

FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE ACTIVITY: APRIL 2021

BOARD ADVOCACY

As part of NEA's third virtual Superweek, we conducted a pre-lobbying briefing on Zoom on April 26. Members of the Board of Directors were asked to conduct virtual lobbying visits with members of Congress and their staffs on these issues:

- Cosponsoring the **Reopen and Rebuild America's Schools Act (S. 96/H.R. 604)**
- Supporting revenue-raising proposals to ensure robust investment in our nation's infrastructure
- Providing healthy meals for all students, at no cost to them, on a permanent basis
- Urging senators to cosponsor and push for a vote on the **Equality Act (H.R. 7)**
- Urging senators to support the **For the People Act (S. 1)**

CHILD NUTRITION

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack approved the extension of pandemic waivers and flexibilities through June 2022 to allow schools to continue serving free, healthy meals to all students.

In a [letter](#) to the House Rules Committee, NEA submitted comments for an April 28 hearing on ending hunger in America. "During the pandemic, Congress and USDA have effectively created a short-term universal school meals program to meet unprecedented levels of hunger. We know that unacceptable levels of food insecurity existed prior to this crisis, and will persist long after. By making healthy school meals universal, free, and permanent, we can go far in addressing childhood hunger, and so much more," the letter said.

EDUCATION FUNDING

On April 9, President Biden released a blueprint for next year's budget that calls on Congress to increase U.S. Department of Education funding by more than 40 percent. Title I funding for high-poverty schools would rise by \$20 billion—the biggest year-over-year increase since the program's inception—and the annual Pell Grant maximum by \$400 with access expanded to Dreamers. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and other minority-serving institutions (MSIs) would also receive significant increases. The upcoming budget is also expected to propose historic increases for full-service community schools, a significant boost for Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funding, and a large investment in school counselors.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Created in 2007, Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) was designed to encourage college graduates to pursue careers in education and other forms of public service. Under the failed

leadership of former Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, the U.S. Department of Education rejected 98 percent of the PSLF applications filed.

On April 1, NEA led a [letter](#) urging Education Secretary Miguel Cardona to invoke an immediate 90-day review of PSLF program and cancel the student loan debt of qualified public sector workers, many of whom are on the frontlines of the response to COVID-19; an updated April 12 [letter](#) featured additional signatories from the labor community.

NEA joined an April 13 [letter](#) urging Cardona to address the borrower defense crisis he inherited from DeVos. “To date, only a fraction of the students entitled to relief have received it. For example, although the Obama Administration identified over 300,000 individuals from Corinthian who were eligible for borrower defense relief, it appears that only some 72,000 borrowers total—from any school—have received relief,” the letter said.

NEA submitted [comments for the record](#) of an April 13 hearing on the \$1.5 trillion crisis in student loan debt, conducted by the Senate Subcommittee on Economic Policy Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee. “Cancellation of at least \$50,000 in student loan debt will strengthen families’ financial security, help close the racial wealth gap, and bolster our economy due to increased consumer spending,” the letter said.

Twelve organizations, including NEA, signed an April 19 [letter](#) urging Senate and House leadership to include the **Student Loan Tax Elimination Act (S. 847)** in the administration’s American Families Plan. The bill would eliminate costly origination fees on federal student loans disbursed on or after March 27, 2020.

NEA was among more than 20 organizations that signed [Civil Rights Principles for Student Debt Cancellation](#), sponsored by the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. The principles include cancelling debt for all student loan borrowers; not limiting debt cancellation to certain types of institutions; ensuring the debt cancellation process is easy, accessible, and does not have negative credit implications; and pairing debt cancellation with meaningful access and affordability in the higher education system.

INFRASTRUCTURE

President Biden’s **American Jobs Plan**, released March 31, includes \$100 billion to modernize K-12 public school facilities, \$12 billion to upgrade the community college infrastructure, and \$25 billion to improve child care facilities—a good start that leaves room for improvement. NEA supports the **Reopen and Rebuild America’s Schools Act (S. 96/H.R. 604)**, which would create a \$100 billion grant program and \$30 billion tax-credit bond program targeting high-poverty schools whose facilities pose health and safety risks to students and staff.

NEA is advocating for inclusion of healthy school meals for all students, at no cost to them, in President Biden’s **American Families Plan**, released April 28. America’s infrastructure is not just roads and bridges; it includes our food distribution system. During the pandemic, food insecurity has grown dramatically. In response, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has provided waivers to schools, allowing them to offer meals to all students at no charge—an approach that should not be rolled back after the pandemic.

IMMIGRATION REFORM

On April 21, the House passed the [NO BAN Act \(H.R. 1333\)](#) by a vote of [218-208](#). The bill would require the executive branch to base any future restrictions on immigration or entry into the United States on “specific and credible facts” connected to “specific acts,” meet a compelling government interest, and employ the least restrictive means; require the executive branch to notify and brief Congress on the status, implementation, and constitutional and legislative authority for any future restrictions; and specifically prohibit discrimination based on religion in the Immigration and Nationality Act.

NOMINATIONS

On April 14, the Senate Judiciary Committee held a hearing on the NEA-supported nomination of [Kristen Clarke](#) for Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights.

On April 21, the Senate confirmed the NEA-supported nomination of [Vanita Gupta](#) for Associate Attorney General by a vote of [51-49](#).

On April 28, the Senate Judiciary Committee held a hearing on the NEA-supported nomination of [Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson](#) for the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit.

NEA-supported nominations still pending as of May 1 include [Julie Su](#) for Deputy Secretary of Labor and [Cindy Marten](#) for Deputy Secretary of Education.

RACIAL JUSTICE

The Senate passed the [COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act \(S. 937\)](#) by a vote of [94-1](#) on April 22. Introduced by Sen. Mazie Hirono (D-HI), the bill would strengthen federal efforts to address hate crimes targeting Asian-Americans in several ways: designate a Department of Justice employee to expedite the review of COVID-19 hate crimes, provide guidance for state and local officials for online reporting of such crimes, and require the department to issue guidance to mitigate racially discriminatory language in describing the pandemic.

VOTING RIGHTS

Taxation without representation was the rallying cry for the American Revolution, yet 245 years later it endures in our nation’s capital. On April 22, the House voted [216-208](#) to correct this

historic injustice and make the District of Columbia the 51st state. The denial of full representation in Congress—and therefore, full citizenship—in a city nearly half Black is egregious given our nation’s history of suppressing the Black vote. No other democracy denies its citizens equal representation because of where they live.

The [Washington, D.C. Admission Act \(S. 51/H.R. 51\)](#) preserves the constitutionally required district that houses the federal government, our monuments, and the National Mall. The neighborhoods and commercial areas where the people of the District of Columbia live and raise their families would comprise the 51st state.

WOMEN’S RIGHTS

On April 15, by a vote of [217-210](#), the House passed the **Paycheck Fairness Act (H.R. 7)**. To address the persistent gender pay gap in the United States, the bill would require employers to demonstrate that gender is not the reason they pay employees different wages, strengthen enforcement of equal pay laws, and put in place robust remedies for discrimination.

OTHER LEGISLATIVE NEWS*

Sens. Ron Wyden (D-OR) and Mike Crapo (R-ID) and Reps. Joe Neguse (D-CO) and Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA) reintroduced the **Secure Rural Schools Reauthorization Act (S. 435/H.R. 2099)** to help fund public education and community services in 770 rural counties located near national forests.

Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) introduced the **For the 99.5% Act (S. 994)**, which would make the estate tax more progressive and raise \$430 billion in revenue.

Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and Rep. Pramila Jayapal (D-WA) reintroduced the **College for All Act (S. 1288/H.R. 2730)** to make community college free and eliminate tuition and fees at public colleges for families earning up to \$125,000 a year.

Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and Rep. Andy Levin (D-MI) reintroduced the **America’s College Promise Act (S.1396/H.R.2861)**, which would create a federal-state partnership to provide two years of tuition-free community or technical college, and reinvest in higher education to lower access costs.

Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) and Rep. Joaquin Castro (D-TX) reintroduced the **Families Belong Together Act (S. 1375/H.R. 2766)** to provide a path to citizenship for children and families forcibly separated at the U.S. border.

Sens. Brian Schatz (D-HI) and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) reintroduced **legislation (S. 1267) to extend two key statutory deadlines for the 2020 Census** to help ensure an accurate count of the population, especially in Native, minority, and rural communities.

Sens. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) reintroduced the **Summer Meals Act (S. 1170)** to ensure children maintain access to school meals when school is out.

Sens. Sherrod Brown (D-MA) and Susan Collins (R-ME) reintroduced the **Social Security Fairness Act (S. 1302/H.R. 82)**, which would fully repeal the Government Pension Offset (GPO) and Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP) that deprive 2.5 million educators and other dedicated public servants of Social Security benefits they have earned.

**This list is a snapshot, not comprehensive*