

November 19, 2020

RE: An Open Letter on Establishing a School Pulse Survey for Assessing the Impacts of COVID-19 on the Nation's Education Infrastructure

Delivered by Electronic Mail

Members of Congress –

As COVID-19 caseloads surge around the United States to alarming levels, the effects on schools, parents, students, and educators will certainly be profound. Unfortunately, today there is little systematically-collected data available for research and analysis that can help policymakers and administrators understand real-time mitigation activities in schools across the country, and importantly, the impacts on students and educators.

The COVID-19 pandemic is highlighting many gaps in our country's data infrastructure, including for our entire educational system. The Data Coalition recently identified the challenges for our federal data collection and data management efforts that should be addressed to effectively respond to the global pandemic.¹ Admittedly, we failed to identify one important issue: as our country's educational institutions respond to the pandemic with varied approaches there is no comprehensive, timely mechanism for assessing the public health and other impacts of these efforts.

When it comes to educating our nation's children – our government institutions and educational community have an obligation to ensure relevant information is collected and analyzed to effectively and equitably enable learning for those who will be responsible for our country's future.

The U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES) is one of the most qualified and respected institutions for presenting information about the state of education in the United States. But IES is currently unable to capture and present real-time information about schools across the country in responding to the pandemic, assessing learning losses, and gauging the adequacy of mitigation policies and behaviors.

Despite the gaps at the Education Department in collecting information, we know anecdotally schools across the country are innovating, adjusting, and piloting new approaches that could improve learning for current students and the next generation of students. How will our country, our parents, our school administrators, and our policymakers know what works best for responding to the pandemic? In short, our country needs better evidence about the impacts of the pandemic on our educational institutions. **The United States needs a School Pulse Survey led by IES, conducted monthly through the 2021-2022 school year.**

There are some existing and admirable efforts to assess the impacts of COVID-19 on schools, students, and teachers around the country. For example, the Census Bureau's weekly Household Pulse Survey, which provides some weekly insights at the household level, including based on questions about learning.² The insights are unfortunately not useful at gauging school- or district-level impacts. Philanthropic and academic

¹ N. Hart. "An Open Letter to Congress for Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic with Data." Washington, D.C.: Data Coalition, 2020. Available at: <https://www.datacoalition.org/an-open-letter-to-congress-for-responding-to-the-covid-19-pandemic-with-data/>

² U.S. Census Bureau. Household Pulse Survey Summary Tables. Washington, D.C.: Department of Commerce, 2020. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2020/demo/hhp/hhp17.html>

institutions have also stepped in to fill some gaps, though the scope of scale of existing projects continues to present challenges for developing comprehensive, real-time insights.³ Many of these existing efforts focus on individual practice or educator perceptions rather than the range of education policy decisions and how those decisions ultimately affect core outcomes.

Additionally, IES's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) provides a wealth of information about educational quality and learning across the U.S. The current data collection and analytical activities of NCES, however, take years to implement. The country cannot wait five years – over even one more year – to better understand the impacts of COVID-19 on our students and schools.

A rapidly-designed and launched School Pulse Survey can measure school and district level impacts. This will quickly fill existing gaps in knowledge about activities in the country, while existing data collection mechanisms continue unimpeded. **We encourage Congress to appropriate or direct the Department of Education to allocate up to \$5 million and at least 1 FTE to develop, manage, execute, and report a School Pulse Survey with monthly waves during the current school year and through the 2021-2022 school year.**

A School Pulse Survey for school administrators should specifically gauge behavioral responses and mitigation activities applied for responding to the global COVID-19 pandemic, school and district choices for educational interventions during the pandemic, and information relevant for assessing learning loss and other key outcomes or indicators of educational quality, student emotional health, and well-being. Such a survey should be designed to minimize burden on school and district administrators while also ensuring policymakers and key decision-makers have the information they need to ensure our educational institutions provide the quality of learning that our children deserve.

Everyone in our country has suffered or been adversely impacted during the global pandemic. We need to build a rapid-cycle evidence capable of ensuring our children – and our future – benefit from innovations that are happening in the county. A national School Pulse Survey must be part of the solution.

It is one thing to say our children are our future. It is another to ensure we have the evidence to make that future both a possibility and a reality. Our country's students need us to make evidence-based policy choices informed by timely, accurate and relevant data. The Data Coalition strongly urges the Congress and the Department of Education to act to rapidly build this evidence base.

Thank you for your consideration of how to meaningfully deploy data in our country for effectively responding to the pandemic. We know you have many critical choices in coming weeks but hope prioritization of a new School Pulse Survey will be among those priorities. For immediate assistance, please contact me or the Data Coalition's policy manager, Corinna Turbes (corinna.turbes@datacoalition.org).

Respectfully,



--Nick Hart, Ph.D.
CEO, Data Coalition

³ See, for example, EdResearch for Recovery (<https://annenberg.brown.edu/recovery>), RAND's American Educator Panels (<https://www.rand.org/education-and-labor/projects/aep.html>), CRPE's "Getting Back to School" Report (<https://www.crpe.org/publications/getting-back-school-update-plans-across-country>), initial indicators or learning loss from the Opportunity Insights Economic Tracker (<https://tracktherecovery.org/>), Burbio's School Opening Tracker (<https://cai.burbio.com/school-opening-tracker/>), and the National COVID-19 School Response Dashboard (<https://explaincovid.org/kids/nationwide-covid-19-school-dashboard/>).

ATTACHMENT: Draft Legislative Specifications for Data Coalition Recommendation

1) Establishment of a School Pulse Survey at the Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES)

- Congress should appropriate, or direct the Department of Education, to allocate up to \$5 million for the purpose of conducting 9-10 waves of a School Pulse Survey in 2021, inclusive of at least one additional FTE to support the project within IES.
- Following a collaborative process led by IES to develop the survey instrument, OMB should permit a rapid approval of an Information Collection Request under the Paperwork Reduction Act using the Emergency Clearance procedure.
- The following draft language could be used for this purpose, reflecting revisions to the text in the Senate Appropriations Committee marks for FY 2021 in the Labor-H bill on the IES budget account:

INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION SCIENCES

For carrying out activities authorized by the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002, the National Assessment of Educational Progress Authorization Act, section 208 of the Educational Technical Assistance Act of 2002, and section 664 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, [~~\$635,462,000~~] \$640,462,000, which shall remain available through September 30, 2022: Provided, That funds available to carry out section 208 of the Educational Technical Assistance Act may be used to link Statewide elementary and secondary data systems with early childhood, postsecondary, and workforce data systems, or to further develop such systems: Provided further, That up to \$6,000,000 of the funds available to carry out section 208 of the Educational Technical Assistance Act may be used for awards to public or private organizations or agencies to support activities to improve data coordination, quality, and use at the local, State, and national levels: Provided further, That up to \$5,000,000 of the available funds shall be used for the development and implementation of a School Pulse Survey to monitor school-level impacts and activities affected by the global coronavirus pandemic.