April 15, 2020

Representative Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Senator Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Representative Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Senator Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Legislators:

As superintendent of the Buffalo Public Schools (BPS), and member of the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS), the nation’s primary coalition of large urban public-school districts, I write to urge you in the strongest possible terms to approve new funding for local school systems in the next coronavirus supplemental appropriations bill. The BPS and CGCS support an additional federal allocation of $175 billion in Educational Stabilization Funds distributed to the local level through the Title I formula. We also urge Congress to provide an additional $13 billion for IDEA, $12 billion in additional Title I program funding, $2.0 billion for E-Rate, and emergency infrastructure funds that include public schools.

The down payment you made in our public education system by allocating some $13.5 billion in the CARES Act for our schools was a critical lifeline for public education in this country. But we now urge you to provide a second, substantially larger installment for public school systems as you work on the fourth supplemental appropriations bill.

The initial allocation will help offset the unexpected costs we are incurring in providing meal services to our students and reestablishing instruction. Our public schools, in major cities and elsewhere, have stepped up to the challenge on very short order to revamp our operations and instructional systems to help meet the unexpected health threats that the nation now confronts. In the first chaotic days of the crisis, with no promise of any aid, our schools organized to provide nutritious meals, and health and wellness services to millions of our students, set up drop-off points, arranged home deliveries, and worked to meet a wide array of needs for our children and families. This work continues today, even as our staff and volunteers have contracted COVID-19. Your funding assistance will help sustain these vital efforts.

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On the teaching and learning side, our schools are providing (and refreshing) grade appropriate instructional packets and making a rapid transformation from school-based to home-based learning. Lessons have been prepared and sent home with meals. Thousands of electronic devices are being purchased and distributed. Donated hot spots are being distributed based on need. Virtual instruction is being provided in many places alongside traditional although remote instruction, and teachers are being trained in how to teach from a distance. To be sure, school districts have a way to go before these instructional changes and online delivery systems are as effective for all students as they need to be. However, the compassion, dedication, energy, and urgency that have gone into these efforts have been nothing short of extraordinary.

Meanwhile, dark clouds are forming on the educational horizon that will spell further disaster if Congress does not effectively intervene. Significant revenue shortfalls are looming for Buffalo and local school districts across the country that will exacerbate the disruption students have already faced. School district revenues from local sources are expected to drop precipitously. This revenue decline will come on top of revenue losses already emerging from state aid sources that have been widely reported. Many big city school districts are projecting double digit percent cuts in overall revenues heading into next school year. For Buffalo, which has had annually balanced budgets since recovering from the 2008-09 recession, projected state and local revenue losses contribute to a deficit of $90 million, or 9% of our budget, for the 2020-21 school year.

We are greatly alarmed by these projections because we have seen them before. Similar losses occurred during the 2008-09 recession. At that time, Congress stepped up with nearly $100 billion in education funding through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). While not compensating for all losses at the time, ARRA provided an essential infusion of funds that allowed local school systems to rebuild their instructional and operational capacity. As local revenues declined further, Congress then approved an additional $10 billion in 2010 for an Education Jobs Fund to help school districts retain existing employees, recall former employees, and hire new ones.

The situation now, however, is far more severe and promises to cause much more substantial damage. Unlike in 2008 and 2009, schools nationwide had to close in mid-March and will likely stay shuttered through the balance of the school year. As aggressive as schools have been in providing instruction at a distance, districts continue to need resources to provide electronic learning devices and internet connections to every child. The amount of time devoted each day to lessons is less now than what would occur in a regular classroom. Students’ ability to interact with their teachers remains limited. Some teachers will have had little more than a crash course on how to conduct online learning. And, the research on the efficacy of virtual learning is not particularly strong. The truth is that there is simply no substitute for students being with effective teachers all day.

The result, coming out of this school year, will likely be substantial unfinished learning for many students. On top of the predictable summer learning loss, vast numbers of students will enter the next school year substantially behind academically—at precisely the time when budget cuts due to substantial local and state revenue shortfalls will be occurring.

These budget cuts will mean staff will be laid off, class sizes will balloon, and remaining teaching staff will likely be redeployed into classes and subjects that they may not be qualified to teach—all at a time when they will be asked to address unprecedented unfinished learning from the previous school year. An estimated 20 percent loss in combined state and local revenues would likely result in some 275,000 teachers being laid off in big city public school systems alone.

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The ramifications are not only profound for the students involved, but for the nation. Without significant financial support from Congress this educational catastrophe could weaken the country’s economic foundation for years to come.

In fact, multiple economic studies have shown that there is a direct correlation between a country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth and its investments in elementary and secondary education. Research published by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), for example, concluded that, “For 15 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, 38 percent of the variance in (economic) growth-rate changes can be explained by test score changes.” Another NBER study found that, “Increasing (educational) spending by 10 percent for all school-age years increased wages by 7.25 percent each year.” And another study published in the American Economic Journal concluded that roughly 20 to 30 percent of variation in state GDP per capita was attributable to variations in knowledge capital.

In sum, public education is one of the largest employers in the nation, dwarfing many private sector companies. Investing in education, therefore, is one of the best investments our nation can make, not only for the success of its citizens but for its overall long-term viability. Sustaining and increasing educational spending now not only saves jobs in the short-run; it ensures economic strength and stability in the long-run.

With additional federal funds, America’s public schools will be able to invest heavily in summer school, expand the school week after reopening in the fall, retain and stabilize a quality teaching force, continue to address the needs of our most vulnerable students, stabilize our school systems, and have a fighting chance at salvaging the futures of millions of young people. Your investment in education will help save the country long-term. We hope and trust you recognize the importance of your investment in the nation’s public schools and will work together to ensure that the country remains strong in the aftermath of this historic crisis. Thank you in advance for your collaborative response to this crucial matter.

Sincerely,

Dr. Kriner Cash
Superintendent

cc: Hon. Majority Leader Crystal D. Peoples-Stokes, 141st Assembly District
Hon. Mayor Byron W. Brown, City of Buffalo
Hon. Senate Education Chair Shelley B. Mayer, 37th Senate District
Hon. Senator Timothy M. Kennedy, 63rd Senate District
Hon. Senator Christopher L. Jacobs, 60th Senate District
Hon. Assemblyman Robin Schimminger, 140th Assembly District
Hon. Assemblyman Patrick Burke, 142nd Assembly District
Hon. Assemblyman Sean M. Ryan, 149th Assembly District
Hon. Congressman Brian Higgins, 26th Congressional District
Hon. United States Senator Kirsten Gillibrand
Board of Education
Cabinet

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