:**

1. Ensuring that the State puts equity at the center of its plans for the use of these new federal funds, including the state's share of the Elementary and Secondary School Relief Fund and the Governor's Fund. This includes ensuring these funds are targeted to schools with the highest proportion of marginalized students, in geographically diverse regions of the state, and that the funds are used on evidence-based approaches to reducing or eliminating education inequities. The State also must provide transparency on their State plans for the funds and their State reports on how funds were used, including by timely posting these items on the Department's website. Finally, we encourage the State to keep all public funds for education in public schools, and to ensure these federal funds supplement, not supplant, state resources for education.

2. Establishing a diverse Task Force on education comprised of parents/guardians, educators, students, counselors, disability rights advocates, and other education experts from racially, economically and geographically diverse backgrounds to help the State and LEAs navigate this crisis. This Task Force should have as its charge ensuring that equity is at the forefront of State and LEA responses to school closures and for transitioning back to school once that is safe.

3. Providing State leadership in helping districts collaborate and learn together by working with the Task Force to:

- Provide guidance on effective strategies for reducing education inequities and addressing learning loss during the COVID-19 school closure, over the summer and once schools re-open, including working with districts to ensure that students who rely on school meals continue to receive them, to coordinate supports for students with disabilities, and to ensure students have technology, mental health supports, and other services,
- Gather and share informational resources on effective strategies for reducing education inequities and addressing learning loss during the COVID-19 school closure, over the summer, and once schools re-open,
- Provide training for district and school leadership and for educators on effective strategies for reducing education inequities and addressing learning loss during the COVID-19 school closure, over the summer, and once schools re-open.
- Encourage LEAs to proactively engage with families, students, educators, and school communities on needs and the development of the LEA plans, and then provide maximum transparency on use of the new federal funds (including posting plans on LEA websites and the SEA website in languages accessible to students/families in the district).

4. Throughout all of the above federally-funded activities, the State must ensure that students most impacted during this crisis are prioritized for instructional and socio-emotional support and opportunities, which includes through:

- McKinney-Vento Program services for homeless children,
- compensatory education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for children with disabilities,
- addressing the technology gap for low-income children and children of color,
- providing educational materials and resources in the child's/family's native language, and
- ensuring students receive needed health and mental health services.

We are ready to work with you to see that the needs of Alabama's children are addressed during this extraordinary time. We welcome the opportunity for a meeting to discuss this with you and to answer any questions you may have. Please contact Shay Farley at shay.farley@splcenter.org or Katherine Dunn at katherine.dunn@splcenter.org if we can answer any questions or provide any support.

Sincerely,

Alabama Appleseed Center for Law and Justice
Alabama Arise
Alabama Coalition for Immigrant Justice
Birmingham Federation of Teachers
Intercultural Development Research Association
Hometown Action
Human Rights Campaign Alabama
SPLC Action Fund