

August 4, 2020

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

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

The Honorable Lamar Alexander  
Chairman  
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education,  
Labor & Pensions  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray  
Ranking Member  
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education,  
Labor & Pensions  
Washington, D.C. 20510

RE: Education funding in HEALS Act

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, Chairman Alexander, and Ranking Member Murray:

The undersigned are religious denominations and organizations who support increased funding for public schools and oppose a redirection of education dollars from public schools to private schools in the HEALS Act. Specifically, we are concerned that of the \$70 billion that the HEALS Act allocates for education, two-thirds is conditional on whether schools reopen for in-person learning and approximately 10% of the K-12 total allocation would be used to fund private schools directly. The bill would also exempt private schools that receive such funding from having to follow federal civil rights laws. Additionally, a separate provision would create a new federal voucher program where federal funds would go to organizations in the states to provide vouchers to students.

State education departments should be working with their state health counterparts to devise the best and safest way to resume the goal we all share of in-person classroom instruction. Threatening public schools with the loss of funding undermines the abilities of states to decide how best to handle the public health crisis in their state.

Public school districts are facing budgetary shortfalls due to the economic impacts of the coronavirus. In order to reopen safely, they will need their ordinary operating expenses as well as additional funds to cover increased costs for safely reopening. Those additional funds are required for safety measures such as providing personal protective equipment for staff and students, increasing cleaning supplies and personnel, and altering transportation routes and classroom setups to facilitate social distancing. Our public-school teachers, principals, superintendents and other support staff want our students to return to the physical classroom, but they cannot do so safely if their school's funding continues to be threatened and cut. The focus in current political debates on how and when public schools will open demonstrates how valuable they are to our society.

As religious organizations, we appreciate the importance of private religious schools to the continuation of religious communities, and some of us sponsor such schools. We also recognize that even in the best of circumstances private schools could never replace the public-school system that serves approximately 90% of schoolchildren in the United States.

Private schools that have suffered an economic loss due to COVID-19 have been included in the relief available to all small businesses and nonprofits, as is appropriate. They may apply for the Paycheck Protection Program, Economic Disaster Loans and various other tax relief options in previous coronavirus relief legislation in addition to the provisions for small businesses and nonprofits in the HEALS Act. Even the partial list of recipients of PPP loans that has been released thus far shows that private schools were among the small businesses and nonprofits that received the PPP's forgivable loans. As units of government, public school districts were not able to receive any relief in these programs but were limited to the education funding provided to state, local, and tribal governments. In an unprecedented economic crisis when Congress is providing relief to the private and public sectors, the needs of the public sector should not be shuffled aside to allow the private sector to double dip in receiving relief provided through our tax dollars.

More of the children within our respective faith traditions are educated in public schools than private schools. We owe it them, and our broader communities, to ensure that their public schools have all the resources needed to provide a great education. Public schools are often our first, and perhaps best, training ground for how we can learn to live, work and play with our neighbors who have different religious beliefs, abilities, or cultural traditions. A pandemic should not be exploited to further a privatization agenda that does not solve the new problems and ultimately harms us all.

Sincerely,

Alliance of Baptists

American Baptist Home Mission Societies

Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC)

Church World Service

Faith in Public Life

Interfaith Alliance

National Council of Jewish Women

Pastors for Children

Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference

Union for Reform Judaism

United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries

The United Methodist Church – General Board of Church and Society

Women of Reform Judaism