April 29, 2020

<insert state/district> Department of Education

<insert state/district DOE address>

Dear <insert state/district chief name>:

We applaud the focus on students, educators, and their families, and the management of disruptions through your leadership in responding to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic is impacting life for students, educators, and families in every state and county across the country. Educators and students are being called on to demonstrate empathy and resilience, build relationships across distance, and utilize their collective resolve to strengthen our schools and communities. These social-emotional skills offer a powerful means to continue to support and educate each other. It’s more important than ever for state departments of education to provide as much funding as possible to the local level so that school and district leaders can use federal emergency relief funds to support high-quality social-emotional skill-building opportunities for both students and educators.

The enormous shift to online learning makes social-emotional learning (SEL) and the systemic implementation of SEL across schools and districts more important than ever. SEL promotes positive skills students need to more fully engage in academic learning (either in-person or virtually). SEL also helps educators take care of themselves while providing encouraging, safe, and supportive school communities. These communities may now be online, but they should continue to focus on students’ strengths, necessary tiered supports, and positive relationship development.

Research overwhelmingly demonstrates that in classrooms and out-of-school settings, high-quality SEL programs reduce behavioral problems, improve students’ sense of belonging, and increase school attendance and academic achievement. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” SEL develops skills that are important for all students to be successful, and critical for those who cope with acute, chronic, and historical traumatic stresses.

The bipartisan Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act included a $30.75 billion Education Stabilization Fund that would run through the Department of Education to states, with $3.01 billion for a [Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund](https://oese.ed.gov/offices/education-stabilization-fund/governors-emergency-education-relief-fund/) and $13.5 billion for a [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund](https://oese.ed.gov/offices/education-stabilization-fund/elementary-secondary-school-emergency-relief-fund/) flowing directly to states and districts. While the law gives states flexibility to address the individual needs of their districts, the law specifically calls out using funds to support the social and emotional needs of constituents.Therefore, to ensure that funds are used appropriately and effectively to support the continuity of student engagement through SEL, we recommend state leaders use new and existing funds in the following ways:

* Prioritize support for schools and districts to implement SEL training for all school and district leaders; this training should ensure students and teachers reenter school effectively and ready to learn. This includes identification of existing and supplemental resources that may be provided in-person or at a distance.
* Increase funding for evidence-based programs and associated professional learning programs that foster safe and stable learning environments. These learning environments should include social-emotional supports and prevent and mitigate the effects of trauma (see the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, funding summary below).
* Prioritize training and support for educator and leadership social and emotional development, including ways in which the school community engages with families and community organizations.
* Allow funds from across agencies to be combined with SEL funding to target students in need of support who are impacted by compounding traumas and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). These ACEs may include those stemming from instability in housing and nutrition, lack of access to mental health resources, connection with the child welfare system, or inadequate access to digital resources.

The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund may be used by districts to support any activity authorized under ESSA. The Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund is extremely flexible and can be combined with other program funds.Some existing ESSA programs that can be boosted to support SEL competency development are:

* **Title I Part A–Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Educational Agencies** 
  + Schoolwide Programs and Targeted Assistance school funds are intended to impact academic achievement for economically disadvantaged youth. This is not to the exclusion of SEL.
  + SEL-informed academic programs, such as culturally competent teaching and learning in the content areas, are allowable uses of these funds. Consider supplemental content curriculum that has demonstrated SEL-informed pedagogical practices.
* **Title I Part C–Education of Migratory Children** 
  + Funding can be used to conduct outreach to special populations in sharing practices in social distancing, health precautions, and information to prevent deportation fears. Language acquisition and culturally informed practices, such as equity-focused SEL programming to enhance reentry or shelter-in-place strategies, are also allowable uses of these funds. Consider extending the certificate of eligibility process for seasonal farmworker families who may have been sheltering in place.
* **Title I Part D–Prevention and Intervention Programs for Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk**
  + These funds are intended to prevent at-risk youth from dropping out of school and providing students who have dropped out, as well as children and youth returning from correctional facilities or institutions for neglected or delinquent children and youth, with a support system to ensure their continued education and the involvement of their families and communities. This can include increased intensive counseling and Tier II and Tier III SEL programs for self-management and coping at correctional facilities and in pre- and post-adjudication counseling services.
* **Title II Part A–Supporting Effective Instruction** 
  + These funds can be used by local education agencies (LEAs) for professional development activities that support the instruction of SEL programs. These funds can also be used to train educators on SEL-specific programming to include adult SEL practices. Retention funds can be distributed to teacher-leaders or other professional developers who lead peer-to-peer coaching and learning for SEL integration in their practice.
* **Title IV Part A–Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants**
  + These funds can support LEAs’ establishment of learning environments and enhance students’ effective learning skills by offering a well-rounded education. A well-rounded education includes social-emotional teams, programs, and professional learning. It also includes SEL strategies to use through distance learning and efforts to address the digital divide.
* **Title IV Part B–21st Century Community Learning Centers** 
  + These funds can be used for academic enrichment learning programs, mentoring programs, remedial education activities, tutoring services, and other well-rounded education activities. Criteria that prioritizes youth from first-responder families is allowable, based on locally determined enrollment needs. There’s a wealth of evidence-based out-of-school SEL programming. Support community-based providers in their partnerships with LEAs by encouraging the use of such programs.

Moving forward, states and districts must create stable, robust, and diverse funding streams to better support the implementation of SEL programs and ensure their enduring presence in schools. This crisis has shown the importance of SEL and the need to move it toward being treated as a part of states’ foundational education funding programs. While states have the opportunity to waive accountability measures for the current academic year, state plans should incorporate SEL in intervention strategies under targeted and comprehensive improvement in state accountability systems, including in their local school-improvement plans and school evaluations that are already focused on discipline and climate issues.

In conclusion, we implore state and district leaders to recognize that leveraging federal funds so that children and families of all backgrounds across the state can access SEL resources should be a priority during this crisis. Now is the time to take a bold stance on supporting educators and the families they serve by offering empathy, compassion, and social-emotional supports. The success and well-being of our nation’s next generation of leaders depends on it.

Sincerely,

<insert district/state leader name>