

August 4, 2020

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Governor
State of Florida
The Capitol
400 S. Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001
governorron.desantis@eog.myflorida.com

Richard Corcoran
Commissioner
Florida Department of Education
Turlington Building, Suite 1514
325 West Gaines Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399
commissioner@fldoe.org

The Honorable Jeanette Nuñez
Lieutenant Governor
State of Florida
The Capitol
400 S. Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001
jeanette.nunez@eog.myflorida.com

Jacob Oliva
Chancellor, Division of Public Schools
Florida Department of Education
Turlington Building, Suite 1514
325 West Gaines Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399
jacob.oliva@fldoe.org

RE: The Safe and Responsible Reopening of Florida's Schools

Dear Governor DeSantis, Lt. Governor Nuñez, Education Commissioner Corcoran, and Chancellor Oliva:

On behalf of UnidosUS (formerly the National Council of La Raza), I write to urge you to reopen Florida's schools safely with comprehensive federal investments that all students and parents need for academic success.

UnidosUS, previously known as NCLR (National Council of La Raza), is the nation's largest Hispanic* civil rights and advocacy organization. The UnidosUS Florida-based Affiliates include 17 community-based organizations that invest more than \$113 million and employ more than 3,200 staff to provide direct services from housing counseling to workforce development to approximately 130,000 Floridians annually. UnidosUS—headquartered in Washington, DC—has an office in Miami and staff in Orlando. Through partnerships, community investments, and state research and advocacy on housing, health, and education, UnidosUS advances opportunities for the more than six million Latinos who call Florida home, and is present in 27 of Florida's 67 counties.

* The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race. This document may also refer to this population as "Latinx" to represent the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are present in the community.

On May 8, UnidosUS sent a [letter](#) to you and Florida’s legislative leadership outlining 16 proactive policy recommendations to provide sustained and equitable support to Florida’s families, especially those Hispanic families experiencing the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic without federal relief. Today, we write to share policy recommendations for the safe reopening of Florida schools and to request a meeting to discuss these solutions. Our recommendations help to ensure that Latino students, especially English learners (ELs), will not experience further learning losses in the 2020–2021 school year.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every aspect of the lives of Florida’s children and youth. According to the Florida Department of Health, as of July 24th, 31,150 children in the state had tested positive for COVID-19. This is concerning for Hispanic families who continue to be disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, particularly those who lack health coverage. A report by UnidosUS and Georgetown University Health Policy Institute’s Center for Children and Families found that Florida has the third-largest population of uninsured children in the country—137,301 Latino children in the state lack health insurance.¹ Academics is also a concern for Hispanic parents, with educational progress for nearly 940,000 Latino students in Florida in jeopardy.²

We share the Florida Department of Education’s (FLDOE) goal of addressing the unique needs of vulnerable students such as ELs, students with disabilities, and racial/ethnic minorities.

One of our top education priorities is addressing the gap in professional development that EL teachers face, in digital instruction—an issue that Florida DOE cites in its reopening plan. The “Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions ([HEROES Act](#),” which passed the U.S. House of Representatives, includes a provision for \$90 billion State Fiscal Stabilization Fund (SFSF) through the U.S. Department of Education, which awards grants to governors to bolster Early Childhood Education (ECE), K-12, and Institutions of Higher Education. The U.S. Senate bill “[Coronavirus Child Care and Education Relief Act](#) (CCCERA)” invests \$345 billion in the Education Stabilization Fund (ESF). Importantly, within the ESF, funds are provided for the Governor’s Emergency Relief Fund (GEER). Below is a list of education priorities that could be addressed with federal funds from both bills, if signed into law:

- **Increase funding for early childhood education to serve more eligible children.** Florida’s youngest learners need support. The “HEROES Act” provides \$7 billion in additional funding for childcare through the Child Care and Development Block Grant

¹ Kelly Whitener et al., “Decade of Success for Latino Children’s Health Now in Jeopardy” (Washington, DC: UnidosUS and Georgetown University Health Policy Institute’s Center for Children and Families, March 2020), <http://publications.unidosus.org/handle/123456789/2039> (accessed July 21, 2020).

² UnidosUS, “Latino Students and English Learners: Fast Facts 2020,” http://publications.unidosus.org/bitstream/handle/123456789/2022/unidosus_fastfacts_latino_students_els.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y (accessed July 21, 2020).

(CCDBG) “to supplement, not supplant” childcare assistance for low-income families. Funding may be used for several purposes including relief from copayments and tuition payments for families and continued payments and assistance to childcare providers in the case of decreased enrollment or closures. Moreover, as the pandemic continues with no foreseen end, dedicated funding towards Early Head Start, Migrant Head Start, and Head Start programs are crucial in order to serve more eligible children.

- **Improve online learning for all students.** As more school districts plan to start the new school year virtually, more than a quarter of Hispanic students in Florida lack high-speed internet, and 138,567 lack a computer.³ For ELs without internet access, online learning is completely inaccessible. Targeted and increased investment in online learning supports for ELs—including devices, connectivity, and digital programs specific to their needs—are essential to preventing ELs from being shut out of the learning process. The “CCCERA” includes \$175 billion in funding to State educational agencies and school districts, and \$4 billion for E-Rate to enable schools to purchase discounted computers, tablets, hotspots, and at-home internet service for students and educators. The “HEROES Act” calls for \$58 billion in state grants to provide much-needed relief to distribute among K–12 schools in coping with the impact of the pandemic.

- **Support professional development in digital instruction for teachers of ELs.** In the FLDOE plan to reopen schools, it is acknowledged that English-learner specialists report receiving fewer hours of professional development on digital learning resources than their mainstream counterparts.⁴ “CCCERA” provides \$1 billion in Title III to support ELs, and would allow greater opportunity for states, districts, and schools to provide the supportive training that teachers of ELs need to serve their students.

- **Uphold the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requirements to engage and communicate with parents of ELs.** As identified in FLDOE’s plans, the new and unfamiliar modes of instruction due to school closings can be particularly challenging for families of ELs and students with disabilities. Across all facets of reopening schools, regardless of scheduling and structure, school districts must actively work to address the language and cultural barriers that parents of ELs face. It is important that Title III support this specific purpose in this time of crisis. Such funding exists in “CCCERA,” which could help more than 300,000 ELs in Florida.

- **Provide mental health supports for ELs.** We agree with FLDOE in affirming that mental health services and resources need to be a mainstay in our school districts. As the many devastating impacts of the pandemic continue, further funding needs to be allocated for our state’s vulnerable student populations, including ELs. Regardless of whether

³ Future Ready Schools, Alliance for Excellent Education, “Students of Color Caught in the Homework Gap,” July 2020, (accessed July 22, 2020).

⁴ U.S. Department of Education, “Supporting English Learners through Technology: What Districts and Teachers Say about Digital Learning Resources for English Learners,” May 2019, <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/title-iii/180414.pdf> (accessed July 21, 2020).

students continue their education remotely or via face-to-face instruction, the hardship exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic can be exceedingly stressful and overwhelming for students and their caregivers and impact a student's ability to focus on learning.

- **Target investments in higher education.** The "HEROES Act" includes \$27 billion for states to support public institutions of higher education. It also provides an additional \$10 billion for public and nonprofit institutions that have suffered losses as a result of COVID-19, including \$1.7 billion for minority-serving institutions, such as historically black colleges and universities and Hispanic-serving institutions. These funds may be used for education and general expenses (such as making up for loss of revenue, reimbursement for expenses already incurred, and payroll); grants to students to cover food, housing, technology, health care, and child care costs; and acquiring technology to support distance learning and training faculty and staff to use this technology.

- **Prevent education-sector job loss as a result of COVID-19.** According to the National Education Association, the state of Florida could experience 93,000 potential job losses from the estimated decline in general state revenues. If the "HEROES Act" is signed into law, it would restore or save approximately 10,006 higher education jobs.⁵

It is evident that the FLDOE is committed to protecting Florida's students and narrowing the achievement gaps as much as possible in these unprecedented times, and it is a value that we share. Reopening Florida's schools safely is only possible with a comprehensive investment that supports all students and their families with the resources needed for academic success and well-being. Should the next stimulus package include the Title III provision in "CCCERA," Florida stands to draw down an estimated \$63 million in supplemental funding to support the state's 300,000 ELs.

The undersigned urge you to act, support more federal investments in Florida's educational system, and meet with UnidosUS and Affiliate leaders across Florida to further discuss, in detail, our school reopening recommendations. Please contact UnidosUS Florida State Director Jared Nordlund at jnordlund@unidosus.org for further information.

Sincerely,



Eric Rodriguez

Senior Vice President, Policy and Advocacy, UnidosUS

⁵ National Education Association, "Estimated Decline in State Revenues by State, Estimated Decline in State Support for Public Education, Potential Education Job Losses from State Revenue Declines, HEROES Act State Fiscal Stabilization Fund State Estimates and Amounts Per Title I and Pell Grant Recipients, and Education Jobs Restored or Saved," https://educationvotes.nea.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Revised-NEA-Estimates-in-Support-of-the-HEROES-Act-06-06-2020.pdf?_ga=2.160508857.5460897.1594664619-2115236415.1554842489 (accessed July 21, 2020).

Jared Nordlund
Florida State Director, UnidosUS

Karina Pavone
Executive Director, Amigos for Kids

John Martinez
Executive Director, Centro Campesino

Betty Alonso
President and CEO, ConnectFamilias

Liz Gutierrez
Founding CEO, Enterprising Latinas, Inc.

Maria F. Pinzon
Executive Director, Hispanic Services Council

Josie Bacallao
President and CEO, Hispanic Unity of Florida, Inc.

Sylvia A. Alvarez
Executive Director, Housing & Education Alliance (HEA)

Marucci Guzman
Executive Director, Latino Leadership

Edward C. Garza
CEO, Mexican American Council

Isabel Garcia
Executive Director
Redlands Christian Migrant Association (RCMA)

Steve Kirk
Executive Director, Rural Neighborhoods, Inc.

Luz Corcuera
Executive Director, UnidosNow