



November 12, 2020

Dear Biden Transition Team:

I write to you on behalf of the more than 100,000 students in preschool through grade 12. As the second largest school district in California, San Diego Unified School District is committed to closing both opportunity and achievement gaps. I am pleased to offer an education policy perspective, “National Response to Persevere and to Prioritize School Recovery with Equity and Undoing Learning Loss”.

San Diego Unified consists of a diverse student population with more than 15 student ethnic groups. The vast majority of our students are from communities of color, 60 percent of our youth come from low income families and 8,000 of our students are from military families. It is from this perspective, we believe the recommendation included in the attached memorandum will provide a meaningful framework for the first 100 days of your Administration. We believe our unique approach and accomplishments can be of value as you consider moving quickly on policy to assist our schools across the nation.

Sincerely,

Cindy Marten
Superintendent of Public Education

Education at a Crossroad
National Response to Persevere and to Prioritize
School Recovery with Equity and Undoing Learning Loss

The Path Forward

The COVID-19 pandemic is amplifying long-standing inequities in our nation’s education system. Recovering from the pandemic requires a robust federal investment in education in the short- and long-term that is centered around equity, undoing learning loss, and supporting high-quality instruction. This will require more teachers and staff to accelerate student learning, and to implement the strongest health and safety standards to support classroom instruction. The path forward requires a national response to prioritize equity, promote labor-management partnerships, fund school-centered contact tracing and testing programs, and provide urgent federal relief. A federal role that supports the nation’s education system is necessary to overcome the challenges of the pandemic, and to effectively recover in the years ahead.

The next phase of federal investment needs to be flexible and available directly to school districts. Successful school districts have always placed an emphasis on strong classroom instruction. Students will only recover from the COVID-19 crisis if their schools have the resources required to invest in strong classroom instruction. Taken together, equity-based funding and classroom-centered investments will lead the way to a robust recovery and accelerated learning, and frame the national response to the challenges facing the nation’s schools. The next sections provide background on San Diego Unified and policy recommendations to navigate the first 100 days.

Background: 2008 Recession Shaped San Diego Unified’s Recovery

San Diego Unified, the second largest school district in California serving more than 100,000 students in preschool through grade 12, has demonstrated success in improving educational outcomes for the most vulnerable students in our nation. The vast majority of our students are from communities of color, 60% of our youth live in low-income families, and 8,000 students are from military families. During the COVID-19 pandemic, San Diego Unified has essentially closed the digital divide, provided millions of free meals, and delivered more instructional minutes than similar districts across California and the nation.

San Diego Unified leadership has experience recovering from previous catastrophic events, especially the 2008 economic recession. Their recovery from that crisis generated improved student outcomes and developed a labor-management partnership based on student success.

San Diego Unified Superintendent, Cindy Marten, has also overseen the implementation of California’s equity funding law, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), since its enactment on July 1, 2013. The LCFF ushered in a new model for equity-based school funding in California, providing school districts with additional funds based on the number of disadvantaged students, including low-income students, foster youth, and English-language learners.

San Diego Unified embraced the equity-based funding model and amplified its impact by increasing funding for equity levers across the system, and especially in high-needs schools. The clear focus on equity, combined with a collaborative labor-management model and other recovery strategies learned during the Great Recession, have produced steady student achievement gains within San Diego Unified. Across all of our strategies nothing provides a better return than investing in the quality of your teacher workforce. These gains provide confidence the San Diego Unified experience should shape national recovery planning.

Academic Achievements and Alignment to Equity

San Diego Unified has approached the challenges of our students with equity as a central area of focus, in collaboration with our labor partners, students and parents, and community stakeholders. The district is concerned COVID-19-caused learning loss will weaken these gains and undermine future progress. Here, as in districts across the nation, additional federal investment is needed to sustain academic achievement.

According to the National Center for the Education Statistics, San Diego Unified [outperformed other urban school districts](#) in a nationwide test that measures math and reading scores for fourth and eighth grade students. A 2019 case study from UCLA's Center for the Transformation of Schools found that San Diego Unified increased college readiness by investing in equity levers. Between 2011 and 2019, college readiness rates, as measured by completion of the University of California A-G curriculum, increased by 70% overall (from 43.9% to 73%), by 50% for African-American students (from 37.9% to 66.6%), and by 150% for Latino students (from 26.3% to 65.6%). The success achieved by students of color are well-documented by both the Learning Policy Institute's *Positive Outliers* report and UCLA's Center for the Transformation of Schools report, titled *Giving Learning and Graduation New Meaning: One Student at a Time*.

These academic accomplishments were the result of a decade-long investment in equity levers, some of which are listed below.

Ensuring access to rigorous coursework for all students:

- Expanded access to University of California A-G approved courses;
- Increased access to Advanced Placement courses;
- Improved integration of special education with general education students;
- Increased career technical and vocational education options;
- Created affordable preschool options for families who do not qualify for State aid;
- Ended inequities in math tracking at middle school;
- Increased access to community college courses through dual enrollment;
- Provided a digital device for every student along with access to free Wi-Fi as needed; and
- Expanded access to physical education and athletics for students with disabilities.

Centering equity in teaching and learning:

- Expanded access to counselors in high-needs schools;
- Established free health clinics in high-needs schools;
- Created a pilot community school at Logan Memorial;
- Created integrated youth services agenda with youth advocacy and counseling;
- Adopted reforms related to restorative justice and student discipline;
- Investing in the professional learning of our educators;
- Recruiting mid-career teachers by giving credit for experience in other districts; and
- Support anti-racism through development of teacher diversity, ethnic studies and anti-racism curriculum.

The next section identifies policy recommendations to support a school recovery with equity and to accelerate learning.

Navigating the First 100 Days

The public health and economic challenges we face today threaten the academic progress we have made in San Diego Unified. Further, these challenges, exacerbated by generations of racial and economic inequities, pose significant barriers to the educational success of students across the country, and particularly students of color and low-income youth. The investments that we make today to recover from these challenges will impact a generation of children and will determine whether schools are prepared to accelerate student learning and meet the needs of all of our youth.

We need federal leadership to ensure all of our children have meaningful opportunities to learn, thrive, and succeed. The current crisis is highlighting the need for a federal role that addresses short-term challenges and makes long-term, permanent investments to effectively recover and accelerate learning. Accordingly, we urge the next administration to work with Congress and take the following actions during the first 100 days:

Invest in direct relief to schools totaling \$350 billion. The costs associated with the COVID-19 pandemic are and will continue to be staggering. We appreciated the resources provided to states and school districts through the CARES Act, which were critical to help stabilize our schools at the beginning of the pandemic. However, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our schools and communities will be long lasting. Lessons learned from the great recession of 2008 teach us that it may take several years for school districts to recover from the loss of revenue. Therefore, we urge the next administration to work with Congress to appropriate \$350 billion over the next two fiscal years. Our schools require robust federal investment, centered on equity, to meet the needs of our children, our communities and our country. The Learning Policy Institute has estimated the pandemic's financial costs to public schools to be as much as \$246 billion. These estimates include both the increased costs of dealing with COVID-19 and the loss of State revenue.

Currently, school districts are purchasing personal protective equipment (PPE) for children and adults, increasing cleaning and daily health checks, and modifying school buildings, including classrooms, gymnasiums, auditoriums, cafeterias, and school buses, to meet social distancing and other recommended guidelines. The COVID-19 pandemic is resulting in ever-increasing spending for schools to ensure health and safety.

A robust testing and contact tracing strategy for students and educators to ensure our schools can reopen and stay open safely is still needed. Unfortunately, school districts face the challenges of reopening during a pandemic without any meaningful support from the State and federal government on testing in schools. The next administration must work with Congress to ensure we have a national testing plan for schools, including issuing guidance and providing the resources to help our schools navigate the complexities of testing and contact tracing.

The data clearly states that COVID-19 has imposed a disproportionate burden on communities of color. African Americans, Latinos, Asian Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans are more likely to be diagnosed with, hospitalized for, and die from COVID-19. The data is particularly alarming for children of color, who are more likely to die from the disease.

The pandemic is also taking a disproportionate financial toll on families of color, who are struggling with income, housing, and food. While more than 30 million workers have filed for unemployment in the past few months, Black, Latino, and Native American communities have been hit the hardest. The children in these families are facing distress and trauma, and schools often play a significant role in the delivery of services to address these needs, including providing nutritious meals. School counselors, social workers, and other specialized instructional support personnel must be able to deal with the emotional burdens and trauma many students will be carrying.

It is imperative that all children have access to high-quality teaching and learning, whether in person, virtually, or using a hybrid model. Not every family has the same opportunity to learn virtually, however. Ensuring all children have access to high-quality virtual instruction will require a significant investment in both technology and connectivity, in addition to extra hours for teaching staff to prepare lesson plans during the pandemic.

The research also shows us that children who returned to school this year experienced significant learning loss as a result of pandemic-related school shutdowns. The average student may have fallen seven months behind academically, while Black and Latino students could experience even greater learning loss. Learning will need to be expanded to compensate for learning loss.

As schools across the country and here at San Diego Unified face significant new costs associated with educating children during COVID-19, state and local budgets are facing massive shortfalls. Schools rely on state and local revenue and need more resources, not fewer resources. Many states, like California, found a way to hold off cuts until next year, by deferring payments to school districts. But that fiscal maneuvering is short lived, and the bills will become due as a result of inaction at the federal level.

These budget shortfalls are creating massive challenges for the teacher workforce who are facing layoffs and pay cuts. Here in San Diego, we have made significant investments in our educator workforce over the years, investing in the professional learning of our educators and recruiting experienced and effective teachers. We now risk losing the progress we have made if we must contend with State budget cuts in January. We urge that the next Administration work with Congress to invest \$350 billion in direct relief to school districts.

Fully fund the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). San Diego Unified serves approximately 15,000 children with disabilities, many of whom are children from military families. Providing special education and the related services to our students during this pandemic is challenging but critical. These children are among our most vulnerable students, and we must have the resources to ensure we are meeting their educational needs.

More than forty years ago Congress passed what is now known as the IDEA to help states with the extra costs associated with providing special education and related services to children with disabilities to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living. At the time, Congress committed to paying 40% of the extra costs; that amount is commonly referred to as IDEA “full funding.” Unfortunately, Congress has never come close to full funding, providing only about 13% of the national average per pupil expenditure, leaving schools and students with disabilities without the resources they need.

We urge that the next Administration work with Congress to put us on a permanent path to full funding of IDEA and to immediately provide at least \$13 billion in funding during this pandemic.

Triple Title I funding and invest \$12 billion now. Many of our most vulnerable students – those living in poverty, in the foster care system or those whose families are experiencing homelessness – struggle to attend school in ordinary circumstances and their lives have been made more difficult by this crisis. We have 60,000 children who are eligible for free or reduced price lunch, 27,000 English learners, and over 6,000 children who are homeless or in foster care.

We urge the next Administration to triple the investment for Title I and to make funding permanent, and to work with Congress to immediately provide an additional \$12 billion for Title I in COVID-19 relief.

Invest in military families and their students. San Diego Unified serves more than 8,000 military families. The Impact Aid program is critical to helping us meet the needs of children from military families but funding for the program only supports approximately 55% of the need. To fix that, we need to fill the gap between fully funding the Basic Support program and the appropriated funding level for 2020. Additionally, there needs to be an increase for per-student payments from \$1,200 to \$2,000 for students with disabilities and available funding for federal property to support districts with non-taxable federal land. We urge that the next Administration pursue these investments to improve services for students of military families.

Invest in a national teacher corps program. The National Teacher Corps program was established in the Higher Education Act of 1965 to improve elementary and secondary teaching in predominantly low-income areas. These programs were developed in collaboration and partnership with institutions of higher education and school districts. The purpose of the National Teacher Corps was to train and retain teachers in disadvantaged school districts. As the nation confronts the challenges of learning loss, a well-prepared and experienced teacher workforce will contribute towards accelerating learning and recovering from the pandemic. A National Teacher Corps program will also serve as a way to develop and promote teacher workforce diversity. We urge the next Administration to invest in a National Teacher Corps program.

Invest in early childhood education. Decades of research tells us that high-quality early childhood education (ECE) is essential to reducing the gap between low-income children and their more affluent peers. Positive impacts include improved cognitive, behavioral, and social emotional development, as well as lasting long-term outcomes, including higher earnings, better health, and less criminal activity. Unfortunately, not all young children have the same access to high-quality ECE. Far too few Black and Latino children have access to high-quality state-funded preschool programs. And, while Latino students represent more than 25% of public school students in the U.S, Latino children have lower rates of participation in ECE programs than White or Black children. We must work together to ensure all three and four years old have access to high-quality early ECE.

Summary

The lessons from the Great Recession are stark: failure to act now means schools will spend the next decade recovering from predictable trauma - layoffs, service cuts and academic stagnation. Recovery requires swift action. That trauma is as predictable as it is preventable. The educational recovery of America's schools must be led by educators and must be carefully targeted to improve outcomes for those students most at risk of falling permanently behind. Our nation cannot afford a lost generation of learners. Nor can we afford an incomplete recovery that leaves communities of color behind and extends 400 years of inequality for another decade.