



NEW JERSEY SENATE

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PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE
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Dear Governor Murphy and Commissioner Repollet,

It has been six weeks since the state of emergency was declared due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and five weeks since schools moved to remote learning. I commend and support your decision to close our schools and focus on the public safety and health of our students and teachers. Now that these immediate decisions were made, it is critical to create strategies to address the immediate needs of our schools and students, begin developing learning loss initiatives, and plan for the next academic year.

While we respect the fact that the Department of Education has given school districts flexibility to meet the needs of its students, now is the time for the Department to give greater guidance that sets a clear benchmark for what schools should be providing. This is not meant to stifle districts; this is meant to create a uniform approach where they can go above and beyond.

In order to assist the states in tackling the challenges we face, the federal government has passed three COVID-19 relief packages, including the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The CARES Act included a number of funding allocations that would benefit New Jersey schools. Much of the funding will flow directly to school districts based on Title I enrollment; however, the State must have a plan in place for the funding that will go directly to the Department of Education to be spent at their discretion.

The total amounts of each grant to New Jersey have been reported as follows: 1) the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund (Higher Education and K-12) at \$68.9 million; 2) Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund at \$310 million which will be split between Local Education Agencies who will receive \$279 million and Department of Education will receive \$29.5 million plus \$1.5 million for administrative costs; and 3) discretionary grants New Jersey can apply for totaling \$301 million.

In order to distribute grants in the most effective way, we need an overall picture of where the need is and what resources are available to be deployed. It is my hope that the Department of Education has surveyed all districts to understand their full needs at this time. This statewide survey should help determine immediate and longer-term needs and allow a full cost analysis. We also must work collectively to determine how best to prioritize our resources.

As Chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee, I am committed to assisting you in whatever way possible.

In order to best do this, it would be helpful to have information on the following.

1. Please share the surveys on the digital divide in New Jersey, including the following data points:
 - The number of students who do not have access to a computer or device;
 - The districts that are providing their students with devices and whether they are meeting the full needs of their enrolled population;
 - The number of students without reliable broadband access;
2. Please respond how the Department is coordinating with school districts to ensure they are progressing towards the goal of one-to-one connectivity to technology and broadband? How often is the Department reaching out to districts to determine their progress?
3. Please share the total amounts districts have spent to connect their students to technology, and what gaps, if any, the state needs to help meet so all students have both a device and broadband access. Additionally, include the sources of funding that are available for this and the plan for using federal funds to connect students.
4. Is the Department requesting COVID-19 spending plans from all districts? Does this include both local, state, and federal aid, and do these plans include needs that the districts do not have funding to implement?
5. Please advise what programs the Department will prioritize as it is making grants for districts.
6. With the many waivers included in the CARES Act, please advise which current grant programs the NJDOE oversees will be repurposed to meet the most pressing needs.
7. Please advise how the following priorities will be elevated: summer enrichment programs, compensatory special education services, health and safety measures, professional development for teachers, social and emotional learning services, remediation programs for the next school year, or other remote learning tools.
8. As grant funds are for both elementary and secondary education costs, as well as higher education costs, please advise how the administration will split the federal funding between DOE and OSHE, and whether this will allow the Department of Education to cover all costs school districts are expected to have.
9. Have you begun to discuss what plans need to be in place if social distancing requirements continue into the future? What policies would you be recommending or requiring school districts to implement to ensure the safety and health of students and staff? What other protective measures would you be recommending to schools, and how are you instructing them to budget for these possible costs for the 2020-2021 school year?

In addition to the items outlined above, I am respectfully requesting that you work with all districts to implement key programs for our students and teachers. We need ongoing professional development in successful remote teaching strategies and best practices to engage all students. We also need to build strong resources for successful social emotional learning, and trauma-informed interventions for both students and teachers. This should include wellness checks for all our students.

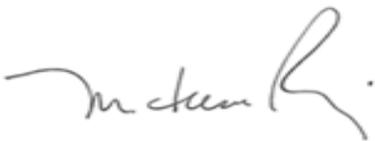
The Department should also assist school districts to transition their traditional summer school programs to “Summer Rising Enrichment Programs” to help address learning loss. I am also requesting that you immediately begin the work of securing a vendor to implement evaluative tools in our schools so we understand where students are and what learning gaps must be addressed. Rather than asking districts to spend their own limited resources on producing local tools that will not provide comparable data between districts, the Department should identify a measurement tool that will produce quick and reliable results.

This moment, while unprecedented and trying, is an opportunity for us to work together to address the challenges our students face, including the achievement gap. I also know that by working collaboratively, our students can become more empowered. I have already been in communication with New Jersey and national educational experts to explore options for our various challenges, with a focus on academic assessments. I hope to use their expertise, as well as the members of the task force we are convening, to develop best practices and recommendations for our schools and to work in partnership with you to execute these.

Finally, I am requesting that a member of the Department of Education and the administration join the task force mentioned above to better coordinate our collaboration. Please forward your recommendation to the Senate Majority Office Senate Education Committee aide Liz Mahn at emahn@njleg.org.

Thank you again to your commitment to the students, teachers, education staff, and parents of New Jersey. Together, we can meet and exceed the challenges magnified by this virus. I look forward to working closely with the both of you, your responses to my questions, and your assistance as we move ahead on educational policies tackling this crisis.

Sincerely,



Senator M. Teresa Ruiz

CC: George Helmy, Chief of Staff
Matthew Platkin, Chief Counsel
Kellie LeDet, Assistant Commissioner, Chief of Staff
Colleen Schulz-Eskow, Deputy Chief of Staff, Executive Services- Legislative
Helene Leona, Office of the Commissioner