



OPENING STATEMENT

House Committee on Education and Labor

Chairman Robert C. "Bobby" Scott

Opening Statement of Chairman Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan (CNMI)

Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Hearing

Lessons Learned: Charting the Path to Educational Equity Post-COVID-19

Thursday, March 25, 2021 | 1:00 p.m.

Today, we meet to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school communities and discuss strategies for safely reopening classrooms and addressing educational disparities.

It has been just over a year since the pandemic forced schools to abruptly switch to online platforms, disrupting the education of more than 55 million students and upending our communities.

Unfortunately, the consequences of this transition have extended beyond lost in-person instruction. School closures have restricted students' access to nutritious school meals and social and emotional learning opportunities. And schools are less likely to identify cases of child abuse and neglect while classrooms are closed.

In my district, COVID-19 has had the greatest impact on students with disabilities, Title I qualified students, English learners, and other vulnerable students that already faced significant challenges.

Going into the pandemic, schools predominantly serving students of color faced a \$23 billion funding gap compared to schools predominantly serving white students.

Because of this disparity, many students entered the pandemic without access to high-speed internet, dedicated devices, and other tools that are critical to remote learning. They will also return to older classrooms and campuses with much-needed repairs, from iPhones—some even to find school libraries losing their entire book collection—books meant for student literacy—and dilapidated school facilities, including dangerously outdated ventilation systems, if they are there at all.

The perfect storm of disparities has worsened inequities in unfinished learning and caused a measurable widening of achievement gaps.

Research indicates Black and Latino students were 3-5 months behind in learning at the beginning of this school year. By the end of the school year, they could be 6-12 months behind, compared to 4-8 months for white students.

GAO reporting found that school districts struggled to provide education and services for students with disabilities and English learners. Further, a new survey by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, found that more than half of all Black, Latino, and Asian fourth graders learned in a fully remote environment. Another survey showed that only a quarter of Pacific Islanders received full-time, in-person instruction. In comparison, 25% of white students learned fully remotely, and nearly half of white students received full-time in-person instruction.

Students with disabilities have also disproportionately suffered from this pandemic in the wake of the Trump Administration's failed COVID-19 response. Without adequate guidance from the Department, schools struggled to maintain the special education services that students with disabilities needed to access quality education in a remote learning environment. Today, schools also face challenges to reopening classrooms for students with disabilities, who may be more vulnerable to the virus. For example, the NAEP 2021 Survey shows that 40 percent of schools prioritized students with disabilities for full-time in-person instruction in the 4th and 8th grades. Yet, students with disabilities have not received in-person instruction at rates noticeably higher than other subgroups of students.

These continued disparities make clear that, to ensure that all schools and students recover from this pandemic, we **must** target relief and resources to underserved students who need them most.

Over the past year, Congress has taken historic steps toward that goal through three major relief packages:

- the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act*, or *CARES Act*,
- the *Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act*, and most recently,
- the *American Rescue Plan Act*.

Combined, these packages secured nearly \$200 billion in urgent relief for schools. The funding has been critical for covering the increased costs of the pandemic and preparing for the \$300 billion shortfall in state and local budgets. To date, reduced state revenue has already cost more than a million education jobs.

The American Rescue Plan, specifically, makes the most significant one-time investment in K-12 education in our nation's history. Under President Biden, Congress swiftly passed this legislation after school communities spent months calling for additional funding to reopen schools safely and support students.

The nearly \$130 billion of flexible funding in this package will help schools take the necessary steps to safely reopen and stay open. And it will help students overcome lost time in the classroom as well as severe trauma, hunger, and homelessness.

The American Rescue Plan funding will also help Congress fulfill its long-standing commitment to meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Specifically, the package dedicates \$3 billion to ensure that K-12 students with disabilities can access the free and appropriate public education they have a right to, and toddlers with disabilities can access the services they need to be ready to enter the school system.

The lessons from our pandemic response so far have provided a valuable foundation for Congress to take the next steps towards educational equity.

For example, we need accurate data from statewide assessments to understand the full scope of this pandemic. Without this data, we cannot accurately target relief funding to support school communities where racial achievement gaps are greatest.

We must also make systemic reforms to our K-12 education system to fully address educational disparities. This includes repairing crumbling school infrastructure, confronting the growing resegregation of public schools, and making other long-term investments to address educational disparities.

Today, we will discuss the work we still have ahead to close persistent achievement gaps and ensure a recovery from this pandemic where every student succeeds.