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To: House Education Committee

From: Deborah Gordon Klehr, Executive Director, Education Law Center-PA

Date: 8/3/2020

Re: Responsible School Re-opening

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input as you deliberate on the crucial and time-sensitive topic of reopening schools. The Education Law Center is a nonprofit legal advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all children in Pennsylvania have access to quality public education. We do our work focused on underserved student populations, including children of color, children living in poverty, children with disabilities, English learners, children experiencing homelessness, children in the foster care or juvenile justice systems, LGBTQ youth, and students at the intersection of these identities.

Pennsylvania woefully underfunds public education and distributes state funds inequitably. The result is that many districts do not have access to resources to meet the educational needs of their students. While the negative repercussions for students of attending underfunded school districts long predate COVID-19, this pandemic has exacerbated the inequities and challenges, particularly in Black and Brown communities. While many wealthy school districts have been able to rapidly deploy plans for remote learning and have ready access to technology to ensure that remote learning can happen in district households, many students in low-wealth districts are facing a complete disruption to their education. This stands to have an immense, long-term impact on the health and well-being of students, illustrates the repercussions of resource gaps among school districts based on funding availability, and shows how critical fair funding is to remedy these inequities. We have seen, in school districts attended primarily by students of color and low-wealth families, how quickly tens of thousands of students can be left without a safe, viable plan to continue their education in light of a crisis because a school district lacks the resources to rapidly adjust and meet the new realities of a crisis. We have also seen that deferred facility maintenance in underfunded districts makes those schools ill-equipped to safely reopen in-person.

Thus, the short and long-term goals of this committee must be to address fair funding in the Commonwealth, driving additional dollars to the most underfunded districts. And with schools about to start the new school year, we see a critical need for the state to provide additional guidance to districts. We have previously provided [input](#) to the Pennsylvania Department of Education to request guidance from the state to districts about how to ensure that historically underserved children receive education even while schools were physically closed. As the new school-year approaches, and given the widespread plans for hybrid or remote learning, it is imperative that all districts consider equity in every aspect of their reopening plans and the impact of their decisions on underserved students and families.

Attached please find some of these considerations. We urge members of this Committee to advocate in your home districts and for larger systemic reforms to ensure that all children have access to quality public education.

Ensuring that all of Pennsylvania's children have equal access to a quality public education.

Online and Hybrid Learning: An Equity Checklist for Schools

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many of the longstanding inequities in our educational system. Black and Brown students, students living in poverty, and other historically underserved groups have been disproportionately harmed by the shift to online learning. To ensure that these students are not left behind, schools must focus on equity and respond flexibly to the individual needs of diverse student populations. Schools will need support for this work from every level of government. This checklist is a guide to ensure that schools providing online instruction are equitably serving students in the new school year.

Access to remote learning and technology

- Is the school ensuring that all students have full-day access to a computer and reliable internet service?
- Does the school deliver resources to the homes of students lacking computer/internet access or facing other barriers to virtual learning?
- Does the school offer workspace to students who do not have a safe place to learn at home, or has it identified community organizations that offer safe workspaces?
- Does the school offer multilingual technical assistance to students and caregivers?

Quality of remote instruction

- Does the school provide professional development for teachers in areas that help students engage in online learning, including social-emotional learning, cultural competency, and anti-racism?
- Does the school provide appropriate daily ESOL and also modify instruction for English learners?
- Do teachers provide regular, constructive feedback to students on a one-to-one basis?
- Does the school offer a balance of synchronous and asynchronous learning, ensuring that students interact with teachers on a frequent basis?
- Are students with disabilities receiving mandated services and supports through individualized IEPs and COVID compensatory services (CCS) to make up for deficits from last year?

Home support

- Does the school provide support to caregivers who are supervising at-home learning?
- Does the school identify and provide extra support to students who lack home instructional supervision or digital access?
- Are translators and other professionals accessible to families who have questions or need assistance?
- Are students being given the same level of support from specialists (e.g., social workers, therapists, BCAs, wraparounds, 1:1, tutors) as they were when schools were physically open?
- Does the school take a supportive, non-punitive approach toward students who face barriers to remote learning, adjusting its grading and attendance policies to support these students?
- Does the school offer trauma-informed and/or healing-centered engagement practices?

Degree of engagement

- Does the school provide updates and instructional materials in a language and format accessible to parents?
- Does the school solicit input and feedback from parents on its plans and programs?
- Is the school in regular contact with caregivers who cannot access digital communications?
- Does the school have a plan for identifying and addressing social-emotional barriers to online learning (e.g., family illness/loss, job loss, fear of contracting the virus, isolation, anxiety)?
- Does the school offer mental-health services to students who face setbacks during the pandemic?

-August 2020