

JESÚS "CHUY" GARCÍA  
4TH DISTRICT, ILLINOIS  
530 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515  
(202) 225-8203

Congress of the United States  
House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515-1304

COMMITTEE ON FINANCIAL SERVICES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
NATIONAL SECURITY, INTERNATIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT AND MONETARY POLICY  
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION &  
INFRASTRUCTURE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
HIGHWAYS AND TRANSIT  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON RAILROADS, PIPELINES,  
AND HAZARDOUS MATERIALS

February 3, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden  
President of the United States  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden,

Thank you for your leadership and commitment to reopen schools and early child care centers safely amid the COVID-19 pandemic as outlined in the American Rescue Plan. While we value education and the opportunities it offers students from all walks of life, it is critical to make educational decisions with health risks and existing barriers in mind. Many educators, parents, and students in my district remain troubled by the decision to return to in-person learning, which is why I write to respectfully request additional resources and clear national standards for public schools to create an environment safe enough to return to the classroom.

Chicago, like many urban centers, continues to suffer from an alarming number of COVID cases and deaths. Latinos comprise the largest share of virus cases in Chicago and Illinois, and unfortunately, many of the COVID hot zones are found in my district. Chicago's Latino and Black communities, those hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, are also the communities who would be most impacted with in-person return to school as parents represent a large sector of the essential workforce and CPS students are mostly Latino or Black (82.5%).<sup>1</sup> A CPS survey conducted in December 2020 demonstrated that a significant number of Latino (55.4%), Black (40.9%), and Asian-American (58.4%) students prefer learning remotely from home when presented with the option in comparison to White students (27.5%).<sup>2 3</sup> These survey results point to the compounded realities that the pandemic has had on marginalized and economically distressed communities including decisions to avoid homelessness<sup>4</sup>. Many low-income, immigrant, and working-class families live in multigenerational homes where students take on multiple caretaking roles. A premature return to in-person learning could drastically further the spread of COVID-19 in underserved communities.

CPS represents the third-largest school system in the nation and how we handle the access to vaccines and the safe return to school here sets the precedent for other major urban areas to follow. We know that in-person learning is best for students, but due to the pandemic alternative settings were created. Schools,

<sup>1</sup> "Demographics," Chicago Public Schools, accessed on February 2, 2021. <https://www.cps.edu/about/district-data/demographics/>

<sup>2</sup> Karp, Sarah "Only 37% of CPS Students Say They Will Go Back to School In Person," December 16, 2020. <https://www.wbez.org/stories/only-37-of-cps-students-say-theyll-go-back-to-school-in-person-and-white-students-are-overrepresented>.

<sup>3</sup> Kunichoff, Yana "One-Third of Students Opt For In Person Learning, But Students Are Disproportionately White," December 16, 2020. <https://chicago.chalkbeat.org/2020/12/16/22179385/one-third-of-chicago-students-opt-for-in-person-learning-but-students-are-disproportionately-white>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/homeless-doubled-families-living-other-households-may-fall-aid-blind-n1251446>

teachers, parents, and students have done their best, under extraordinarily difficult circumstances, to make remote learning work for everyone. Yet, we recognize that the current settings pose greater limitations for English language learners, special education students, and students that need (and by federal law require) additional accommodations to prosper academically and socio-emotionally. Many local health experts, educators, parents and students in my community stand strongly behind the decision that we cannot return to schools until we have the appropriate infrastructure, adequate support, and safety protocols in place.

While CPS has invested more than \$100 million to mitigate risk and improve the safety of its schools, we know that it is not enough to fully address the issues raised by our students, educators, and community members. Based on expert guidance and community input, federal and local governments must ensure the following:

1. *PPE*: Guarantee PPE including N-95 masks, gloves, gowns, and other equipment as required for specific jobs
2. *Testing*: Ensure adequate testing frequency of teachers, students, and support staff as recommended by health experts
3. *Contact tracing*: Encourage the direct coordination for contact tracing in schools, zip codes, and community areas that are most impacted and ensure that community-based organizations have the funds and resources to lead these efforts
4. *Vaccination*: Provide priority access to vaccines for teachers and personnel before return
5. *Mental health*: Provide access to mental health services and resources for students and educators
6. *Accommodations*: Provide special accommodations, such as continued remote learning, for students and teachers in high-risks groups
7. *Language*: Require schools districts to produce, distribute, and make publicly available materials and resources in Spanish and other languages spoken by families
8. *State Education Plans*: Restore states' rights to seek testing and reporting waivers from the U.S. Department of Education as deemed necessary by local plans
9. *Digital Divide*: Increase federal funding for digital infrastructure including access to broadband services, devices, and technology
10. *Infrastructure*: Increase federal support for state and local funds to rectify and upgrade mechanical ventilation systems to ensure the safe reopening and operations in schools, as outlined in your executive order<sup>5</sup>

The pandemic exacerbated the inequitable conditions in underserved communities already suffering from chronic disinvestment in school infrastructure, academic wrap-around services, and mental health supports. Students, educators, and support staff returning to in-person classes should not be forced to risk additional community spread or their own health if solutions exist in the near future. We must focus our efforts on controlling the virus and creating safe conditions for learning by following the guidance of

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<sup>5</sup><https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/21/executive-order-supporting-the-reopening-and-continuing-operation-of-schools-and-early-childhood-education-providers/>

health experts and impacted communities. Most importantly, federal, state, and local governments must work in tandem to secure additional funds while restoring trust in the safety of our schools.

To achieve that end, we ask that your administration issue clear national standards outlining prerequisites for a return to in-person learning and ensure that those standards are informed by diverse stakeholders, public health experts, and organized labor.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Jesús G. "Chuy" García  
Member of Congress  
Illinois' 4th Congressional District

CC: Secretary Of Education-Designate Miguel Cardona