

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 10, 2022

VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION

The Honorable Miguel Cardona
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary Cardona,

We write with great concern over the rash of school closings throughout the country – both at K-12 schools and colleges and universities. Over the past several weeks, numerous colleges and universities have gone back to remote learning, including Georgetown University, Yale University, and Duke University. Further, more than 5,400 K-12 schools across the country have closed their physical building for one day or more in the first week of 2022, including districts in Chicago, the third largest school system in the country, Cleveland, Newark, Detroit, and Milwaukee. These preemptive school closures are unnecessary, especially given the high vaccination rate of teachers and the layered prevention strategies recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), including the test-to-stay program.

In 2020, Congress passed two bipartisan appropriations bills that provided \$68 billion to K-12 schools and \$37 billion to institutions of higher education. In addition, in 2021, the administration pushed through a partisan reconciliation package that included an additional \$123 billion to K-12 schools and \$40 billion to institutions of higher education. Further, schools received a separate \$10 billion from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) specifically for testing. Yet, today our nation is faced with school closures across the country. The question to the Department is why aren't schools continuing in-person learning? And how will the Department address this critical situation?

We appreciate your public support for ensuring children of all ages stay in in-person school and the efforts made to keep children in school by providing guidance on testing and other mitigation strategies. It is critical to keep children and young adults in school to avoid significant and unnecessary learning loss and detrimental impacts to mental health. However, given the recent rise in school closures, clearly more must be done beyond the administration's current rhetoric to support state and local leaders in keeping schools open and kids in classrooms. We know that more money isn't the answer. Even President Biden admitted this on January 4th when he stated, "They have what they need."

What concerns us is that, as of December 30, 2021, 86 percent of funding remains unspent by K-12 school districts and 36 percent remains unspent by colleges and universities. With more than \$266 billion specifically appropriated for K-12 schools, colleges, and

universities to ensure the continuity of learning during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and more than \$191 billion currently available, where is the disconnect between the Department and schools? Schools have the funding necessary to address the impacts of COVID-19 and keep students in school. They also have the flexibility to spend their funds on what will work best for their students, including improving ventilation systems, hiring more teachers, or focusing on students' mental health. But do they have a strategy from the Department to ensure that state, local, and institutional leaders have the best and most comprehensive and up-to-date information they need on how to keep their classrooms open throughout the ongoing pandemic?

We have appreciated your past efforts to keep schools open, but clearly more must be done. It is important for Congress, and the American people, to have a clear understanding of the administration's strategy and a full accounting of how the Department of Education is using taxpayer funding. Therefore, we request answers to the following questions below:

1. Please provide a comprehensive list of guidance the Department has provided to state, local, and institutional leaders on how they can keep their schools open.
2. How have you worked with key advocacy groups, including teachers unions, to disseminate the latest CDC guidance and encourage in-person learning?
3. The CDC recently released updated guidance on quarantine and isolation. What have you done to ensure that state, local, and institutional leaders are aware of the updated guidance and able to update their policies to reflect the new guidance?
4. How have you worked with HHS to ensure that K-12 schools and institutions of higher education have access to tests to implement successful test-to-stay policies?
5. Please provide a breakdown of how COVID-19 relief funding has been spent by both K-12 schools and institutions of higher education.
6. For COVID-19 relief funding that has been obligated by the Department but not yet spent by districts or institutions, how are you working with state, local, and institutional leaders to support spending those remaining dollars in a way that best supports keeping schools open?

We appreciate your prompt attention to this matter and look forward to a response by January 31st.

Sincerely,



Roy Blunt
Ranking Member
LHHS Appropriations Subcommittee



Richard Burr
Ranking Member
Committee on Health,
Education, Labor & Pensions