

**Testimony of Marc H. Morial
President and CEO, National Urban League**

**Committee on Education and Labor, Subcommittee on Early Childhood Elementary and
Secondary Education**

**Lessons Learned: Charting the Path to Educational Equity Post-COVID-19
March 25, 2021**

Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Owens, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for your invitation to participate in this hearing. My name is Marc Morial, and I am the President and CEO of the National Urban League, an organization with a 111-year history of advocating for economic empowerment, equality, and social justice for African Americans and other historically underserved groups. With 90 affiliates serving 300 communities across 36 states and the District of Columbia, the Urban League spearheads the development of social programs and authoritative public policy research, and advocates for policies and services that close the equality gap. At the community level, the National Urban League and its affiliates provide direct services that improve the lives of more than two million people annually.

I appreciate the opportunity to share the perspective of our Urban League Movement on the path to educational equity post-COVID-19. Unfortunately, it is our Black and Brown children who have faced a disproportionate burden both educationally and personally as a result of this pandemic. Black people are more likely to contract, be hospitalized, and die from COVID-19. Black workers are more likely to be in fields with the most layoffs due to the pandemic. Black children are more likely than their White counterparts to lack the internet access and the devices necessary to receive adequate remote instruction, a term we call “the homework gap,” which affects 1 in 3 Black, Latino, and American Indian Alaska Native students.¹ Each of these are aspects of inequity that negatively impact the ability of students to thrive and too many of these and others pre-dated the pandemic, so they are not easily dismissed as being only of this particular moment.

Each of these inequities make it disproportionately difficult for students of color to access a high-quality education this school year, but the systematic denial of educational opportunities to African Americans and other vulnerable students has long subjected many students to an inferior education from the start. Inequities in K-12 education stem from 400 years of systemic racism and federally-sanctioned discriminatory policies that have denied Black, Latino, and other students of color the right to a free and public education. Slavery, Jim Crow laws, language discrimination, and the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court ruling of 1896 declaring separate but equal public schools legal created a second-class system of education for children of color in America. Before *Brown v. the Board of Education* in 1954, Black 4th grade students were using White 2nd grade textbooks.

¹ <https://nul.org/news/new-analysis-shows-students-color-more-likely-be-cut-online-learning>

Even after the Supreme Court outlawed de jure school segregation with their ruling in that case, many states and localities retaliated, leaving generations of students in subpar schools. A 2016 study by the Government Accountability Office found that segregation in schools is worse than any time since the 1960s.² According to the report, high-poverty schools where 75-100 percent of the students were low-income and Black or Latino increased from 9 percent in 2000-2001 to 16 percent in 2013-2014. The report also found that these schools had fewer resources and less access to math, science, and college preparatory courses and disproportionately suspended, expelled, or held back students.³ Despite the promise of Brown and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Black and Brown children are still learning in segregated schools and facing discrimination. These historic injustices and their existing antecedents continue to negatively impact the education that students experience in our current school system and the outcomes that schools produce.

We need to be intentional about rooting out the systemic racism and racial inequities in our public education system that has disadvantaged generations of Black students, Latino students, and other students of color. Systemic racism in our nation's schools has robbed resources and opportunities for Black, Latino, and other children of color necessary to succeed. For example, students of color are:

- more likely to attend high poverty schools than their White peers;⁴
- less likely to have access to high rigor courses like AP, IB, and STEM;⁵
- less likely to have access to high-quality teachers;⁶
- less likely to have access to high speed internet and technological devices;⁷
- less likely to have social and emotional learning supports and positive behavioral interventions;⁸
- and more likely to have police and/or school resource officers than guidance counselors.⁹

This historical context, coupled with the ways by which too many students of color have borne the brunt of the pandemic, we have seen estimates that Black students have lost an average of 10 months of instruction and Latino students have lost an average of 9 months of instruction since the pandemic began and interrupted in-person teaching and learning, compared to an average of 6 months of lost instruction for White students.¹⁰ Not only did kids lose access to

² <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-16-345>

³ <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-18-258>

⁴ <https://www.epi.org/publication/schools-are-still-segregated-and-black-children-are-paying-a-price/>

⁵ <https://www.jbhe.com/2019/08/the-racial-gap-in-participation-in-high-school-ap-ib-and-dual-enrollment-programs/>

⁶ <https://www.epi.org/publication/the-teacher-shortage-is-real-large-and-growing-and-worse-than-we-thought-the-first-report-in-the-perfect-storm-in-the-teacher-labor-market-series/>

⁷ <https://nul.org/news/new-analysis-shows-students-color-more-likely-be-cut-online-learning>

⁸ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5142755/>

⁹ <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/school-policing-racially-discriminatory/?agreed=1>

¹⁰ <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Industries/Public%20and%20Social%20Sector/Our%20Insights/COVID-19%20and%20student%20learning%20in%20the%20United%20States%20The%20hurt%20could%20last%20a%20lifetime/COVID-19-and-student-learning-in-the-United-States-FINAL.pdf>

their classrooms, teachers, and classmates overnight, but they lost meaningful access to school meals, school counselors and social workers, and other wrap around services and supports that often provided them with much-needed stability.

As has always been the case in moments of crisis, our Urban League affiliates stepped up to offer opportunity and to fill gaps where they could. Local Urban Leagues have been instrumental in distributing meals to students in their communities who needed them. To address the homework gap, Urban Leagues across the country have led the charge to connect their families – in fact, the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle began handing out devices to the youth in their programs literally within a day of schools closing. Urban League programming has helped families affected by layoffs find new work. Our affiliates have worked hard to help those in danger of foreclosure and eviction to address housing instability. Lastly, Urban League affiliates have partnered locally with schools, cities, and communities to host COVID-19 testing sites and COVID vaccine sites.

We thank the President and members of the House and Senate for the American Rescue Plan, which, among many needed supports, includes the largest federal investment in education in our nation's history. The unprecedented \$200 billion dollars of combined aid from coronavirus relief packages passed so far is much needed, and must be used to work to close persistent and exacerbated equity gaps in our education system. Resources are needed to focus on accelerating learning, not on an overly restrictive remedial approach; to extend learning and development by truly engaging community partners before and after school; to use summer differently both this summer and next to broaden and deepen opportunity; to make sure all students have reliable computer devices and internet access; and to support the whole child with resources like mental health counselors and trauma-informed teachers, and approaches that recognize that student learning and development has continued over the past year even without daily instruction. Given what we have faced over the past 12 months, how could it be otherwise?

The current federal education law, the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*, required every state in the union to put together a specific plan as to how they would integrate equity into the education of children. In 2019, the National Urban League published a review of ESSA state plans in the 36 states and District of Columbia with local Urban Leagues. In the report, we graded states on 12 key equity indicators and found that nearly a quarter of state plans (8 states) missed significant opportunities to advance equity in their plans. 20 state plans were only "sufficient" in advancing equity. Ultimately, states have implemented their plans with varying levels of fidelity and impact. And this all happened before the novel coronavirus severely impacted how teachers could teach and how students could learn.

Last school year, the federal government waived the part of ESSA that requires annual statewide assessments -- a necessary move at that point. But since then, states had to create and implement plans for how to deliver instruction and make sure students have access to the supports they are entitled to in order to learn. This year, the Department of Education has decided not to waive the testing requirement across the board again, which we support.

Assessment data is one tool in the toolbox to advocate for and advance equity in education. The data from statewide assessments and other sources will inform states, districts, and schools on how best to use the necessary influx of federal COVID-19 relief dollars that they are receiving. In addition, each state and local district was responsible for designing and implementing a plan for delivering an equitable and excellence education to all students. Assessments and other indicators of student success will allow us to see what has worked over the past year, and what hasn't. Where did the nation fall short and what innovations should we carry forward? While the Department's decision to allow time-limited flexibility on the accountability provisions in ESSA will ensure that the data is used only to inform state and local education leaders to make equitable decisions, data from statewide assessments will help inform parents, caregivers, and community stakeholders how their children are performing and how systems are supporting their learning and development. National PTA published a statement that shows that 52% of parents support end-of-year assessments to know if their children are learning and 60% are worried that their child is behind and want information on where their child is academically.¹¹

Ultimately, we have an opportunity to address inequity in K-12 education like never before, with an investment by the federal government equal to 8 years of annual Title I funds. Without question, we also need to find the students who schools and districts have lost contact with since March 2020. Whether you believe that this is less than 10% of students or closer to 30% of students as has been reported, I think we can all agree that a single student disconnected from their education and from critical supports is one student too many. This was true before the pandemic and remains true today.

As we look at how the COVID-19 pandemic has widened opportunity gaps, we also need to look at how to recover, how to close resource gaps, how to introduce additional innovation and supports to students, and how to provide our Black and Brown children with a high-quality education.

For the Urban League Movement, a high-quality or excellent education includes equitable access to mental health supports including school counselors, social workers, and strategies that allow educators to recognize the learning and development that did take place over the past year, to build the wellness assets and address mental health needs of adults and students alike during and after a very traumatic year and more. Our education vision also includes ensuring students are learning in safe and healthy schools and getting devices and internet connections into the hands of all students and families who are without it in order to close the homework gap. A high-quality education includes extended learning opportunities both after school and over the summer so students can deepen their intellectual, social, and emotional learning. An excellent education includes expanding the provision of rigorous coursework for students of color and low-income students, who have never had equal access to AP, IB, and STEM classes. It includes access to diverse and qualified teachers and school leaders, whose pedagogy and leadership is culturally-relevant and resonant. And the education that we envision

¹¹ <https://www.pta.org/home/About-National-Parent-Teacher-Association/PTA-Newsroom/news-list/news-detail-page/2021/02/22/national-survey-finds-majority-of-parents-support-end-of-year-state-assessments-with-modifications-and-resources>

and for which we advocate includes restorative practices, social-emotional learning, and positive behavioral approaches that don't rely on exclusionary discipline and instead keep Black, Latino, and Native students deeply connected to educators and to rich learning opportunities. In our minds, an excellent education begins by understanding that all learning is social and emotional and deeply reliant on positive relationships, is supportive of development and growth, and grounded in principles of equity. Lastly, and most important, the Urban League envisions our nation fulfilling the promise of *Brown* to combat persistent segregation and discrimination in K12 education, and robust enforcement of civil rights laws.

Thank you for your focus on this issue. I look forward to answering any questions members of the subcommittee have.