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United States Senate

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July 27, 2020

The Honorable Peter T. Gaynor
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street SW
Washington, DC 20472

Dear Administrator Gaynor:

I write today to request Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) support for our communities and school systems as they plan to reopen this fall. Schools across the country face a number of tough decisions, and added costs, as they prepare to provide students with a safe, quality education. These efforts are made more challenging by the fact that school districts, alongside local and state budgets, face harsh cuts due to a lack of tax revenue on top of extra emergency management expenses. In light of these facts, FEMA must provide support under the emergency declarations for the COVID-19 pandemic to support our schools in this critical time.

Schools across the country currently face an unsustainable situation – drastic increases in costs to implement protective measures against COVID-19, paired with expected reductions in financial support from state and local governments. Experts predict that state budget shortfalls will total about \$555 billion over the next two years.¹ This will inevitably lead to cuts that will directly impact school budgets. Such cuts will make funding issues worse for schools preparing to handle increased costs due to the pandemic, such as acquiring personal protective equipment (PPE), adding staff to implement smaller classes, and funding transportation to spread students out on bus rides. It will cost the average school district an estimated \$1.8 million to implement social distancing measures, further straining the budgets of many schools.² Federal aid will be essential to enabling the implementation of these necessary precautions.

President Trump's March 13, 2020 nationwide emergency declaration under the Stafford Act, and subsequent Major Disaster Declarations, enable FEMA to provide assistance to state, tribal, territorial, and local governments for "emergency protective measures" for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. Eligible activities for reimbursement include management, control and reduction of

¹ *States Continue to Face Large Shortfalls Due to COVID-19 Effects*, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (July 7, 2020) (<https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/states-continue-to-face-large-shortfalls-due-to-covid-19-effects>).

² *Budgets put limits on social distancing options for schools*, AP News (June 23, 2020) (<https://apnews.com/6d5267d213c2ab6438cdca742df1817>).

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immediate threats to public health and safety, such as trainings specific to the event and disinfections of eligible public facilities; emergency medical care and medical sheltering; and the purchase and distribution of consumable supplies such as PPE.³

Under this national emergency, FEMA is well-positioned to support schools and students. To ensure that schools are able to fully access the power and resources of the federal government to adapt to these extraordinary circumstances, FEMA must take two steps immediately. First, FEMA should use all relevant authorities within the Stafford Act to allow schools nationwide to access funds from the Disaster Relief Fund for eligible expenditures, such as conducting trainings for public safety, adapting classrooms to meet public health standards, and acquiring PPE for students and staff. This would help schools manage some of the essential costs that accompany any reopening plan.

Second, FEMA must work with the Departments of Education and Treasury to issue clear guidance on what school expenses are allowable for reimbursement. Schools need to know which expenditures will or will not be reimbursed by FEMA, so there is no duplication of benefits from other COVID-19 supplemental funding sources that could be the cause for denials of reimbursement at a later date. The federal government needs to proactively support schools from the start, to minimize confusion and facilitate effective planning for cost reimbursements. Please provide an update within two weeks on your progress in implementing these steps.

We are all in agreement that our students deserve to have access to a safe, quality education this fall, even in the midst of a global pandemic. FEMA has the opportunity and the duty to play a role in supporting our nation's schools in this effort. I urge you to undertake the suggestions I have outlined, and look forward to working with you to support our nation's schools.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gary C. Peters". The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a horizontal line.

Gary C. Peters
Ranking Member
Senate Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs Committee

³ Federal Emergency Management Agency: *Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic: Eligible Emergency Protective Measures* (March 19, 2020).