

LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

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AUSTIN BEUTNER
Superintendent

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

I am writing to inform you Los Angeles Unified will not be including your proposed letter in the Families Food Boxes we're providing to families as part of our community relief efforts. The letter may be a violation of the Hatch Act and will further politicize the response to COVID-19.

It is of great concern your letter arrived on my desk at the same time as press reports that the Trump Administration will no longer engage with Congress in discussions about further federal relief programs.

Getting emergency funding to schools now is a necessary step to reopening schools and getting the economy back on track.

Every day away from the classroom can weaken the foundation in literacy, math and critical thinking skills children need to reach their full potential. And families struggling to get by can't return to work until their children are back in school safely.

In its pandemic response, the Administration and Congress have overlooked the vital role schools play. Some officials contend that the extraordinary emergency actions taken by school districts – from providing millions of free meals to the families they serve to buying computers for students to creating their own COVID-19 testing programs – are somehow optional. They aren't.

As part of any new funding for COVID relief, Congress needs to specifically designate funds to support schools. The White House must show leadership on this issue and recognize the important role that school districts are playing during the pandemic.

School districts coast to coast have stepped in to fill the void left by others. In Los Angeles Unified, where I am superintendent, we will spend more than \$350 million on food for those in need, computers for students and COVID-19 testing for all in schools that has not been reimbursed by local, state or federal government. Like my colleagues in towns and cities across America, we fed hungry families because others did not. We redirected scarce funds to buy computers and internet access because children not in classrooms would otherwise have no way to participate in school. We created a virus testing and contact-tracing program for the school community because it is needed and didn't exist. Schools have long been on the front lines of dealing with broader societal issues and that has never been more true than during this crisis.

Public schools are sadly accustomed to operating with inadequate funding. Collectively, school districts have invested billions of dollars in local communities as they scrambled to live up to the moral imperative of educating children and providing a safety net for families.

Los Angeles Unified is the nation's second-largest school district and 80% of its almost 700,000 students are from families living in poverty. Since March, we have provided about 68 million meals, including 2.5 million from the USDA Families program, to people who otherwise would not have enough to eat. While school-lunch funding reimbursed us for the children, about a quarter of the meals went to hungry adults for which we've received no funding. Although we provide much-needed meals, we are left holding a \$70million bag. The Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF) within the broad CARES Act could be tapped to reimburse Los Angeles Unified, but there is no direct way for school districts like ours to receive CRF money. Yet, we have been asked to distribute a back-patting letter from the White House with each of our care packages.

We have taken other extraordinary steps. At the outset of school closures, Los Angeles Unified spent \$100 million to buy laptops, tablets and internet hotspots so students could connect with their schools and teachers. We struck a deal with a major telecom provider for broadband access at vastly reduced rates so we could provide it for free to students. That arrangement has become the blueprint now used by schools in 40 states serving millions of students. Again, these efforts are praised – but not reimbursed.

Similarly, the CARES Act's Public Health and Social Services Emergency Fund set aside \$100 billion for programs like virus testing. Los Angeles Unified is collaborating with major universities, health insurers, biotech companies and a tech giant on a new approach to COVID-19 testing and contact-tracing that significantly reduces the cost to about \$30 per test for everything involved – lab materials and processing, administering of tests, logistics and data reporting and community engagement and contact tracing. This makes it possible to test every student and staff member on a regular basis and provide a foundation for a return to campuses in the safest way possible. The program will cost Los Angeles Unified about \$150 million for the entire school year – again, all of it coming from existing budgets because school districts are not explicitly designated to receive federal COVID-19 testing funds.

The \$350 million in unreimbursed costs are just a portion of the additional investment we're making to keep students and families safe and connected as we plan a return to school campuses. The nation's 13,500 school districts have been forced to take billions away from their core mission at a time when people depend more than ever on their local schools to reopen – and stay open. Democratic lawmakers in Congress have proposed \$175 billion for schools, Republicans \$70 billion and a bi-partisan group from the Problem Solvers Caucus \$100 billion. Big differences remain in other areas, but there's agreement about the need in schools. Now is the time for your administration to work to pass a bi-partisan bill for school funding. There's lots to do and the kids are counting on us.

Ultimately, this is about something that can't be measured in dollars and cents; it's about creating opportunity for the children who will lead us into tomorrow. A good education is the path out of poverty for many students and the promise of a better future for all of them – and the future of our nation. It's also about providing a roadmap for working families to help get their children back to school so the parents can return to work. If the Trump Administration and Congress don't help with funds for schools to reopen, we're not only compromising that future, we're endangering our present. There's no mixed message in that.

Sincerely,



Austin Beutner