

December 21, 2020

MEMORANDUM

TO: State Affiliate Presidents  
State Affiliate Executive Directors  
State Affiliate Government Relations Directors  
NEA Board of Directors

FROM: Marc Egan, Director, NEA Government Relations

**RE: Congressional year-end COVID agreement**

The 116<sup>th</sup> Congress began in the midst of the longest government shutdown in history, included the impeachment (and acquittal) of Donald Trump, included several key education and labor victories to end 2019, but ended 2020 with an all-too-late, inadequate COVID relief package that no one should applaud. There should be no confusion as to where the overwhelming blame for this paltry response lies: Donald Trump and Mitch McConnell. While the country suffered through death, illness, racial unrest and economic despair, they largely shrugged, and the end product passed by Congress amounts to the proverbial low bar of Congressional accomplishments: it is better than nothing.

After months of haggling and inaction, Congress in the next few hours is expected to pass a year-end funding bill that also carries a roughly \$900 billion COVID relief package with it. The key elements included in the COVID deal – and what is NOT in the deal – are briefly listed below. We will have longer analysis for you after the holidays.

The COVID package includes:

- **Emergency education stabilization funding:** a total of \$82 billion for schools, modeled after the formula and allowable uses in the CARES Act from March, but with additional allowable uses for addressing learning loss, school facility improvements and activities related to air quality/HVAC; this includes \$54.3 billion for K-12, \$22.7 billion for higher education, and \$4.05 billion for the governors to distribute of which \$2.75 billion is to go to private schools. There is *no* language requiring schools be open in-person (even if not safe to do so) in order to receive funding as previous GOP proposals demanded. The bill includes language prohibiting the private school aid from being used for new tuition/vouchers, requires a public agency to control the money, shuts off – going forward – previous multiple avenues for private schools to access financial help via the governor’s discretionary funding and the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and equitable services, which is eliminated in this bill.
- **Direct stimulus checks:** it includes \$600 in stimulus payments per person for those who make up to \$75,000, with an additional \$500 per child, and will also go to households with at least one EITN holder
- **Extended unemployment insurance:** it extends supplemental unemployment insurance (UI) benefits and other emergency UI payments of \$300 a week
- **Increases for nutrition services:** this includes \$13 billion to increase SNAP benefits by 15 percent, Pandemic EBT for families with children in childcare programs and meals for seniors
- **Child care:** it includes \$10 billion in emergency funding through the Child Care Development Block Grant program to provide assistance to families and child care providers

- **Expansion of Pell Grant program:** part of the COVID package is the removal of a prohibition on Pell Grants for incarcerated students and a restoration of Pell Grant eligibility to students defrauded by their college; it also includes a simplification of the FAFSA form and financial aid calculations that may expand Pell eligibility; and loan forgiveness for dozens of HBCU's.

The COVID package does **NOT** include:

- **Direct funding for the digital divide/homework gap to help students:** despite evidence of as many as 16 million students without access to the Internet, GOP leaders refused to provide billions in necessary funding via the successful E-Rate program to help ensure students forced to learn remotely can do so; GOP demands that would have undermined the program and tied the hands of FCC commissioners wanting to provide assistance to Black, brown, indigenous, and low-income students—those most in need—going forward derailed any funding from being included in the deal.
- **Student loan relief extension:** it does not extend loan forbearance for student-loan borrowers, which will expire on January 31, 2021.
- **State and local aid:** unlike the CARES Act and subsequent bills passed by the House, the agreement included no direct aid to state and local governments to address gaping budget shortfalls and increased costs related to COVID
- **Adequate extension of paid emergency sick leave:** though Congress could have extended even for a few months this essential provision from the CARES Act for a few billion dollars (out of a \$900 billion deal), it instead included a half-measure of tax credits to employers who offer further paid sick leave but no guarantee they actually will. This means people who are sick or who have been exposed to COVID will have to choose between a paycheck or potentially infecting other individuals in the workplace during the worst stretch of the pandemic.
- **Liability shield for businesses and schools:** this Mitch McConnell demand to protect corporations and schools instead of people essentially derailed any direct funding for state and local governments, as both provisions were dropped from the package.

**Our letter to the Hill can be found here:** <https://educationvotes.nea.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/COVID-Relief-Bill-Senate-House-122120.pdf>

**President Pringle's statement can be found here:** <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/nea-president-becky-pringle-reacts-end-year-covid-19-relief-bill>

It has been a long, difficult and from a Congressional standpoint frustrating year that ended with what can best be described as a mere down payment on all that remains to be done in order to fully provide the help needed for our country to recover and begin correcting historic inequities that have only grown wider. The good news is we will soon have a president and vice president who understand that and want to address it. They will be faced however, with remarkably close margins in both chambers of Congress. We will be there to fight along with you for what must be done in 2021. With appreciation for all you have done this year, we wish a safe and restful holiday break.

Marc and the Government Relations team