

Testimony
Written Statement of Dr. Jesus F. Jara
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Before the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and
Secondary Education
United States House of Representatives

Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Owens, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to participate in this hearing. For the record, my name is Dr. Jesus Jara; I serve as superintendent of the Clark County School District (CCSD) in Nevada, the 5th largest school district in the country, serving 304,000 diverse students, as a minority-majority district, with over 70% of our students receiving free and reduced lunch.

We reopened our elementary schools on March 1, 2021. This feat was only possible because of CCSD's 42,000 employees, our business partners, and the families of Clark County. Federal support from the American Rescue Plan made it possible for our school district to stay connected to our students so they could continue learning from home during the pandemic. When considering the COVID-19 pandemic from a school district perspective, we went from crisis to response, then stabilization to improvement. Let me illustrate what the Clark County School District did to react and make this possible.

When the pandemic hit and the decision to shut down was made, our priority was to protect our students and staff. We sent everyone home and then set about creating distance learning options so students could connect to learn from their teachers. We quickly discovered that many of our students did not have internet access or mobile phones.

One young woman attending high school, who had no internet access or a mobile phone, asked a friend to reach out to her teacher to get missed assignments. Once the teacher learned of her circumstances, they relayed the information to the administration and provided the necessary

connections for continued learning. This young woman caught up on her assignments and will start college next Fall. Similar stories played out throughout the school district. In a matter of weeks, we were able to deploy over 247,000 devices and provide internet access to those students who previously did not have it.

In 2020, student suicide rates rose, and we needed to intervene immediately. The District created Lifeline, a program to assist educators and leadership to interface with and determine students' level of need. We instituted protocols to ensure students isolated at home could meet with school-based mental health professionals in virtual or in-person format. Additionally, CCSD created *Connection Line* for students to call a school counselor or social worker if they needed support over breaks and holidays.

We knew our kids needed to be with their peers in school, learning from their teachers. As we designed our back-to-school plan, we consulted stakeholders throughout the District, including the five bargaining units representing the 42,000 employees of the Clark County School District. Together, we instituted a mask mandate and social distancing protocols, purchased and provided PPE, and improved ventilation systems. Without their buy-in and voices in the process, we would not have been able to reopen our elementary schools in March 2021.

Like so many other districts across the country, we have struggled with staffing shortages. On the first day of school in August of this year, we started with 699 teacher vacancies. We need more substitute teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and custodians. All of these vacancies are putting instruction, extracurricular activities, and maintenance of district assets at risk.

The American Rescue Plan (ARP) COVID relief funds enabled the Clark County Public Schools to prioritize needs, address obstacles, reopen safely, and support students' social and emotional learning and academic needs.

We enlisted over 80 nongovernmental organizations to help us design a bold and unique process called *Focus on the Future for Kids: Community*

Input Process. We received over 13,000 responses from families and members of the community. In addition to students most impacted by the pandemic, 90% of survey respondents identified as those who experience historical racial inequities, students from low-income families, students of color, English learners, children with disabilities, students experiencing homelessness, migratory students, and youth in foster care, need the most support.

We utilized the School District's Strategic Plan *Focus: 2024* framework to organize and align the community-identified priorities to our use of funds plan. This framework guides our spending priorities and informs future community conversations related to budgeting and developing the long-term, shared vision for CCSD students and staff.

Because of this community conversation process, we determined that the federal 20% minimum requirement of our \$777 million dollar allocation would not provide enough support for CCSD students. Therefore, we are committing over \$533 million dollars, or nearly 80% of the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) III funding, to address these urgent student needs. We firmly believe that investing our ARP allocation in addressing the learning needs of our students was prudent despite the infrastructure and other investment needs of the district. We are hopeful that these needs can be addressed using the school construction investment from the Budget Reconciliation Act proposed by the U. S. House of Representatives.

By coordinating with the Council of the Great City Schools and many other urban school districts across the country, and listening to our local community responses, we know student success occurs when we invest additional funds to support our teachers, principals, and staff.

CCSD knows parental involvement produces better student outcomes, so we will provide direct training to parents to support their learners with technology at home.

In the coming months, CCSD will refresh the *Focus: 2024* strategic plan to include the ARP ESSER III spending priorities and unique measures of success for this plan.

As we implement our plan, we will continue engaging with the community to align our final priorities and build the necessary data-driven metrics to ensure transparent, ongoing communication and accountability. This week and next, I am hosting virtual town hall meetings to present our vision and plan for ongoing recovery and improvement beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

The circumstances were unprecedented, the needs great, and now is the time to shape a recovery benefitting our students, communities, country, and future.