

April 6, 2021

The Honorable Xavier Becerra  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, Southwest  
Washington, D.C. 20201

The Honorable Miguel Cardona  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue, Southwest  
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary Becerra and Secretary Cardona:

Congratulations on your historic confirmations. It was an honor to support your nominations, and I look forward to the progress that we can make together over the course of this Administration.

In this moment, our nation is in crisis. Communities across the country are reeling from the economic and public health disasters brought on by the coronavirus; twin crises that have left millions out of work and hundreds of thousands of families mourning the loss of loved ones.

One of the most urgent facets of our federal response is supporting schools, educators, students, and families in the wake of unprecedented school closures and periods of remote learning. The impending mental and behavioral health hurdles that lie before us as kids grapple with the trauma of the pandemic will be the next phase of this public health crisis, and it must be our top focus.

I write today to ask for a bold, coordinated all-of-government response to help kids recover from these pandemic impacts and avert the long-term consequences that that come with associated traumas, ranging from learning loss to self-harm and incarceration. Students and all of the structures that support them – from parents to educators to school administrators and community-based organizations – will need resources and guidance in how to process the pandemic and its effects.

Over the course of the COVID-19 outbreak, research has shown what parents know intuitively: that their children are hurting.

Families have struggled with basic needs like food and housing: downward trends in food insecurity were reversed, leaving an estimated 13 million kids – one in six children – without enough food to eat.<sup>1</sup> Some studies found that food insecurity rates doubled, a trend that was magnified among households with children.<sup>2,3</sup> Housing insecurity rates were similarly higher

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<sup>1</sup> [Food Insecurity and Poverty in the US – Feeding America](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Children’s food insecurity increasing during COVID-19 pandemic – Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Tracking the COVID-19 Recessions Effects on Food, Housing and Employment Hardships - CBPP](#)

among families with kids: 28 percent of renters living with children reported that they were not caught up on rent, compared to 12 percent among adults without children.<sup>4</sup>

Unfulfilled basic needs and a year of remote and altered learning structures have compounded to inflict severe stress and trauma on our children, fundamentally impacting their ability to learn. Schools have raised concerns about dramatic increases in chronic absenteeism and numbers of students failing classes that are “off the rails”.<sup>5,6</sup> Nearly all of these effects are felt more acutely among communities of color and vulnerable student populations. A McKinsey study found that by the end of the 2020/2021 academic year, students of color could be six to 12 months behind, compared with four to eight months for white students.<sup>7,8</sup> Poor grades and assessment outcomes increased more significantly among low-income students in the Los Angeles Unified School district, and Northern Virginia saw failing grades more than double for English language learners and students with disabilities.<sup>9,10</sup> As we’ve seen in other aspects of this pandemic, the impacts of coronavirus have hit our most vulnerable hardest.

Most concerning, however, is the toll on kids’ health and socioemotional wellbeing. Between March and October of 2020, the rate of children’s mental health-related emergency department visits was 44 percent higher than the corresponding period in 2019.<sup>11</sup> In my state of Nevada, the Clark County School District saw 18 suicides over the course of remote learning in 2020, doubling the incidents in all of the previous school year, and earning national attention.<sup>12</sup> The ramifications of pandemic-inflicted trauma on kids of all ages is reminiscent of the trauma that kids have experienced at the hands of the opioid epidemic.

That’s why I was proud to support the American Rescue Plan (ARP). The law makes an historic investment in direct supports for struggling households through increases in the child tax credit and the earned income tax credit, an extension of enhanced unemployment benefits, and direct checks to families because we know that income stability is the best predictor of kids’ health and wellbeing.

The ARP will also provide an unprecedented level of support to schools: \$122.7 billion in funding will support school in-person reopening efforts, including strategies to meet the social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs of students hit hardest by the pandemic. The bill includes billions more for local governments and community-based organizations to enable them to provide the essential services that families and kids need to recover.

The challenge that lies ahead is ensuring that schools are able to effectively leverage every last dollar and flexibility made available under the American Rescue Plan. Not all schools and

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<sup>4</sup> [ibid](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Schools get creative to enroll, retain youngest students during pandemic – K-12 Dive](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Report: Students with historically higher absenteeism rates struggle most during COVID-19 – K-12 Dive](#)

<sup>7</sup> [COVID-19 and learning loss—disparities grow and students need help - McKinsey](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Schools confront ‘off the rails’ numbers of failing grades - AP](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Ds and Fs surge, attendance slips among L.A.’s poorest students amid distance learning – Los Angeles Times](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Should Schools Be Giving So Many Failing Grades This Year? - EducationWeek](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Mental Health–Related Emergency Department Visits Among Children Aged <18 Years During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, January 1–October 17, 2020 – CDC](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Surge of Student Suicides Pushes Las Vegas Schools to Reopen – New York Times](#)

districts are equipped to work on these complex mental and behavioral health issues and meet the unique needs of today's students. Many suffer from drastic shortages of counselors, social workers, and psychologists to work with students even under normal circumstances. They will need robust assistance from community-based service providers and the health care community.

Thus, it is imperative that both of your agencies work collaboratively to develop resources and guidelines to aid school districts in formulating reopening frameworks that will best equip them to support returning students.

Under its various agencies and programs, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has a wealth of knowledge and expertise to help educators and communities navigate this moment. The Human Resources and Services Administration, for example, has a long history of creating and funding professional development resources for health care providers; the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and the National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative in particular, have helped us to understand and respond to child trauma in schools and provide evidence-based professional development for educators. These agencies should work in concert to support the development of trauma-informed guidelines for educators welcoming students back to school and the community-based provider serving them.

As the foremost authority on child welfare, the Administration for Children and Families should support schools looking to develop best practices for parents and connect families in need with wraparound services available in the local community. SAMHSA and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services should help to identify the community-based providers who can best support the ongoing mental and behavioral health needs of students and facilitate collaborations between schools and these providers.

The Department of Education also has a broad range of services that should be offered to help schools and school districts respond to this moment. In particular, the Office of Safe and Healthy Students can provide resources to guide best practices in safe, welcoming school environments, including professional development for educators, evidence-based instructional practices, mental health screening tools, and best practices to build partnerships between schools and community-based organizations. In addition, schools will need resources to help respond to increases in students experiencing homelessness and poverty, and a larger volume of highly mobile students.

In general, schools and communities will need robust technical assistance and help in navigating and integrating the various federal funding streams to maximize positive outcomes. While this crisis has been very detrimental for students, it also provides an opportunity to transform our schools into community hubs that can help to address students' academic and non-academic needs.

Congress' work to support our children is far from finished. But your close collaboration will help to fill gaps and illuminate specific areas of need so that together, we can deliver statutory relief and regulatory assistance as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Children and families across the country have stayed home, navigated online learning environments, and faced exceptional loss and trauma over the past year. We owe them our full

and coordinated attention to their safety and wellbeing through the upcoming recovery. Thank you for your attention to this matter, and I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Catherine Cortez Masto". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Catherine Cortez Masto  
United States Senator