

FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE ACTIVITY: MARCH 2020

Coronavirus and COVID-19

Congress has passed three coronavirus bills and is contemplating a fourth bill with an infrastructure focus. The three bills passed thus far address many of [NEA's initial legislative priorities](#):

- The [Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2020 \(H.R. 6074\)](#), signed into law March 6, appropriated \$8.3 billion for the public health system, vaccine development, and other needs.
- The [Families First Coronavirus Response Act \(H.R. 6201\)](#), signed into law March 18, provides free testing, paid sick and emergency leave (for some), and bolsters unemployment insurance, food initiatives, and federal support for Medicaid. NEA urged members to support the bill in a [letter sent March 12](#). In a [second letter sent March 18](#), we urged members to oppose the Johnson amendment to the bill and support the Murray substitute; both measures focused on paid sick leave and both failed.
- The \$2 trillion [Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security \(CARES\) Act](#), signed into law March 27, “is not perfect, but it does address many urgent needs of our students, educators and schools,” said NEA President [Lily Eskelsen García](#). Key provisions include one-time payments to most households; expanded unemployment insurance; a six-month suspension of federal student loan payments and interest accrual; a \$30.7 billion Education Stabilization Fund to help fill state budget gaps and prevent educator layoffs; and tens of billions of dollars to help prevent housing insecurity. The CARES Act also allows flexibility with regard to Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) accountability and reporting requirements, which NEA supports.

We have created and identified several online repositories of resources about this legislation and related issues. Check out the:

- [COVID-19 page](#) for information about advocacy before the U.S. Congress, including letters, action alerts, links to bills, and more
- [NEA Today page](#) for information on our official position on distance learning, links to news stories and resources, and more

As part of our COVID-19 advocacy, NEA continues to urge Congress to take action to:

- **Close the homework gap.** As part of the Education and Library Networks Coalition (EdLiNC), on March 12 NEA [sent a letter](#) urging Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman

Ajit Pai to use the E-Rate program to ensure that K-12 students can access the internet. Twenty senators, led by Sen. Ed Markey (D-MA), signed a [second letter](#) to Pai on March 22. EdLiNC sent a [third letter](#) on March 23 urging House leadership to provide \$2 billion for the E-Rate program to help close the homework gap experienced by students who lack internet access at home.

- **Provide connectivity across the country.** A March 23 [letter from 250 organizations](#), including NEA, urged the FCC to adapt the Lifeline program to help make essential communications affordable for low-income consumers during the coronavirus crisis.
- **Repeal Social Security penalties.** For retirees, the coronavirus is a double whammy threatening to ruin both their health and finances—especially those whose Social Security benefits are reduced, or totally eliminated, by the Government Pension Offset (GPO) and Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP). On March 20, NEA [sent a letter](#) to the sponsors of the Social Security Fairness Act (S. 521/H.R. 141), which would fully repeal both the GPO and WEP; the letter urged them to include GPO/WEP repeal in coronavirus legislation.
- **Address the needs of special education students.** Thirty-seven members of Congress signed a March 23 [letter to House leadership](#) urging the inclusion of additional funding for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in coronavirus legislation. “Despite changing classroom settings,” they wrote, “education for students with disabilities cannot be compromised. Additional funding for IDEA will allow teachers and parents to continue to provide a high-quality education at home while meeting benchmarks for students, no matter how they learn.”
- **Expand paid sick leave.** A March 10 [letter to the Subcommittee on Workforce Protections](#) stressed the importance of paid sick leave, especially during the coronavirus crisis, and urged members to support the Healthy Families Act (H.R. 1784) and the Families First Coronavirus Act (H.R. 6150).
- **Protect voting rights.** A March 17 [letter from the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights](#), whose signatories included NEA, urged Congress and state elections officials to adopt “policies to ensure both the public’s safety and the orderly conduct of the 2020 primary and general elections in light of the current threat posed by COVID-19.”
- **Reach out to Congress.** A March 18 [letter to congressional leadership](#) from 14 leading education organizations, including NEA, expressed “strong, unified support for clear, direct and immediate bipartisan efforts to provide both policy and fiscal relief to state and local

education agencies.” A March 20 [letter thanked Sen. Mike Braun \(R-IN\)](#) for his help in getting a large group of students and educators traveling in Europe safely back to the United States during the coronavirus crisis.

- **Work with allied groups.** A March 21 [letter signed by seven leading education organizations](#), including NEA, urged Congress to provide \$75 billion in emergency funding directly to states to support local education agencies; emergency funding for technology for remote learning, including \$2 billion for the E-Rate program; paid sick leave for workers who need to care for sick, elderly, or disabled family members; cover 100 percent of the Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP) for Medicaid for at least one year; and include public employers in the payroll tax credit for “emergency paid leave.”

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CENSUS 2020

A March 4 [letter to both chambers of Congress](#), sent during “Statistics in the Schools Week,” highlighted NEA’s efforts to promote an accurate and complete census; expressed support for S. Con. Res. 31, the Schatz-Murkowski 2020 Census Concurrent Resolution; and encouraged broad participation in the census through NEA’s “We Count” campaign.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and her pro-privatization, anti-student agenda were rebuked on March 11 when a bipartisan Senate majority blocked her efforts to gut protections for student borrowers and taxpayers in her revision of the “borrower defense” rule. Ten Republican senators joined Democratic senators in voting 53 to 42 for [S.J. Res. 56](#), which would overturn the Department of Education’s revision of the 30-year-old Borrower Defense to Repayment rule. When predatory for-profit colleges have defrauded students with false promises, it is the borrower defense rule that enables students to have their federal loans canceled or forgiven.

“Today’s bipartisan vote in the Senate is a victory for students and shows, once again, just how out of touch Betsy DeVos’ agenda is with the American people,” said [NEA President Lily Eskelsen García](#). As of this writing, the president has neither signed nor vetoed the resolution.

IMMIGRATION

In a March 11 letter, NEA urged members of the House to support the [NO BAN Act \(H.R. 2214\)](#), which would:

- Immediately repeal all versions of the administration’s Muslim, refugee, and asylum bans.

- Require the executive branch to base any future restrictions on immigration or entry into the United States on “specific and credible facts” connected to “specific acts,” meet a compelling government interest, and employ the least restrictive means.
- Require the executive branch to notify and brief Congress on the status, implementation, and constitutional and legislative authority for any future restrictions.
- Specifically prohibit discrimination based on religion in the Immigration and Nationality Act.

READ ACROSS AMERICA

Sens. Susan Collins (R-ME) and Jack Reed (D-RI) and Reps. Susan Davis (D-CA) and Rodney Davis (R-IL) introduced bipartisan resolutions in their respective chambers designating March 2, 2020, Read Across America Day.

RURAL SCHOOLS

In the face of a bipartisan outcry, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos retreated from a bookkeeping change that would have caused more than 800 rural, low-income schools to lose critical funding from the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP). The change entailed how districts report the number of students living in poverty. Instead of basing payments on the number of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, DeVos decreed that schools must use census data, claiming the law requires it. She agreed to maintain the status quo for at least a year after receiving a strongly worded [letter signed by 21 senators](#) from both parties, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY).

SCHOOL MODERNIZATION

On March 3, NEA President Lily Eskelsen García joined Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), House Education and Labor Committee Chairman Bobby Scott (D-VA), NEA member and former National Teacher of the Year Jahana Hayes (D-CT), Rep. Donald Norcross (D-NJ), and national education leaders for a [press event](#) about adding the Rebuild America’s Schools Act (S. 266/H.R. 865) to House Democrats’ Moving Forward infrastructure framework. The bill makes a \$100 billion investment in repairing and improving the physical and digital infrastructure of public schools across America.