



Opening Statement

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & LABOR

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The Hon. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott • Chairman

Opening Statement of Chairman Robert C. "Bobby" Scott (VA-03)

House Committee on Education and Labor Full Committee Hearing

Budget Cuts and Lost Learning: Assessing the Impact of COVID-19 on Public Education

WebEx

Monday, June 15, 2020 | 12:00pm

Before I deliver opening remarks, let me first acknowledge the recent protests against police misconduct and in favor of racial equity and justice across the nation and the world. The times are demanding that we address this country's centuries-old challenge. With today's hearing, we can be prepared to answer the calls for racial equity and justice in education.

I want to note that this hearing marks the Committee's first fully remote hearing, per House Resolution 965 and its accompanying regulations.

Today, we will examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically impacted state and local government revenue and how projected state and local government shortfalls will further exacerbate educational inequities rooted around the country.

Nationwide school closures due to COVID-19 have had a profound effect on all students, especially in what has been called the summer slide; only, this year, the summer started a few months earlier than usual.

Our country's history of educational inequity tells us which students lose the most during these school closures. Today, the pandemic is exposing and worsening achievement gaps for students of color, students with disabilities, English language learners, and students from low-income backgrounds.

Vulnerable students are less likely to attend schools that have the resources to rapidly establish high-quality distance learning programs. They are also less likely to have the basic technology, such as personal devices and high-speed internet, and the support at home needed to access virtual learning.

Data suggest that only 60 percent of low-income students are regularly logging into online instruction compared to 90 percent of high-income students. Only 60 to 70 percent of students in schools serving predominantly Black and Latino students are regularly logging in.

It's important to note that states and school districts entered this recession with already crumbling infrastructure; a teacher shortage; 77,000 fewer school workers; and about 2 million more public school students compared to pre-recession levels.

These setbacks have not been distributed equally. Our continued reliance on local property taxes to finance public education has ensured that public schools with the highest need are forced to do more with less.

Unfortunately, the achievement gaps exacerbated by COVID-19 could widen even further.

This morning, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, or CBPP, revealed that states will face a \$615 billion revenue shortfall over the next three years due to the pandemic.

States are required to balance their budgets every year, and public education is usually one of their largest expenditures, accounting for 40% of many states' budgets, on average.

Unless the federal government provides immediate relief, it won't be a matter of whether education funding will be cut, but how deep the cuts will be. While wealthier districts will fall back on property taxes, low-income public schools will rely heavily on state funding. These districts—which are already disproportionately impacted by COVID-19—will suffer severe cuts in education and other areas at a time when they can least afford it.

We have already started to see the consequences of these shortfalls. Nearly 759,000 public school employees have lost their jobs since March. In Colorado, the state legislature just passed a budget that cuts \$1 billion from its schools for next year.

In Virginia, we ended our regular General Assembly session just as the pandemic was starting and then reconvened a few weeks later for the normal veto session where we consider the governor's vetoes and amendments. Revenues had been reforecast during that period of time and we learned a new word: unallocated. That is what happened to the two-percent teacher raise; that is what happened to the additional counselors in schools; that is what happened to money going into low-income school districts. Because of the revised revenue estimates, those expenditures were unallocated.

Unless they get assistance from the federal government, those expenditures will totally evaporate.

The Department of Education has received \$31 billion to help provide emergency education funding, which happened in the *CARES Act*.

Regrettably, the Education Department has mishandled those funds and prevented states and school districts from quickly accessing these funds.

Specifically, the Department issued *equitable service* guidance, which has drawn bipartisan criticism and generated widespread confusion by directing schools to divert relief funding away from low-income students in public schools to support wealthier students in private schools.

The Department also announced its intention to use a vast majority of the \$300 million in discretionary funds it received in the *CARES Act*—which were intended to support public schools in their efforts to respond to the virus—to fund a grant program that is virtually indistinguishable from private school vouchers.

Even if the Department had used *CARES Act* funds in accordance with the law, the initial emergency relief package would be insufficient to confront the scale of the problem.

Researchers project that reopening schools could cost the average school district about \$2 million, with large urban school districts obviously facing far higher costs. The American Federation of Teachers projects that schools nationwide will need as much as \$116 billion to safely reopen campuses.

Recent history foreshadows the consequences our education system will face if we fail to act. In response to the Great Recession in 2008, Congress provided approximately \$110 billion in funding for education—more than three times the funding we've secured in response to the pandemic so far.

While helpful, research shows that even that funding was insufficient and did not focus enough on school districts with the highest need. Consequentially, schools across the country experienced massive budget cuts; 300,000

school employees lost their jobs; and, unsurprisingly, children in the poorest communities bore the brunt of these cuts.

This lesson from our past makes clear that school districts urgently need more relief.

To that end, the House passed the *Heroes Act* last month. This legislative relief package dedicates nearly \$1 trillion to help states and localities address their budget shortfalls and avert cuts in education.

Additionally, it provides nearly \$60 billion in direct K-12 emergency funding that schools can use to:

- Cover the cost of cleaning supplies and other expenses required to reopen;
- Purchase educational technology, like laptops and hotspots;
- Sustain special education for students with disabilities;
- Provide training and professional development for teachers; and,
- Support school counselors, who are helping students tackle the trauma of this pandemic.

This is a pivotal and perilous moment in our fight for equity in education. The pandemic has already translated to a major setback for students across the country.

But – while all of us want to reopen schools as quickly as possible – we cannot put the safety of students, teachers, and communities at risk by reopening schools without providing them the resources they need.

If we fail to give states, local governments, and school districts these resources, the impact of this unprecedented challenge on students will be felt long after it is over.

I thank our witnesses for being here today, and yield to the Ranking Member, Dr. Foxx, for the purpose of an opening statement.