



KATE BROWN
Governor

December 1, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Leader McConnell, Speaker Pelosi, Leaders Schumer and McCarthy:

As you consider another COVID-19 relief package, I urge you to take action to ensure the continuity of critical child care for families and to support the educational needs of students in public schools and at institutions of higher education in Oregon. Emergency relief provided through the CARES Act earlier this year helped shore up support for Oregon's most vulnerable children and youth, and those low-income Oregonians pursuing postsecondary education and training.

The emergency relief package importantly provided for new broadband and IT infrastructure that has expanded connectivity for more families and communities, while educators and schools have had additional tools and resources to deliver comprehensive distance learning. For child care and early learning programs -- and in those Oregon communities where students and educators have returned to public schools classrooms -- there has been needed protective equipment and supplies. However, this emergency relief has only gone so far in responding to the real impact COVID-19 continues to have on our educational system. It is clearly not sufficient to address continuing unmet needs for students from communities disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, or to adequately support the return to in-person instruction.

Child Care for Working Families

Federal emergency resources have been a lifeline for early care and education programs during the pandemic. Oregon has so far been able to maintain most of its child care supply, providing emergency grants to over 3,200 child care providers to help them stay afloat. This past April, only about 60% of licensed child care providers had reopened as Emergency Child Care

Providers. That number is now up to over 80%. However, the number of available child care slots in Oregon remains at 40% of pre-COVID-19 levels. Programs are open at greatly reduced capacity, and increasingly are limiting their services. Child care providers continue to struggle with business debt, challenges with retaining qualified staff, and concerns about covering costs. Without continued emergency relief, the success Oregon has had in keeping child care accessible and to keep programs operational will backslide, hindering workforce participation for parents and Oregon's economic recovery.

Elementary and Secondary Education

Despite the enormous efforts being put forth to continue quality education for Oregon's students through distance learning, it is clear that many students are requiring more support during this pandemic to remain connected to school and stay on track to graduate. Many Oregon school districts are reporting that many high school students, in particular, are falling behind in earning credits necessary for a high school diploma. Resources are needed for educators and schools to provide more robust academic support and supplemental learning opportunities, especially through remote means.

With the vast majority of Oregon students learning remotely, distance learning resources continue to be a critical need for most public schools. This includes student devices, digital content and curriculum, learning management systems, and professional development for educators in the use of digital learning tools. The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) estimates that the federal emergency relief provided to public schools only meets about 30% of the need identified by school districts for ongoing comprehensive distance learning. For those public schools that are implementing hybrid-learning models (both on-site and comprehensive distance learning), there are additional costs related to staggered schedules and student transportation.

Additional investments resulting from federal relief funds are extending broadband and high speed internet through many parts of rural Oregon. However, many school districts need additional aid to gain connection to this fiber. The federal E-Rate Program is critical to this effort, but it still leaves between 15-30% of costs uncovered for poorer school districts. Based on the size of many of these projects, these districts lack the resources to finance this funding gap. Providing emergency aid that is flexible to work in conjunction with the federal E-Rate program would enable more schools to gain long-term and reliable connectivity for their students and community.

Oregon's low-income students and their families are currently benefiting from extended federal waivers to provide school meals through the USDA Summer Food Service Program and Seamless Summer Option. Unfortunately, the level of school district reimbursement doesn't meet the actual costs incurred, disincentivizing participation in these programs. Additional emergency aid would significantly increase the capacity of public schools around the state in continuing the delivery of student meals.

ODE has worked in partnership with the Oregon Department of Administrative Services (DAS) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to obtain personal protective equipment (PPE) for schools to ensure student and staff safety. In addition, the state has worked to increase the number of vendors that can provide the necessary PPE and other sanitization supplies that are critical in providing on-site education. Unfortunately, the amount of supplies needed to ensure safe learning environments exceeds the budgets of most school districts. Oregon needs either additional no-cost products allocated to the state or resources that enable school districts to acquire these supplies directly.

Adequate PPE and sanitization in combination with strict adherence to the state's comprehensive schools guidance minimizes the risk for students and staff returning to in-person instruction. However, there is wide variability across Oregon school districts in the capacity and condition of existing school facilities. As public schools implement necessary health and safety protocols, resources that have not been previously budgeted by school districts are needed to meet these standards. This includes accommodating requirements for smaller student cohorts within many school buildings that were overcrowded before the pandemic, upgrading or replacing ventilation systems, and performing other facilities maintenance.

Higher Education

The pandemic dramatically shifted the landscape of the higher education sector overnight, and institutions of higher education responded as ably as possible—shifting all but the most high-touch, technical programs online. As a result, institutions faced significant costs related to technology investments, the development of pedagogically sound course work, and training. In addition, to support a resumption of on-campus learning when necessary or desirable, institutions have incurred cleaning and testing costs required to ensure the safety of students, faculty, staff, and the surrounding communities.

These direct costs are significant, but represent only a portion of the financial burden institutions face. Despite the needed and appreciated investments in the CARES Act to provide emergency support to students in need, institutions issued tens of millions of dollars in refunds to students who changed their academic plans out of emergent necessity, and face millions of additional dollars in lost revenue from students that did not return for this fall semester. Institutions with robust on campus auxiliary operations (such as dining and housing) face further revenue losses related to unavailable meal plans and empty dorm rooms.

The current estimate for total financial loss, both direct costs and lost revenue, for Oregon community colleges and public universities, is \$120 million in Fiscal Year 2020. Despite unemployment statistics that typically result in enrollment spikes, community college enrollment year-over-year has plummeted 23% from Fall 2019 levels. Public university enrollment declined a more modest, but still troubling, 3.8%. These declines represent students deferring enrollment decisions, which comes at an economic cost, and includes thousands of students that were, but are not now, currently enrolled.

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The financial stability of these students is of great concern, given the potential for these students to carry debt without the increased earnings power provided by a degree. The likelihood these students return to complete their postsecondary degree decreases over time. To improve degree completion outcomes for these students, additional emergency relief for the state and institutions of higher education in Oregon is needed to provide necessary direct financial aid.

Ensuring our child care providers, schools, community colleges and public universities have the resources to succeed during these unprecedented times is of utmost importance. I appreciate your consideration of these urgent needs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kate Brown" with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Governor Kate Brown

cc: Senator Ron Wyden
Senator Jeff Merkley
Representative Suzanne Bonamici
Representative Greg Walden
Representative Earl Blumenauer
Representative Peter DeFazio
Representative Kurt Schrader