

## **Written Testimony**

**Leslie Boggs**

**Mother, Grandmother, Child Advocate, and President of National PTA**

**Before the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education**

**Thursday, July 23, 2020**

Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Allen and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on what is needed to support the safe reopening of our nation's public schools in the midst of this pandemic. I am here today on behalf of National PTA, the nation's oldest and largest child advocacy association, with congresses in all 50 states, DC, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico and Department of Defense schools in Europe. Since 1897, National PTA has been a strong advocate and a reputable resource for millions of parents, teachers, grandparents, caregivers, foster parents and other caring adults who share a commitment to improving the education, health and safety of all children. We speak with one voice for every child.

At National PTA, it is clear to us that parents, educators and school leaders are natural allies. As the president of National PTA, I have seen firsthand how this partnership is more important than ever in this time of crisis. Unfortunately, the pandemic is far from over. As a nation and individuals, we cannot downplay the critical nature of this virus. We are seeing a substantial increase in cases across the country including in my own home state of Texas. Children are the future of our nation. We must keep them safe. Claims that all children are asymptomatic and can't spread virus are simply not true.

Our utmost priority during this time continues to be the health and safety of all students, their families, educators and school personnel. National PTA and PTAs across the country are working hard every day to help school communities navigate the challenges that have arisen from the pandemic—focusing on social and emotional wellbeing, addressing food insecurity, creating resources for family engagement, demanding greater support for distance teaching and learning, and bridging the digital divide.

Our association understands that the reopening of our nation's preK-12 schools during the COVID-19 pandemic is vital to ensure the continuity of education. However it should not outweigh the safety and the mental and physical health of our students, educators, staff and families. It is our association's position that plans for reopening shall incorporate the best available science and the expertise of infectious disease doctors and health practitioners.

Most importantly however, States and school districts, or the Federal government, should not simply hoist plans for reopening schools on parents. States and school district leaders must meaningfully engage with parents and other stakeholders on developing plans to reopen

schools and subsequently throughout the school year as conditions warrant changes in plan and strategies to ensure both learning and safety. Parents know the value of in-person instruction and want their children to be in school this coming school year. However this must be done safely and effectively and with engagement of all stakeholders, especially parents and students.

PTAs across the country have worked to engage school leaders on reopening schools. One of our affiliates, the Virginia PTA, supports community-determined reopening plans that prioritize the health and welfare of students, staff and families. To inform how schools are reopening in Virginia, Virginia PTA conducted a parent survey, which received 50,400 responses including 3,475 comments. Through this survey, parents' number one concern, related to a fall reopening, was the level of education their children were receiving under emergency distance learning, with 85% of parents selecting this as a top concern for the fall. This was followed by keeping their family and children healthy (65%), socializing (61%) and balancing work with distance learning (46%). Spanish language survey responses indicated family health and safety as their number one concern (82%).

Furthermore, COVID-19 has shone a bright light on the long-standing systemic health and social inequities among communities of color. CDC data shows that Black, Brown and American Indian or Alaska Native persons are at increased risk of getting COVID-19 or experiencing severe illness, regardless of age. In numerous surveys, including one done by USA Today, health and wellbeing were either first or second on the list of priorities for most parents. The importance of health was often higher in low-income communities and communities of color. Additionally, a Common Sense Media survey showed 6 in 10 teens were concerned about contracting coronavirus and their family's economic security. Amongst black and Latino teens, 71 percent and 66 percent respectively were worried about their or their family's exposure to coronavirus.

The work done by the Virginia PTA, other PTAs and organizations across the country have shown the concern parents and students have for both learning, but also for safety. As reopening plans are developed, they should strictly follow the most up-to-date Center for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines for school settings, including but not limited to reasonable social distancing, rigorous sanitizing processes and viral screening and testing protocols. CDC guidelines must not become politicized or watered down and must be aligned with the best available science and research. National PTA strongly believes that states and school districts must plan and align logistics, educational strategies and public health approaches into one coherent response. We recognize that there will not be a one-size fits all process for the reopening of schools.

The issue of how or whether to physically open schools in a safe manner is a critically important issue. National PTA has tried to help guide our members and the larger education community in this area. We recently co-hosted a webinar with 16 other education organizations where we heard from infectious disease experts. Among very obvious points made by medical experts stressing the use of face masks, social distancing, handwashing and adequate ventilation to mitigate the spread of coronavirus, they made clear that a school's decision to physically

reopen must take into account the rate of community transmission. A school's expected transmission rate is significantly impacted by the rate of its community spread. To put it bluntly, where community transmission rates are high, transmission of the virus in schools will also be high. This has been substantiated by experiences in Israel and other areas around the world that had high community transmission rates when they reopened schools. In these areas, schools had to subsequently close their school buildings and revert back to online learning. We should not make that same mistake in how we reopen schools in this country.

Regardless of approach to beginning the school year, safely and effectively reopening schools is going to take resources, regardless of whether schools begin the year in person, remotely, or a hybrid combination. These steps simply cannot be done on the cheap. What value would you place on the safety of our children and their school's educators and staff? If we desire to make up for months of lost learning time. We must have an infusion of significant, new federal resources. There is no getting around this reality.

School districts and schools need specific resources to address the health, safety, infrastructure, and immediate and long-term physical, psychological, social, and emotional needs of students, educators and staff as they prepare for the upcoming school year. Schools must be prepared to address the transition back to school, the trauma of a pandemic and the many instructional issues—including the effects of learning loss and the digital divide. Many of our nation's school districts are have already been working for decades without the resources needed to provide an equitable education and critical supports to all students. The added strain of recovery from a worldwide pandemic will wreak havoc on all localities and will require significant, immediate, and continuing support from federal and state governments.

National PTA is encouraged by the adoption of previous COVID-19 packages, the House action on the Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (HEROES) Act, and the introduction of the Coronavirus Child Care and Education Relief Act (CCCERA) in the Senate. Congressional recognition of the COVID-19 needs of schools has made a difference in how schools support their students and their families, and educators and other staff during this pandemic. Despite these packages, there are, and will be, continued needs Congress must address now.

National PTA has called on Congress to provide additional resources to support students and their families, public schools, and the educators and staff that work in them. Today we reiterate our requests for this critical funding in response to COVID-19. Furthermore, we reinforce our opposition to the creation of any private school voucher programs and/or other mechanisms to funnel public dollars to private schools. We also urge you to include language to clarify that equitable services should be provided to students eligible under Title I only. Our recommendations for support fall in five buckets:

- 1) Emergency Funding Directly to States to Support Local Education Agencies:** Building off the Education Stabilization Fund included in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), the fourth emergency COVID response must include an

investment of at least \$175 billion for K12 education. Any such funding must include strict protections related to 'supplement, not supplant' and ensure that a high percentage (all dollars except those related to administrative costs) end up at the local level.

- 2) Support for Federal Categorical Programs:** Recognizing the devastation facing state and local economies, it is clear that when schools open their doors, their student population will be significantly needier, with more students coming from families living at or near poverty, and students with disabilities in need of significant supports and services. National PTA has urged Congress to provide \$13 billion for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and \$12 billion for Title I on top of appropriations provided through the FY 2021 appropriations process to help school districts address the litany of needs for students served under these programs.
- 3) Emergency Funding for Remote Learning:** Outside of, and in addition to the fiscal stabilization fund, Congress must include \$4 billion in funding for remote learning through the E-rate program. This spring, schools and families found themselves in the never-before-found situation of wide-spread home-based learning. As they plan for remote learning options for the Fall, we must not repeat the long-documented and persistent inequity as it relates to access to broadband.
- 4) Family Engagement in Education:** In addition to supporting students, many families have become and will continue to be their child's primary teachers in virtual learning situations. The current Statewide Family Engagement Centers (SFECs) program has enabled 13 states to have dedicated family engagement centers in their states. National PTA has urged Congress to provide a one-time infusion of \$245.5 million for the SFECs program in the next COVID-19 relief bill to directly target and support the need of families, children and educators in this crisis.
- 5) Funding for School Nutrition programs:** While we will continue to gain insight on the specific needs of children, families and schools to provide access to nutritious meals, National PTA believes Congress must continue to increase funds for Food and Nutrition Services at USDA to prevent, prepare for and respond to food insecurities related to COVID-19.

We understand that science and health-based re-opening schools is vital to the continuity of education, and that schools must be prepared to address the transition to back to school. Addressing these needs will take a significant infusion of federal funds to support local educational agencies, disadvantaged students, family engagement, remote learning and nutrition programs. Congress must take action today to support our nation's public school and ensure that the reopening of schools is done with safety and health as the number one priority. Thank you for this opportunity and I look forward to answering any questions members may have.