

**Written Statement of Lily Eskelsen García
President, National Education Association**

**Before the Committee on Financial Services
United States House of Representatives
Subcommittee on National Security, International Development, and Monetary Policy
Virtual Hearing:
Paycheck Security: Economic Perspectives on Alternative Approaches to Protecting
Workers' Pay During COVID-19
Tuesday, July 7, 2020**

Thank you Chairman Cleaver, Ranking Member Hill, and members of the Committee for this opportunity to provide testimony for today's hearing. My name is Lily Eskelsen García and I am a sixth grade teacher from Utah, and president of the National Education Association, NEA.

As NEA's president, I am honored to represent more than 3 million teachers, education support professionals, and specialized instructional support professionals in K-12 public schools and on public college campuses. NEA also represents educators in Department of Defense schools, college students who plan to become educators, retired educators, and public employees in local and state government. All are essential to preparing students to contribute to their communities and build successful lives for themselves, and therefore, all are essential to the future of our nation.

I'm in constant contact with a wide range of educators—from those in rural towns, to educators in densely populated urban areas and the suburbs and exurbs that border them. I am so proud that NEA members have risen to this moment and demonstrated the resilience, creativity, and teamwork that we strive to cultivate in our students. Educators have organized car caravans through students' neighborhoods to deliver a crucial message in this uncertain time: Even though our school building is closed, I am still here for you. They have helped parents who overnight had to take on one of the hardest jobs in the world: teacher. And they have cried with me more times than I can count because they worry about the many students for whom school was the only stable place in their lives.

I believe this pandemic has actually intensified our commitment to students. While we are a very diverse group, we share the belief that students in our public schools—no matter where they live or their race or ethnicity or family income—should have an education that prepares them for the responsibilities of citizenship and to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world. This our fight, and it is a privilege to wage it.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made this fight much more urgent, and much more difficult. It has deepened disparities that have always existed and separated the students lucky enough to attend public schools in well-off communities from those who attend schools in poor communities. In recent months, this cavernous gap has been well illustrated by the Digital Divide—the disparity between students who have access to the internet and devices at home, and those who do not.

As we speak today, governors and mayors, with state income and sales tax revenues falling off a cliff, are making steep budget cuts that will exacerbate these disparities and devastate students in

public schools. Nothing will be off limits as school districts look to slash spending, leading to program cuts, ballooning class sizes, and more. Without federal assistance, we will continue to see educator layoffs that will be particularly harsh for those who struggle to make ends meet even during normal times, such as our wonderful, amazingly devoted education support professionals: for instance, the lunch ladies, like I once was, the school bus drivers, and the maintenance and repair staff. These are the people who have been on the job since this pandemic began, often working without the personal protective equipment they needed. They were putting themselves in harm's way to get meals to students and families, drop off school work to students, and keep our schools healthy and safe.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, **nearly 900,000 public education jobs have already been lost because of budget cuts.** By comparison, more than 350,000 education jobs were lost due to the Great Recession. In other words, COVID-19 has done more damage in three months than a recession that lasted for a year and a half. If this damage goes unchecked, nearly 2 million educators could lose their jobs over the next three years, according to NEA's analysis. This would represent one-fifth of the workforce that powers public schools and higher education institutions. **The "COVID-19" recession could be six times worse for education than the 2008 financial crisis.**

Our nation has about 1.4 million *more* K-12 students than we had in 2008. Yet, now we have 135,000 *fewer* educators than we had 12 years ago. The layoffs that could stem from pandemic-related budget cuts would worsen what is already a dire situation.

The economists on this panel will speak to what the data and unemployment numbers mean for our nation's economy and long-term fiscal outlook. But I can tell you what these factors mean for the public schools that educate 50 million students. They mean that many educators may soon be out of jobs that they love, jobs that allow them to nurture, mentor, and support students. This tremendous loss will of course affect individual educators and their families, threatening their ability to keep up with bills, put their kids through college, buy groceries, and support the businesses in their communities. But the impact will be especially severe for students.

No community would go unaffected. As was the case during the Great Recession, the schools in wealthy communities are more likely to weather this storm reasonably well. But schools in poorer communities, those that were already struggling with too few staff to meet students' needs, will barely stay afloat. Job losses in these schools would profoundly affect low-income students whose schools rely on Title I funding to reduce class sizes, hire specialists, and offer a rich curriculum. These job losses will also profoundly affect our students with special needs because the federal government has yet to fulfill its commitment under IDEA to pay 40 percent of the average per student cost for every special education student. This creates shortfalls that school districts must cover and it denies full opportunity to students with disabilities—even during better economic times.

Because it appears this pandemic will be with us for the foreseeable future, our schools must adapt in a variety of ways to the new reality. We must have enough teachers to assess where students are and to *meet* them where they are, given the loss of learning many will have experienced. We must have enough school counselors, school social workers, and other specialized instructional support personnel to deal with the emotional burdens and trauma many

students will be carrying with them when they return to school. Before our students can learn, they must heal, and we need to provide enough educators at all levels to help them through that process.

And when it comes to reopening, let me make clear that educators, more than anyone, want our students back in classrooms for the 2020-21 academic year. We yearn to look into their eyes and reassure them and give them the dedicated time and attention they need. But the safety of students and educators cannot be compromised. We know we will need to provide PPE for students and educators; modify classrooms, cafeterias, gyms, auditoriums, playgrounds, and school buses for social distancing; provide disinfecting materials and sanitizing stations; intensify instruction and support for students traumatized by the impact of the coronavirus on their families and communities; and much, much more. All of this demands *more* educators in our schools, not fewer. More resources, not less.

NEA recently released guidance on reopening public schools called **All Hands on Deck** because we know that bringing students and educators back together is not only best for students; it is best for our nation, too. We cannot fully reopen our economy unless and until public schools reopen. Closed schools mean parents and guardians cannot go back to work, which means working people will not have the money to pay their bills, much less spend money on goods and services in their communities. Keep in mind that aside from their centrality to local economic activity, public schools are hubs of activity in many places, where people gather, meet, vote, and access important support services. Therefore, it is imperative that they reopen, and that they be fully staffed when they do.

We thank the House for taking bold action to pass the HEROES Act, and we call on Mitch McConnell and the Senate to abandon their wait-and-see approach and act quickly. Schools are already planning for the upcoming school year and all of the new dilemmas—COVID-related and beyond—that it will bring. We know that even at the start of a typical school year, schools across the country must scramble to fill thousands of positions. This year, layoffs will worsen the shortage of teachers, specialized instructional support professionals, and education support professionals. We must act now to provide school districts with a measure of financial certainty as they continue planning for a school year that will be, just like 2019-2020, a year like none other.

To stave off the elimination of thousands of critical educator positions, NEA urges Congress to provide at least \$175 billion more for the Education Stabilization Fund. In addition, we are calling for at least \$56 million in directed funding for protective equipment, and at least \$4 billion to create a special fund, administered by the successful E-Rate program, to equip students with hot spots and devices to help close the homework gap. Even when schools do open, they will very likely need to incorporate online learning.

NEA members also support Representative Jayapal's Paycheck Recovery Act as a means of avoiding mass layoffs and enabling workers, including those in the public sector, to keep employer-provided benefits such as healthcare coverage, which is crucial during a global pandemic. The Paycheck Recovery Act would cover 100 percent of wages for workers earning salaries up to \$90,000, ensuring that these individuals are kept on the job and off the

unemployment rolls, which grow longer by the day. We thank Representative Jayapal for introducing this bill and recognizing that mass unemployment does not have to be a consequence of the pandemic. We can, and we should, make much better choices for working people.

The week ending last Friday marked the 15th consecutive week that unemployment filings exceeded 1 million. We have to ask ourselves: How much more of this can families, communities, and our nation withstand before we are so damaged that it will take not mere budget cycles, but *decades*, before we recover? We risk the kind of harm that could last for a generation, or longer. At a time when so many working people are suffering, immediate action is needed—not next month or six months down the line, but right now.

I will end by telling you that even now, members of the NEA have not lost hope that we can come out of this time as a stronger nation, able to surround students with the dedicated educators they need, and able to provide the opportunities that every student deserves. The members of the National Education Association stand ready to work with this committee to toward this goal.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions.