

May 4, 2020

**Via E-mail**

Dr. Carmen Ayala  
State Superintendent of Education, Illinois State Board of Education

Governor J.B. Pritzker  
State of Illinois  
c/o Martin Torres, Senior Policy Advisor, Education

**Re: State Planning to Distribute CARES Act Education Funding**

Dear Governor Pritzker and Superintendent Ayala:

Thank you for your leadership and the commitment you have shown in highlighting equity issues during these challenging times.

As Illinois prepares to apply for and distribute education-related funding appropriated under the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, we write to request that the state take the necessary steps to ensure that all of the new CARES Act funding be used to advance equity for and support the needs of marginalized children and their families. Decisions about how to allocate the new CARES Act federal funds should center the needs of marginalized students at this crucial period.

Through the CARES Act, Illinois is slated to receive about \$569.5 million through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund to be distributed by ISBE to the local education agencies (LEAs) in our State. The U.S. Department of Education has also allocated about \$108.5 million to Illinois from the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund under the CARES Act, to be used by Governor Pritzker to meet the needs of students, schools, and education-related organizations.

As you have named in recent press briefings, students from the following groups already faced barriers and educational inequities before the COVID-19 crisis began: low-income children, children of color, children with disabilities, English-language learner children, children in immigrant families, children in foster care, migrant children, homeless children, LGBTQ children, children in the juvenile justice system, and children whose identities span two or more of these categories. These are students who rely on additional support through our schools. With schools closed for the remainder of the 2019-20 academic year, these children are likely to fall further behind their peers without a plan to prevent or redress equity gaps.

Moreover, the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color compounds existing risk factors, exposing already crippling equity gaps. Marginalized students are intended to be primary beneficiaries of CARES Act funds. States are responsible for overseeing the use of these funds and have the authority to instruct LEAs in how these funds should be used.

We appreciate that ISBE has moved quickly to provide and update guidance to districts on key issues including remote learning, meal distribution, and special education. We applaud ISBE for engaging an advisory group of students, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders in developing its Remote Learning Recommendations and for translating the document into languages other than English. We also recognize

that many school districts in Illinois have quickly risen to the challenge of providing meals, services, technology, and educational services to students in this difficult time.

ISBE has suggested that CARES Act resources should be directed toward tackling the digital divide in Illinois' least-resourced districts. While there are many challenges presented by the COVID-19 crisis, this is also an opportunity to support innovations in education to support our most vulnerable students. We urge ISBE to recommend providing instruction and support to students to the maximum extent possible, thinking creatively about ways to meet student needs.

It is also crucial that Illinois allocate adequate funding and resources to plan for the transition when students return to the classroom – particularly to address the gaps that are likely to widen for marginalized students while schools are closed. Among other things, this means that the State must maintain (and not cut) State education dollars, and use the federal dollars to "supplement not supplant" State dollars, so the federal dollars are actually having the maximum impact on reducing inequities for marginalized children in Illinois.

We urge you to continue upholding Illinois' commitment to equity by taking the following steps to ensure that CARES Act funds are targeted to reducing equity gaps for marginalized students:

#### **A. Create Structures for Public Accountability and Transparency**

1. **Convene a Task Force that includes students, parents, educators, and community stakeholders** with equity as a central value. The Task Force should ensure a statewide response and school district accountability to accomplish a twofold role: (1) ensure equity in short-term efforts, including meal distribution, remote learning, devices and internet access; and (2) ensure equity when students transition back to in-person instruction, including how to assess and determine the need for compensatory services for students who have fallen behind, and how to address issues like trauma, mental health, and social-emotional needs at school.
2. **Meaningfully engage with marginalized students and parents in planning and monitoring the use of these funds.** In addition to convening the Task Force, we urge ISBE to explore multiple strategies to engage and center the voices of marginalized students and parents, including but not limited to the following:
  - a. Leverage current communication structures to gather information. This could include establishing a phone hotline and email address to take questions and feedback, and surveying students and families about their concerns. It should also include tapping existing leadership structures such as Parent Advisory Councils (PACs), Local School Councils (LSCs), Bilingual Advisory Committees (BACs), and parent or disability-based organizations.
  - b. Bring together community-based organizations and advocacy groups in soliciting input and feedback.
  - c. Hold multiple online community engagement sessions that focus on centering different groups on a rotating basis, including different geographic regions and target populations (such as children with disabilities, English-language learner children, black children, children in immigrant families, and homeless children).

3. **Require transparency and accountability at the district level by requiring LEAs to submit plans that put equity for marginalized students at the center of planned uses of these new funds and provide maximum transparency on reported uses of federal funds.** This also includes requiring that **private and charter schools' uses of CARES Act funds be equally transparent and accountable** to those of public schools. This can be accomplished through the State requiring LEAs to:
  - a. Submit plans that:
    - i. Demonstrate, with specificity, how the LEA plan is targeting the new federal financial resources to the schools with the highest proportion of the marginalized students in the groups listed above;
    - ii. Demonstrate, with specificity, how the LEA plan is using the new federal funds to support approaches that are reasonably expected to have the greatest impact on reducing education inequities for marginalized students in the groups listed above during the COVID-19 school closure, over the summer and once schools re-open;
    - iii. Demonstrate, with specificity, how the LEA will engage with parents and students from marginalized groups to develop and evaluate its use of federal funds;
  - b. Report, with specificity, on how federal funds were used and their outcomes, including by submitting reports to ISBE and posting reports on LEA websites in languages accessible to students/families in the district.
  
4. **Require transparency and accountability at the state level on planned and reported uses of federal funds.** We urge ISBE and the Governor's office to provide maximum transparency on planned uses of the new federal funds by publicly posting on their website – including in languages accessible to students/families in the state – the **State application** to the federal government, the **State's plan** for the funds, and a **State report** on how funds were used.

### **B. Focus Spending on Equity for Marginalized Students**

1. **Address short-term equity gaps now.** We ask the state to ensure that districts have the resources they need to provide the tools to access education remotely, thereby improving equitable access to services. While some districts already provided students with individual devices, other districts don't have the funding to provide computers and internet access to all of their students in need. We suggest that the state use the Evidence-Based Funding Formula as one method of assessing which districts are likely to need additional resources. In addition to the digital divide, short-term equity gaps include the need to:
  - a. **Provide additional supports for students with disabilities,** rather than reducing current guidelines and rules for providing services. Many of our most vulnerable students, including those who require specialized day and residential placements, are receiving inadequate supports during this crisis. While current best practices allows providers to use technology such as videoconferencing and telephone to provide therapies such as social work, occupational therapy, speech therapy, and even physical therapy, many students who rely on these services are receiving very little or no services at all.
  - b. **Ensure language access.** Remote learning materials, instruction, and communications with teachers and staff all need to be accessible in multiple languages for English-learner students and families.

- c. **Provide students additional supports if their parents or caregivers are not able to meet their children's educational needs while balancing other significant family concerns.** For example, districts should be responsible for providing quiet learning spaces for vulnerable children, especially for homeless students and those in the foster care system.
  - d. **Provide additional support for continued identification of students experiencing homelessness** during periods of school closure so students can access necessary services, including devices and internet access for remote learning.
  - e. **Provide increased training and support for educators** on how to effectively utilize remote learning and parent engagement tactics to reach marginalized communities.
  - f. **Address mental health needs**, ensuring students and families are able to remain in communication with social workers, therapists, counselors, and teachers. This includes enabling school social workers and psychologists to communicate with students virtually in a manner that complies with student privacy and confidentiality protections.
2. **Address longer-term needs for school investments to narrow equity gaps.** Plan for and allocate funding for longer-term investments in schools, particularly addressing equity gaps, once students return to in-person instruction. This will require that the state:
- a. **Maintain (and not cut) state funding** for districts, using federal dollars to supplement rather than supplant state funding.
  - b. **Invest in equity and accountability in compensatory education.** The state should support and incentivize districts to provide compensatory education to vulnerable students, including funding for trainings for parents, for fronting the costs of compensatory education, and for transportation to services.
  - c. **Invest in mental health, physical health, and trauma-informed support** for all students, particularly the most vulnerable.
3. **Provide guidance and leadership to districts, both in the short and long term, by:**
- a. Providing **guidance** on effective strategies for reducing education inequities for marginalized students during the COVID-19 school closure, over the summer and once schools re-open;
  - b. **Gathering and sharing informational resources** on effective strategies for reducing education inequities for marginalized students in the COVID-19 school closure, over the summer and once schools re-open. This includes supporting districts in methods of innovation to meet student needs, including, but not limited to best practices in engaging students virtually and creating a forum for schools and districts to share lessons and strategies they have found effective; and
  - c. **Providing training, guidance and support for district and school leadership and for educators** on effective strategies for assessing academic and social-emotional needs and reducing education inequities for marginalized students in the COVID-19 school closure, over the summer and once schools re-open.

We are ready to work with you to see that the needs of our most marginalized children are addressed during this extraordinary time. Please let us know the best way to set up a meeting to discuss this with you in the near future.

Sincerely,

Asian Americans Advancing Justice

Assata's Daughters

Blocks Together Chicago

Brighton Park Neighborhood Council\*

Chicago Coalition for the Homeless

Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights\*

Chicago Teachers Union

Chicago United for Equity\*

Civitas ChildLaw Center, Loyola University of Chicago

Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI)

Educators for Excellence

Enlace

Equip for Equality

Grassroots Collaborative

HANA Center

Illinois Families for Public Schools

Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy, University of Illinois at Chicago

Moran Center for Youth Advocacy

Northside Action 4 Justice

Parents 4 Teachers

Pilsen Alliance

POWER PAC IL

Raise Your Hand for Illinois Public Education\*

Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP)

Stephanie Farmer, Associate Professor Sociology, Roosevelt University

Teamwork Englewood

\* Steering Committee, Partnership for Equity & Education Rights (PEER) Illinois Coalition