

April 22, 2020

Dear Governor Inslee and Superintendent Reykdal,

Thank you for your leadership and your commitment to ensuring learning continues during the COVID-19 pandemic for the 1.1 million students across our state. As you consider how to use and distribute federal education emergency response dollars, we are writing to ask you to direct a substantial portion of these funds toward the educational needs of students in foster care and students experiencing homelessness.

The COVID-19 pandemic has required schools to shift from a traditional school building-based model and adapt quickly to delivering instruction at a distance. Under these circumstances, it would be difficult for any student to embrace learning, but it is especially challenging for highly-mobile students who are in foster care or experiencing homelessness. Many of these students do not have a parent or caregiver with the capacity to assist them in staying on track with their education, let alone a safe and stable place to participate meaningfully in remote instruction.

Before COVID-19, students in foster care and students experiencing homelessness were already academically far behind their peers. They are having to deal with additional obstacles such as navigating the child welfare system or not having a safe and stable place to sleep at night due to their high mobility, challenges worsened by our existing structural and racial inequities. Highly-mobile students are more likely to be students of color, receive special education services, and be English Language Learners. Academic disparities and disproportionality will only persist, evolve, and worsen over time without adequate school and community supports. More than ever, we must not exacerbate existing barriers to students accessing quality education.

Project Education Impact, continued under SHB 2711, is a workgroup comprising state agencies and nonprofit partners serving students in foster care and students experiencing homelessness. As members of that workgroup, Building Changes and Treehouse sought insight from across the state to develop recommendations to meet the emergent needs of highly-mobile students during this COVID-19 crisis. We, the nonprofit partners, developed the enclosed recommendations on how to best use the Education Stabilization Fund dollars based on our experience in advocating for and implementing programs that specifically serve both student populations. We also spent time listening and learning from homeless liaisons, foster care liaisons, and Treehouse education staff. This group represents over 19,000 students in 32 counties and 124 school districts across the state. We were able to hear directly from those working with students to understand their needs, current barriers, and promising practices that are being deployed.

As our state prepares to distribute emergency education funds, we ask that you use the federal funds available to the Governor and the state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction to strengthen critical supports, provide guidance, and prioritize resources to meet the needs of students in foster care and students experiencing homelessness who are often the furthest from opportunity.

Sincerely,



Recommendations on Meeting the Educational Needs of Students Experiencing Foster Care and Homelessness:

Washington has approximately 40,000 students experiencing homelessness, 5,000 students in foster care in the K-12 system, 821 youth in Extended Foster Care, and an estimated 800 youth and young adults who were previously in foster care during high school that are at risk of becoming homeless. These youth experience the worst education outcomes of any student group in our state.

Based on our experience and a statewide survey with staff serving highly mobile students, four broad themes emerged in how to structure our state response using the federal funds available to the Governor and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction:

1. **Prioritize existing programs** that can be used as mechanisms to distribute dollars quickly to serve students experiencing homelessness and/or foster care.
2. We must meet the **basic needs** of students to ensure resources are provided for baseline survival, or they will simply be unable to engage in their education.
3. Our state must meet its constitutional duty to provide **access to education** for every student experiencing homelessness and/or foster care, including those youth in juvenile detention and juvenile rehabilitation settings, who are at significant and outsized disadvantage during the prolonged school-building closure.
4. Educators and providers should be supported and positioned to **deliver quality education services** to highly mobile students.

Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund Recommendations

We recommend that the Governor direct 25% of the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund to meet the needs of youth experiencing homelessness and youth currently or formerly in the foster care system. While these two groups of students make up only 4% of the student population (about 45,000 students), they experience the worst education outcomes in our state. The effects of the coronavirus have exacerbated existing inequities, and it is critical that these funds be used to address the deep opportunity gaps that these students and families are facing. Thus, a tailored and equitable response needs to be proportionate to meet the needs of each individual and warrants that significant resources be prioritized for students with the greatest educational needs. The Governor's Fund provides an opportunity to address the educational equity issues these children and youth experience.

Meet basic needs

- Provide \$4.6 million in flexible, emergency funding. These dollars should be used to meet the immediate needs most identified by homeless student liaisons: food; hygiene supplies; technology devices and internet access; housing, rental, and eviction prevention assistance including safe quarantine solutions, referrals and navigation support to achieve housing stability; and transportation.
 - \$3 million to the Washington State Student and Youth Homelessness COVID-19 Response Fund administered by Building Changes for students experiencing homelessness;
 - \$1 million to the DCYF Adolescent Services Division to be deployed through Extended Foster Care and the Independent Living programs to meet the immediate needs of youth currently in foster care;

- \$225,000 to the Treehouse Graduation Success and Launch Success program to meet the immediate needs of 300 youth participants currently and formerly in foster care; and
- \$375,000 to College Success Foundation's Passport to Careers program to meet the immediate needs of 630 unaccompanied homeless and foster care student participants.
- Provide \$2.5 million in additional funding to DCYF's Extended Foster Care (EFC) program to place a moratorium on discharging any youth from Extended Foster Care during this crisis and for 12 months after the end of the crisis, including for approximately 248 youth who turn 21 and would otherwise become ineligible. Require DCYF establish an expedited processes for youth to re-enter foster care that allows their immediate needs to be met.

Education Access

- Provide at least \$5 million through OSPI to school districts to significantly expand summer school, credit retrieval and summer enrichment options available to students, and prioritize students experiencing homelessness and foster care. Provide necessary transportation and supplies to enable full participation.
- Provide \$1 million for districts through OSPI for training and professional development of existing staff, e.g., homeless and foster care liaisons, building points of contact, and paraeducators, to proactively provide supplemental virtual academic support for youth in foster care or experiencing homelessness based on the Treehouse Graduation Success model, and teaching and learning support for parents and caregivers in prolonged and remote learning environments.
- Provide \$500,000 in funding to Treehouse to train and deploy staff to serve as education advocates from July 1 – December 31, 2020 to ensure that districts are meeting the individualized education needs of students experiencing foster care and students experiencing homelessness.
- Make \$1 million in funding to the Open Doors Youth Reengagement program through OSPI to help youth who are not enrolled in school to reengage, including access to technology devices and the internet.

Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund

Distribute Funds to Increase Equity

The state must ensure that all school districts that receive funds make publicly available how they and schools within their boundaries are spending their allocations, explicitly describing how they met the unique and individualized needs of students who are low income, students of color, students with disabilities, English language learners, students experiencing homelessness, students in foster care, and students engaged in the juvenile justice system. We must ensure that funding is distributed equitably and directed to students and districts most impacted by COVID-19 with:

- Ensuring funding is directed by districts to schools with the highest academic and population needs and direct funding to students who are furthest from opportunity. For example, allocate funding based on rate of students experiencing homelessness and or in foster care and county-level COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people.

- Requiring districts publish expenditure reports on how the use of these funds met the needs of highly mobile students.

Guidance and Systems Coordination for Quality Education Delivery:

Delivering quality education services requires an emergency response and efforts to bring stability in remote learning over time. The recommendations below should be followed as part of both short-term response and long-term stabilization. As advocates and providers of educational service delivery for highly mobile students, Project Education Impact is well positioned to lend expertise and facilitation of system coordination achieved by:

- Prioritizing re-starting individualized education to students engaged in the juvenile detention and juvenile rehabilitation systems.
- Protecting and prioritizing the employment continuity of homeless and foster care liaisons and ensure that they have the time and resources to carry out their duties under Federal Law.¹
- OSPI and LEAs prioritizing coordination with other agencies to ensure youth and families know how to access resources to obtain basic needs such as unemployment benefits, rental assistance, and food assistance.
- OSPI and the Health Care authority working together to ensure guidance is not creating additional barriers for youth and families experiencing homelessness. For example, closing schools to protect public health may create additional challenges for families or youth experiencing homelessness or in foster care who need to access facilities to address basic needs such as food or hygiene.²
- Prioritizing state and local level coordination across student support service departments, including but not limited to ELL, Special Education, Institutional Education, and the Office of Equity and Civil Rights. Students experiencing homelessness, foster care, or the juvenile justice systems are more likely to be enrolled in special education services and/or identified as ELL compared to their general education peers. Students of color are overrepresented within these populations. Commitment to a whole child approach that is grounded in equity requires an integrated continuum of supports for those students furthest from opportunity.³
- Providing guidance and support for how school building points of contact can be used to navigate resources for youth and families and play a role in closing education gaps for students experiencing homelessness. School building points of contact should also be required for students in foster care.

1 According to the Washington State Auditor, “Statewide, districts dedicate an average of 0.4 of one full-time equivalent homeless liaison position to student homelessness, which is, on average, less than 20 minutes with each homeless student each month.”

Office of the Washington State Auditor. (2019). *Performance Audit: Opportunities to Better Identify and Serve K-12 Students Experiencing Homelessness*. Retrieved from https://www.sao.wa.gov/performance_audit/opportunities-to-better-identify-and-serve-k-12-students-experiencing-homelessness/

2 United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. (2020, March 16). *Supporting Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness during the COVID-19 Outbreak: Questions to Consider*. Retrieved April 15, 2020, from <https://www.usich.gov/tools-for-action/supporting-children-and-youth-experiencing-homelessness-during-the-covid-19-outbreak-questions-to-consider/>

3 Lemon, M. (2019). *Students Experiencing Homelessness in Washington’s K-12 Public Schools: 2015-2018 Trends, Characteristics, and Academic Outcomes*. Retrieved from <https://schoolhousewa.org/data/analysis/academic-outcomes-for-students-experiencing-homelessness-are-low-across-the-state-of-washington/>