

**Written Statement of Rebecca Pringle
Vice President, National Education Association**

**Before the Committee on Education and Labor
United States House of Representatives
Full Committee Hearing:**

**Budget Cuts and Lost Learning: Assessing the Impact of COVID-19 on Public Education
Monday, June 15, 2020**

Thank you Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Foxx, and members of the Committee for this opportunity to provide testimony for today's hearing. My name is Becky Pringle and I am a science teacher from Pennsylvania and vice president of the National Education Association, NEA. I spent over 30 years teaching middle-schoolers, that wonderful group that can be delightful one minute, and give you serious attitude the next. During all those years with my babies, a deep love grew within me not only for teaching, but also for advocacy—for all students and educators, and for public education.

As NEA's vice president, I am honored to represent more than 3 million teachers and education support professionals across the nation, in K-12 public schools and on public college campuses. NEA also represents educators in Department of Defense schools, college students who plan to become educators, and retired educators.

My position puts me in constant contact with a wide range of educators—from those in rural towns, to educators in densely populated urban areas and the suburbs and exurbs that border them. While we are a very diverse group, we share many of the same experiences as well as the belief that all students in our public schools—no matter where they live or their race or ethnicity or family income—should have an education that prepares them to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world, be good citizens, and contributing members of their communities. That is our fight, and it is a privilege to wage it.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made our fight much more urgent and much more difficult. It has deepened disparities and prompted state and local budget cuts that will devastate students in many public schools, severely restricting their opportunity for an education that sparks their curiosity, inspires their desire to learn, and sets them up for success.

The reality is that the fight for the opportunities that all students deserve has always been tough, whether our economy has been in boom or bust cycles. The pandemic, however, has underscored the vast inequities in educational opportunity, particularly in black and brown and rural communities, that have always existed. These inequities, the result of systemic racism and classism, and inadequate funding for public schools in low-income communities, were never far from view. But under the bright, flashing lights of COVID-19, we can no longer turn away from the fact that not all students have access to the educators, resources, and tools they need. The pandemic's continuing fallout could make inequities far worse.

It is urgent that we address the concerns directly stemming from COVID-19, and also finally come to grips with the disparities in school funding that have for too many years advantaged a

fortunate few students, while disadvantaging many, many others—particularly low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and rural students. These disparities were readily apparent from the very start of the pandemic.

When schools across the nation began closing, I don't know of any school district that was fully prepared for the abrupt shift to online learning. Yet, educators had to transition practically overnight. Teachers taught themselves new technologies and worked through all the hiccups involved. School counselors had one hand on their laptops, the other on their phones, and used email, text, Google Voice, and Zoom to reconnect with students. This was no one's first choice; online options are a supplement to—never a replacement for—in-person learning and support. But it was the best we could do under the circumstances. Educators partnered with families to help students—and parents—navigate the challenges, and some educators even organized car caravans through students' neighborhoods to get the message across that “Even if you're no longer in our classrooms, we are still here for you.”

Wealthier districts in areas where just about everyone has internet at home could handle this transition most easily. In fact, some of those districts immediately distributed devices to the few students who didn't already have them. But for the estimated 12 million students—1 in 5—with no internet access and no connected devices at home, or for those who have to share one device with three or four school-age siblings, that transition was impossible to make. This Digital Divide is particularly acute in African American, Latino, Native American, and rural communities. The public libraries, community centers, Boys and Girls Clubs, and other places these students would turn to for internet access were closed, and many remain inaccessible. For these students, the past few months have been a time of isolation from educators and their classmates, and in some cases, from the sense of stability that only their schools gave them.

Even *with* internet access, we know that some students can only truly learn under the watchful eye of educators who know them well, and can tell with one look who's getting the lesson and who's getting lost. These students need the interaction that virtual platforms, no matter how fast the internet speed is at home, cannot provide.

We've coined a term for the loss of learning that typically occurs during the summer months: the “summer slide.” Educators expect it, and we all have strategies for getting our students back on track. But when schools reopen, how do we respond to this slide when we know that for some students, online learning was as inaccessible as their closed school buildings? How do we meet the needs of students who, through no fault of their own, have fallen far behind their peers? For them, this is not a “slide”; it is a crash landing.

These are among the challenges our students and educators will be facing when they return to school. The gap in learning between students who had online access and those who did not, the jolt of suddenly being away from school communities that many students counted on for support and normalcy—educators must figure out where their students stand instructionally, and emotionally. Many students will have experienced the death or grave illness of loved ones, job losses that have pushed their families close to, or even into, financial disaster, the raw, always-present anxiety of this time of masks, gloves, and fear.

All of this calls out for trauma-informed practices throughout our schools. We must have enough teachers to assess where students are and to *meet* them where they are. We must have enough school counselors, school social workers, and other specialized instructional support personnel to deal with the emotional burdens and trauma many students will be carrying. Educators, too, are struggling with their own trauma and losses. Many education support professionals, for example, continued to work in school facilities, cleaning and maintaining buildings, preparing and delivering School Meals and the like. They have been in constant contact with students and families, often without the personal protective equipment (PPE) they needed. We lost some of these essential, frontline workers during this pandemic. Our schools will have to be supportive spaces for all members of school communities when they reopen.

And when it comes to reopening, let me make clear that educators, more than anyone, want our students back in classrooms for the 2020-21 academic year. We yearn to look into their eyes and reassure them and give them the dedicated time and attention they need. But we also insist that all decisions about when and how to reopen be rooted in health and safety, with input from frontline educators. We know we will need to provide PPE for students and educators; modify classrooms, cafeterias, gyms, auditoriums, playgrounds, and school buses for social distancing; provide disinfecting materials and sanitizing stations; intensify instruction and support for students traumatized by the impact of the coronavirus on their families and communities; and much, much more.

This task is made more difficult by the reality that our school buildings are, on average, more than 40 years old. We are grateful that the Rebuild America's Schools Act (RASA) begins to tackle many longstanding infrastructure needs. Thank you, Chairman Scott, for showing your commitment to improving our school buildings by making infrastructure a priority and not only introducing RASA, but making it the first bill that passed out of the Education & Labor Committee this Congress.

Ultimately, all of this will require significant investments at a time when schools are facing devastating budget cuts that are likely to far exceed those from the Great Recession. Keep in mind that some school districts have yet to recover from that recession and the downsizing and educator layoffs it spawned. Districts across the nation are still facing severe educator shortages, and now they face a brand new crisis.

Thanks to educators' advocacy in the massive RedforEd movement last year, we saw more resources for students from Arizona to West Virginia. More funding for public schools led to the hiring of additional teachers, school counselors, school nurses, and other staff. But COVID-19-prompted budget cuts are quickly eroding those gains.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, **nearly 500,000 public education jobs have already been lost because of the cuts.** By comparison, 300,000 education jobs were lost due to the Great Recession. In other words, COVID-19 has done more damage in three months than a recession that lasted for a year and a half. If this damage goes unchecked, nearly 2 million educators—one-fifth of the workforce—could lose their jobs over the next three years, according to NEA's analysis. **The "COVID-19" recession could be six times worse for education than**

the 2008 financial crisis.

As was the case during the Great Recession, the schools in wealthy communities are more likely to weather this storm. But schools in poorer communities, those already under-resourced, will barely stay afloat. Job losses in these schools would profoundly affect low-income students whose schools rely on Title I funding to reduce class sizes, hire specialists, and offer a rich curriculum. These job losses will also profoundly affect our students with special needs because the federal government has yet to fulfill its commitment under IDEA to pay 40 percent of the average per student cost for every special education student. This creates shortfalls that school districts must cover and it denies full opportunity to students with disabilities.

While educators were grateful for the support from the CARES Act's Education Stabilization Fund, those resources are simply not enough to meet the needs of students, educators, and schools. This is not something we alone say; other leading K-12 organizations agree. The funding was not sufficient even back in March when the legislation was signed into law. It is even less so now, given the huge fiscal crisis states and local governments face and their escalating COVID-related expenses. Matters are made worse by Education Secretary DeVos' attempt to use this pandemic to shift resources away from students in public schools, and direct resources to private schools. We must not allow anyone to exploit this time of pain and suffering to push a privatization agenda and further the inequities in our nation.

Instead, we must do all we can to strengthen the public schools that educate 9 out of 10 of America's students. The HEROES Act helps to do this because it includes \$915 billion in direct relief for state and local governments, and \$90 billion in additional education resources. These funds equate to an average of \$2,225 in additional funding per Title I student, money that could help pay the educators that teach and support our students and save more than 800,000 education jobs at all levels.

We thank the House for taking bold action to pass the HEROES Act, and we call on Mitch McConnell and the Senate to abandon their wait-and-see approach and act quickly. Schools are already planning for the upcoming school year and all of the new dilemmas—COVID-related and beyond—that it will bring. They need the certainty that this legislation can offer.

To stave off the elimination of thousands of critical educator positions, NEA urges Congress to provide at least \$175 billion more for the Education Stabilization Fund. In addition, we are advocating for at least \$56 million in directed funding for protective equipment, and at least \$4 billion to create a special fund, administered by the successful E-Rate program, to equip students with hot spots and devices to help close the homework gap. Even when schools do open, they will very likely need to incorporate online learning.

We've been listening to our members and allies and recently released guidance on reopening public schools called **All Hands on Deck** because we know that taking this step is not only the best thing for students; it is in the best interest of our nation. We cannot fully reopen our economy unless and until public schools reopen. Closed schools mean parents and guardians cannot go back to work, which means working people will have less to spend on goods and services in their communities. But just as importantly, public schools are hubs of activity in

many places, where people gather, meet, vote, and access important support services. It is imperative that they reopen—but decisions about how and when must be grounded in health experts' recommendations, with input from educators, and with access to PPE for students and educators. In all these decisions, it is crucial that we treat racial and social justice as an imperative, so that we don't inflict more harm on the students and communities that can least afford to bear it.

I will end by telling you that members of the NEA have not lost hope that we can come out of this time as a stronger nation, able to provide the opportunities that every student deserves. We can bring forth the fortitude and creativity that will address the fallout from COVID-19, and *also* address the equity challenges that have plagued us for generations. We know that we must do something, and we know too that the status quo was never the best we could provide for all students. The members of the National Education Association stand ready to work with this committee to bring about the new day that our students deserve.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions.