

# United States Senate

May 13, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Senate Majority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
317 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer  
Democratic Leader  
U.S. Senate  
322 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Leader McConnell and Minority Lead Schumer:

We are writing to request that as you develop further legislation to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, you work to provide robust support to our nation's English learner (EL) students, who face unique educational challenges during this time. Specifically, we ask that you include an additional \$1 billion for Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in the next emergency package to address the needs of EL students, their teachers and their families.

Approximately 5 million students, or 10 percent of all public-school students, are classified as ELs. While the majority of these students speak Spanish, the population is increasingly diverse, with states listing over 50 commonly spoken languages, including Chinese, Arabic, and Vietnamese. The EL population has grown rapidly over the past few decades, but our nation has failed to meet its obligation to provide a high-quality education for these students, resulting in discouraging outcomes.

According to the 2017 National Assessment of Education Progress, only 14 percent of fourth grade ELs scored at or above the proficient level in math and only 9 percent were at or above proficient in reading. These numbers were even smaller for ELs in eighth grade, and at every level, they lagged far behind their non-EL peers. While one third of non-ELs were proficient in math at grade 8, only 6 percent of eighth grade ELs met these standards. In addition, the National Center for Education Statistics reports that while 84 percent of students nationwide graduated from high school on time in 2016, the rate was only 67 percent for ELs<sup>1</sup>. We are concerned that the COVID-19 crisis will only exacerbate this achievement gap.

We have heard from our constituents that educators have had difficulty providing high-quality distance instruction to their EL students. While many states, schools, and teachers are going to great lengths to try to support these students, they have encountered obstacles on several fronts, from a dearth of technology in EL students' homes to inadequate training of the teachers. In a recent survey, the Migration Policy Institute found that educators across the country were particularly concerned about students' lack of access to online devices and connectivity, the challenges families face in supporting students with independent learning, and a shortage of resources and professional development. In addition to a need for curricula, software, and other

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/el-outcomes/index.html>

infrastructure, educators report a need for strategies to support parents who face language and technological barriers. They also express a need for mental health supports for students and resources for summer programs to make up for the learning loss during this crisis.

We are grateful that the CARES Act included \$13.5 billion to support states with the transition to K-12 distance learning, and we are pleased that funds can be used to address the needs of vulnerable student populations, including students with disabilities, English learners, and homeless youth. However, given the many competing educational priorities states contend with, we believe that dedicated funding beyond what was provided in CARES is necessary to adequately address the challenges ELs face.

Title III of the ESEA is the only federal funding source dedicated to supporting ELs, their teachers, and families. Title III funds can be used for language instruction education programs, teacher professional development, and other activities to increase parent, family, and community engagement, as well as for acquiring or developing educational technology and accessing online networks<sup>2</sup>. This is particularly important as 60 percent of ELs live in households with incomes below 185 percent of the federal poverty line<sup>3</sup>. Providing an additional \$1 billion for Title III will allow states to meet the needs of their EL students and families while providing teachers with the resources they need to provide high-quality instruction and mitigate the loss of learning during the COVID-19 crisis.

Our nation has legal and moral obligations to provide ELs with an education equal to that of their non-EL peers. To fulfill this imperative during the COVID-19 crisis, we urge you to provide targeted funding for these students in the next emergency package. Thank you for your dedication to our nation's students and for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Catherine Cortez Masto  
United States Senator

Jacky Rosen  
United States Senator

Jack Reed  
United States Senator

Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator

Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senator

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essatitleiiiguidenglishlearners92016.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [https://edfunders.org/sites/default/files/Educating%20English%20Language%20Learners\\_April%202013.pdf](https://edfunders.org/sites/default/files/Educating%20English%20Language%20Learners_April%202013.pdf)

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