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COVID-19 RECOVERY TASK FORCE**

United States House of Representatives Committee on Education and the Workforce

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***AASA COVID-19 RECOVERY TASK FORCE GUIDELINES FOR REOPENING
SCHOOLS: An Opportunity to Transform Public Education***

Good afternoon Chair Scott, Ranking Member Foxx and members of the House Education and the Workforce Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss AASA’s COVID-19 Recovery Task Force Guidelines for Reopening Schools: An Opportunity to Transform Public Education.

I am Michael Hinojosa, superintendent of the Dallas Independent School District, speaking to you on behalf of my district and AASA, The School Superintendents Association.

It has been my privilege to serve as a school superintendent for 26 years, in urban, suburban and smaller districts, in Texas and in Georgia. As the immigrant son of immigrant parents, I can personally attest to the value of education as a path to the dream America has to offer. If we as a country are to succeed, we must educate *all* students for success. Schools are vital to our democracy, and learning must continue no matter what – storm, strife, or pandemic. The COVID crisis has brought that lesson home.

Lessons from the Pandemic

When the coronavirus shuttered our schools at spring break in March, the district was forced to ramp up in a week’s time so that teachers could be ready to move to a virtual instruction model when classes resumed. Teachers, staff and administrators worked throughout the break, preparing online learning plans, creating lesson and activity packets for elementary students, and providing hotspots and tech devices for middle- and high-schoolers who lacked them. As many as 36,000 district households had no internet service to access at-home learning. Fortunately, with the help of local partners, we were able to quickly distribute more than 15,000 hotspots, laptops and tablets

to students and their families and continued to build on that number weekly. The effort got us through the end of the school year, but it was only a temporary solution.

Factors Impacting the Reopening of Schools

With the new school year looming, our leadership team and board are still in talks about the way forward. Likely, the start of school in Dallas will not only be delayed but will begin largely with online instruction. The bottom line in this debate is that everyone agrees students must receive instruction. Whether that should happen online, or if and when it can safely happen in person, are open questions.

Dallas ISD is the 16th largest school district in the nation, with an enrollment of more than 153,000 students, of whom 70% are Latino, 22% are Black, 86% are economically disadvantaged, 45% are English Learners, and 10% have special needs.

Driving the debate over the decision about how to reopen schools is the current spike in COVID-19 cases in Texas and several other states, which represents a threat to the health of staff and students alike. The numbers in Dallas County as of last Friday stood at 40,200 cases and 523 deaths—the deadliest week yet. Faced with this data, Dallas and other Texas districts are confronting difficult decisions about the fate of the 2020 school year.

Further complicating matters is medical data indicating that Latino and Black communities are disproportionately among those becoming seriously ill and dying from COVID. Authorities differ on the causes, but the fact is communities of color are suffering. As of July 1, Latino Texans were 60% of those testing positive for the disease, far in excess of their 40% of the state's population.

Feedback and Input from Regulators and Stakeholders

What factors are in play in making this decision? Our stakeholders are torn by the need to open for in-person instruction and fearful of the danger of that decision in the current health environment. The last survey of parents showed they were almost equally divided between those calling for in-person instruction and others who feel the possible danger is an argument for online classes. Parents and educators worry about the health and safety of students and their families. Teachers and staff are concerned about risks to their own health. And, despite a strong push to equip students with technology, many families in our community still lack devices and connectivity, as the city of Dallas ranks sixth in the country, and first in Texas, among large cities without fixed internet access. Also, in addition to health issues, we face a changing landscape of regulatory and financial challenges.

Based on the disease spike and input from superintendents and educators, the county's health authority has closed in-person learning and school activities until after Labor Day. In recent days, the Texas Education Agency has done an about-face on its initial order that districts had just three weeks from the start of the fall semester to reopen to in-person instruction. TEA is now giving districts the leeway to open with online classes and extend their opening dates as late as November. Depending on the case counts in their areas, districts can request waivers to open even later or to offer strictly online instruction indefinitely. One caveat to this extension is the requirement that districts with virtual instruction must provide reliable online devices and hotspots to students.

Educational Equity Demands Technology Access

This pandemic has taught us many lessons, one of which is that fast, reliable internet connectivity for all families is essential for the long term. Broadband connectivity is not a luxury, but a necessity. It is a utility, much like water service, electricity or gas. Given that belief, and with the support of state and local government, the district has taken the lead in forming “Operation Connectivity.” This is a joint effort of state and local leaders and technology officers, the Texas Urban Council of big-city superintendents, and the national Council of the Great City Schools, among others, to help fill this crucial need for our students.

The group has completed many of its short-term objectives: distributing hotspots, petitioning for E-rate rule changes to secure affordable internet access, and spearheading the Dallas regional coalition to permanently address this issue. As a result, school community wi-fi projects are being launched in high-need neighborhoods, deploying school buses with wi-fi in those areas. If all goes according to plan, we will achieve broadband connectivity for all Dallas ISD students, to serve as a model for what can be done across the state and the nation to connect more students to technology at home.

If equity in education is to be achieved, all students must have access to the technology and connectivity that enables learning. While the COVID crisis has exposed this need, it is clear that wi-fi hotspots and internet access must be available to all students’ families as a necessary provision for learning even after the crisis is over.

The recently passed federal legislation to expand broadband access must be fully implemented, including funding for high-need urban and rural areas where citizens are currently underserved.

COVID Presents an Opportunity to Transform Education for the Better

In recent meetings of the AASA’s COVID-19 Recovery Task Force, participating superintendents and state executives have created a national plan for reopening the nation’s schools during this unprecedented challenge. One notable result of these discussions has been our shared commitment to use the lessons of the pandemic to transform public education.

Included with this testimony you will find the AASA COVID-19 Recovery Task Force Guidelines for Reopening Schools. Beyond the obvious and most crucial considerations for preserving the health, safety and wellness of all students and staff during reopening, task force members emphasized several key guidelines to address inequities. Chief among these, members agreed we must: ensure equitable access to the technology required for virtual learning; anticipate COVID-related budget and fiscal management issues; and prepare for a changing landscape while still ensuring the academic achievement and social emotional learning of all students when schools reopen.

Ensuring a Safe Reopening of Schools

AASA has joined the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and fellow educators, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) in issuing a joint statement calling for the *safe* return of students, teachers, and staff to schools. We agree that decisions on when and how schools reopen should be premised on the science-based recommendations of public health agencies and the best educational advice of school leaders.

The joint statement reads, “Returning to school is important for the healthy development and well-being of children, but we must pursue reopening in a way that is safe for all students, teachers and staff. Science should drive decision-making on safely reopening schools. Public health agencies must make recommendations based on evidence, not politics. We should leave it to health experts to tell us when the time is best to open up school buildings and listen to educators and administrators to shape how we do it.”

Many of the school districts represented on the AASA task force plan to offer options for attendance, including:

- Classroom instruction, which may or may not be feasible for traditional August or September openings.
- Virtual learning as the primary course of instruction.
- Staggered and/or limited student schedules.
- On-site programs for specialized population groups such as English Learners and those in Special Education or Career and Technology Education, with virtual programming for all others.

Task force members support the guidance and recommendations of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that universal health and safety protocols be in place in all scenarios.

This includes screening students and staff for symptoms of COVID-19, providing adequate supplies of personal protective equipment, and following recommended procedures for hygiene, sanitation and decontamination of school buildings. Participants agreed that districts must have in place social distancing protocols and detailed quarantine and closure procedures should students or staff contract the virus.

In reopening, curriculum and instruction must consider the needs of all students, but especially those who are English Learners or who require Special Education services.

Professional development must ensure that all staff members are equipped for instructional design within a virtual setting. Teachers and staff must be encouraged to create learning experiences that engage as well as inform, so that students can best retain and apply gained knowledge and skills.

The distance inherent in online learning requires that educators redouble their efforts to renew and maintain relations with students, excite them about learning, and rebuild connections that may have been frayed by isolation.

Anticipating COVID-Related Budget and Fiscal Management Issues

High on the task force list of concerns is the expected budget shortfalls resulting from this pandemic. Many superintendents are facing budget cuts or reallocations this fiscal year and projected 16-18% reductions for the coming fiscal year.

Fortunately, the Texas Education Agency's announcement of flexibility for school start dates included a commitment from the state to funnel \$200 million in federal stimulus funds to buy devices, hotspots and routers for districts. That's on top of a previous promise to reimburse all school districts for up to 75% of their pandemic-related expenses. Texas school leaders uniformly see this as a good start. Across-the-board financial assistance is needed for a range of services. Personal protective equipment (PPE); increased transportation demands; staffing of teachers and paraprofessionals to help students demonstrating learning gaps; space reconfigurations required for social distancing; mental health services; student meals; facility sanitation; and teacher training in areas such as virtual learning, technology, social and emotional learning and trauma-skilled education are other items that will strain district budgets.

In comparison to some districts, Dallas ISD has been fortunate when it comes to finances. In 2018, voters approved a tax increase of 13 cents per \$100 assessed valuation to fund the district's strategic initiatives that include Strategic Compensation, Early Learning, Public School Choice, and early college high schools, which provided significant dollars in operational funding. In addition, last year, Texas legislators passed a school finance measure that increased per-student base funding by about 20%. So, in short, we had a healthy reserve when the virus arrived.

That is not the case for many of our colleagues across the state and nation, whose districts are facing layoffs, shortages of supplies and budget deficits, in many cases compounded by the costs incurred to manage a raging pandemic. Federal financial support will be essential to address these needs.

Superintendents recently sent a letter to Congress urging support for students displaced from their classrooms, including \$4 billion in direct funds to the FCC's Schools and Libraries Program, commonly called the E-Rate program, to help connect millions of students to the internet.

As you know, in March Congress passed, and the president signed, an \$8.3 billion emergency package in response to COVID-19, which included \$2.2 billion to help federal, state, and local agencies prepare for and respond to the pandemic. Subsequent legislation provided additional funding for food and nutrition services, COVID testing, public health programs, and support for distance learning.

Superintendents on the task force cited the need to stay informed about the ever-changing landscape of federal funding and state pass-through initiatives to better understand budget cycles and the parameters of how funding can be used. It is evident we must ensure that funding sources are accessed and maximized to purchase equipment and resources related to safety, health, and wellness, as well as the equitable education of all students. Superintendents are grateful for the passage of the CARES Act and feel it is a good faith effort of the nation's commitment to equity

in education. However, as the virus continues its scourge, school districts will face unprecedented uncertainty.

To ensure that public schools can successfully weather these challenges, Congress should continue to demonstrate its support with passage of the HEROES Act currently approved in the House and pending consideration in the Senate. In addition, there are numerous other bills before Congress that would address infrastructure particularly as it relates to connectivity. These, too, deserve prompt action to ensure that districts can make the promise of technological equity a reality. It should go without saying that threats to withhold federal funding to districts that follow health authority recommendations in their decisions about when and how to open schools are disturbing and unhelpful in the search for workable solutions. Certainly, we hope the president will rethink this idea. We urge our delegations to continue to consider school district leaders a resource to provide the evidence and support needed to enact essential education funding.

Preparing for a Changing Landscape

If anything is certain in the face of this pandemic it is that nothing will be the same as before. As superintendents and staffs plan to reopen schools, we must rely on lessons learned to build a new kind of support infrastructure that will address the health and psychological issues emerging from the COVID-19 crisis.

Attached you will find specific action steps recommended by the AASA task force for building the COVID-19 reopening infrastructure, regarding:

- Wellness, health and safety measures.
- Technology.
- Ensuring academic support and addressing the learning gap.
- Special populations.
- Progress monitoring and accountability measures.
- Child nutrition services.
- Facilities.
- Financial services.
- Human resources.
- Professional development.
- Student services.
- Transportation.

Implementing any and all these action steps will require continued collaboration at the local, state and federal levels. Our children—our country’s future—are depending on us to ensure their success.