

Washington Update July 24, 2020

Dear Colleagues:

There has been a lot of action in DC this week, but not much progress.

1. COVID Relief Package Progress Stalled

The Congress is scheduled to go into recess in two weeks. The election is about 100 days away. The nation is in crisis. Yet this week brought us a back and forth between the White House and Senate Republican leadership that yielded leaks of morsels about a proposed COVID relief package followed by retractions, clarifications and proclamations by individual Republican Senators that they have not seen any proposals nor been able to weigh in. Democrats are growing antsy – with two proposals on the table – [HEROES Act](#) in the House and the [Coronavirus Childcare and Education Relief Act](#) in the Senate - -they are ready to negotiate. But no one is at the table yet.

A Senate Republican leadership bill was promised this week. A sketch of a proposal was leaked with the caveat that nothing had been finalized or agreed to. With Monday and Tuesday next week focused on honoring Rep. John Lewis in the Capitol, the business week will be short. The promise of that August recess is looking dim. With the federal unemployment checks scheduled to end at the end of the month and [1 in 5 workers now collecting unemployment benefits](#), much is at stake. Educators in both higher education and K-12 are struggling to make decisions now about school openings with little clear guidance and no sure knowledge of when or if there will be additional federal support.

The leaked [summary](#) of the next COVID relief bill indicates that there will be \$105 billion available for education in the next package, which Republicans want to call “CARES-2.” Of that \$105 billion, \$5 billion would be available for a Governor’s fund (flexible for K-12 or higher education); \$29 billion for higher education and \$70 billion for K-12.

Of the \$70 billion for K-12, \$10 billion goes to private schools. \$30 billion is distributed to states within 15 days and must be sent by states to school districts within 15 days after that. The remaining \$30 billion is available only to schools that physically reopen and is contingent upon a district reopening plan.

The proposal drew swift response from Democrats. Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-CT), chair of the education funding subcommittee in the House, called the proposal “not just utterly ridiculous. It is delusional and dangerous. Make no mistake, there is no way the House passes this legislation that will put our families in danger.” A democratic staffer said the plan is a “non-starter.”

The White House is reported to have endorsed the education portion of the proposal – which is no surprise as it clearly reflects what they have been calling for: more money for schools which open in person and further privatization of education funds.

Sen. Alexander (R-TN), Chair of the HELP Committee and one of the leaders negotiating the new package, introduced a [bill](#) last week which will also be included in the next COVID relief package. It is intended to simplify and consolidate student loans. It includes a provision to extend the deferment of monthly student loan payments until students have an income. Then the system would change so that no student ever paid more than 10% of their income after deducting rent and food. Currently 40 million student loan borrowers are covered by the CARES Act which suspends interest and monthly payments until October 1. Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA), ranking member of the HELP Committee, called the Alexander plan “an unworkable proposal”. She recommends a pause on payments for all borrowers until the pandemic is over.

It has also been reported that Senate Republicans may introduce a series of five or six separate bills covering different areas rather than one large COVID relief package. It is planned that those bills will be introduced at the same time. This could complicate matters for negotiation as different negotiators could be at the table for each of the individual bills.

In the meantime, states are picking up the privatization banner and moving forward utilizing funds from the previous COVID relief bill, CARES Act, to develop new voucher programs. [Governors in Oklahoma and South Carolina](#) committed significant portions of their funds from the Governor’s portion of the bill toward these efforts. In Oklahoma, Gov. Stitt indicated he would dedicate \$10 million of his state’s \$39.9 million allocation for funds for scholarships so students could attend private schools. In South Carolina, Gov. McMaster announced that he will direct \$32 million of his \$48 million allocation toward a new voucher program. A judge in South Carolina has temporarily [blocked](#) the new voucher program in SC as it may conflict with state law. In a related [lawsuit](#), the NAACP is challenging Sec. DeVos’ implementation of the CARES Act by directing funds to benefit wealthy private K-12 schools.

2. Sec. DeVos Proceeds to Dedicate Additional Funds to Privatization Initiatives

In addition to relentlessly promoting the inclusion of “Education Freedom Scholarships” in the next COVID bill, Sec. DeVos announced two privatization initiatives through the Department of Education this week. [The Accessing Choices in Education \(ACE\) grants](#) will be made available to Native American tribes, or others partnering with the tribes, to set up educational options which parents or students may choose. Options would include tutoring, educational or technology supplies and more. This will be a \$15 million grant competition.

The second announcement is an infusion of \$85 million into the one voucher program that the federal government funds for students in the District of Columbia – the [DC Opportunity Scholarships Program](#). Parents use the funds to pay for private school for their children. In making the announcement, Sec. DeVos said “While too many Democrats in Congress continue to do the bidding of union bosses who want nothing

more than to defund this successful program, this administration will continue to be on the side of students and parents.” The promised \$85 million over the next five years would have to be appropriated by the Congress, so the announcement appears to be an intention more than a real competition.

3. House Subcommittee Holds Hearing on Reopening Schools

This week the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education held a hearing, “[Underfunded and Unprepared: Examining How to Overcome Obstacles to Safely Reopen Public Schools.](#)” While the head of the Centers for Disease Control, Robert Redfield, was invited to come, it appears he was blocked from appearing by the White House. Witnesses included: Dr. Michael Hinojosa, Superintendent, Dallas Independent School District; Ms. Leslie Boggs, National PTA President; Dr. Penny Schwinn, Tennessee Commission of Education; Dr. Sean O’Leary, American Academy of Pediatrics.

4. New Resources for Educators

- [UNCF Mourns Passing of Civil Rights and HBCU Icon John Lewis reports Educators Mourn the passing of John Lewis](#)
- [Education Dive reports Half of Colleges will Require Faculty Training for an Online Fall](#)
- [Ed Research for Recovery has issued Sustaining Teacher Training in a Shifting Environment](#)
- [Chalkbeat reports on a consensus document from education researchers: Education Researchers Come Together on What Schools Need Now – Starting with More Money](#)
- [The Committee for Education Funding has released its annual CEF budget book, Education Matters Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Analysis](#) which includes an overview of all federally funded education programs, the funding history of those programs and recommendations for FY 2021.
- [Ed Week reports ‘No One Else is Going to Step Up’: In a Time of Racial Reckoning, Teachers of Color Feel the Pressure](#)

- NORC at the University of Colorado reports [Concerns about School Reopenings Loom Large](#)
- The American Federation of Teachers released . "[A Time to Act: The Importance of Investment in Public Education and Other State and Local Services in the Time of COVID-19](#). The report calculates the need to fill a gap of \$93.5 billion for preK-12 funding and a \$45 billion higher education funding caused by the country's economic slump. It identifies an additional \$116.5 billion needed to keep schools and colleges as safe as possible during the pandemic. The report also notes that without sufficient relief about 1.4 million education jobs could be lost.
- NPR reports on [Families of Children with Special Needs are Suing in Several States. Here's Why.](#)
- The National Council on Learning Disabilities is out with [Promise and Peril: Examining the Role of Ed Tech for Students with Disabilities](#)

Sunday, July 26, marks the 30th Anniversary of the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act. It is heartening to know that the federal government can be such a powerful force for progress. When Republicans and Democrats work together and set a place at the table for their constituents, solutions can be found. We need more of that!

Best,

Jane