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Philadelphia Town Hall on Building a School Recovery Plan (March 30,2021)

My name is Sophia Tan, and I am an attorney with the Education Law Center. Though federal aid from the American Rescue Plan to address Covid-related learning loss is urgently needed and helpful, it cannot resolve the structural problems of long-term inadequate and inequitable state funding – so we urge the City and District leaders to prioritize these resources for students who have experienced the most disruptions to their education. In particular, black and brown students living in poverty, including members of linguistically and culturally diverse communities that I represent, are experiencing significant disruptions from the pandemic that exacerbate inequities caused by years of under-investment. These communities are further harmed by recent racist and xenophobic violence.

Across the district, the majority of English learners have not been able to meaningfully access their education since school buildings closed a year ago. For the 16,500 English learners attending District schools, funding for expanded language access is critical to ensure students can engage with instruction in English and parents can be involved in their child’s education. Adequately funding additional Bilingual Counseling Assistants (BCAs) is also crucial because all efforts to remediate learning loss and disengagement rely heavily on BCAs, who act as cultural brokers, interpreters, and can monitor and support students in their language groups. Additionally, the district - which has families speaking 100+ home languages - must invest in a communication platform that enables teachers and caregivers to exchange timely and accurately translated messages.

The District should also prioritize culturally affirming training for staff to create welcoming environments for students who bring diverse strengths and experiences, but who are often targeted for bullying or harassment. It is equally important to provide mental health supports and resources that reflect the diversity of our students and are accessible. Building our schools’ capacity to serve these students will be critical to connect with students and families, especially in light of ongoing racist and xenophobic, anti-immigrant violence.

We also support the district’s commitment of resources to ensure students have safe and modernized facilities in which to learn every day and programming to address learning losses, which should include academic and English language instruction for English learners.

The call to action to robustly and equitably fund services for English learners and train our educators to support our diverse students is not new or unique to this moment - it reflects systemic under-investment to support our linguistically and culturally diverse communities. We must take advantage of this funding opportunity by investing now to ensure our immigrant, refugee, and asylee students do not fall even further behind.