

Dear Honorable Members of the Nevada State Legislature,

Thank you for your steadfast leadership during a time of uncertainty. You have been called to make decisions of unprecedented magnitude to ensure that Nevada's students, families, and communities receive much-needed relief from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are grateful for your resolution asking for more federal relief dollars, and support your goal of making decisions that benefit *all* Nevadans, no matter where they live. While there will be no simple solutions or easy decisions, we trust the Nevada State Legislature to lead with a focus on equity during this time of crisis.

The Nevada Department of Education (NDE) has worked closely with Governor Steve Sisolak and other State agency partners to focus on equity and access in administering the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief and Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER) funding made available possible through the federal CARES Act. In addition, we have applied for a Rethink K-12 Education Models Grant to further support our effort to meet the needs of students and educators during this time of significant upheaval in the delivery of education. We are eagerly anticipating the passage of the proposed Coronavirus Child Care and Education Relief Act, which will provide critically needed support for our schools.

The school building closures that began on March 16, 2020 and continued through the end of the school year forced a rapid shift to distance learning. We can all be proud that district and school leaders, teachers, families, and students have stepped up to continue teaching and learning during this difficult time. However, the shift to distance learning highlighted significant challenges, including inequities in access to technology, the need for timely professional learning and support for educators, and the availability of high-quality instructional materials. We must continue to strengthen our capacity – both in resources and talent – to address the needs of every student, regardless of their access to technology, at-home support, ability, or means.

It has become clear that students and educators cannot succeed without access to high-speed internet and functional, education-ready devices. **Therefore we, the Nevada State Board of Education, are writing to request your support in identifying funding and incentivizing internet providers to address the increasing urgency of Nevada's digital divide.** We believe a purposeful and aligned Statewide focus on the critical and pressing need to expand reliable access to high-speed internet will accomplish the following:

- Significantly reduce, with the goal of eliminating, the possibility that families have no or inadequate access to high-speed internet that would prevent them from participating fully in education, employment, and civic life;
- Increase the resources available to families and caregivers regarding supporting their children in distance learning;
- Provide uninterrupted access to behavioral and mental health services, educational services, and peer-to-peer connection to support the well-being of students;

- Enhance the professional support available to educators, including teachers and other licensed professionals, in providing high-quality and virtual instruction that can be differentiated based on students' needs and abilities;
- Ensure families have access to services that allow them to solve pressing problems, such as access to food, stable housing, and domestic violence prevention and recovery resources;
- Support the closure of opportunity and achievement gaps that prevent all students from experiencing success; and
- Enable districts and schools to provide personalized learning and targeted supports and interventions.

In addition to planning for a safe re-opening of school buildings, we must simultaneously be ready to provide distance learning options in school districts that cannot accommodate all students on campus while adhering to social distancing protocols. In addition, all of Nevada's school districts and charter schools have been tasked with planning for distance learning in the case of potential future closures due to the spread of illness or other extraordinary circumstances. Through our conversations with our communities, constituents, and government partners, we have identified the main obstacles to providing equitable learning opportunities in a virtual environment. The digital divide facing Nevada's students and families can be quantified and described as follows:

- Over 30,443 households with inadequate (rely on a mobile device or a data plan for high-speed internet where users are beholden to a limited amount of minutes or data usage that cannot support a month of connectivity for a household or individual) or no access to home internet;
- At least 96,000 students without devices;
- Frustration from parents and families who cannot access distance learning or connect with educators for assistance due to unreliable or no access to high-speed internet in both rural and densely populated areas; and
- Varying levels of corporate or government assistance to subsidize high-speed internet access resulting in inequitable opportunities for families to learn and earn during COVID-19.

In shifting to a digital learning environment at the end of the 2019-20 school year, despite our best collective efforts, existing equity issues were exacerbated, particularly for students with severe cognitive or physical disabilities, English language learners, and those who experience other challenges in demonstrating proficiency. Distance learning compounds opportunity and achievement gaps by failing to reach and support our most underserved and vulnerable students, including those who may be homeless, highly transient, or from families experiencing poverty. Our students' continued learning and growth is dependent upon our efforts to leverage every resource available to create the digital infrastructure necessary to their success.

Sincerely,

The Nevada State Board of Education

CC: Jhone M. Ebert, Nevada State Superintendent of Public Instruction

The Honorable Steve Sisolak, Governor of the State of Nevada