

April 16, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senators McConnell and Schumer and Representatives Pelosi and McCarthy:

On behalf of the National Education Association (NEA) and the undersigned organizations, we write to urge Congress to include student loan debt cancellation in any future COVID-19 relief package.

For years, we have been facing a student loan crisis—one that has held back our economy and crushed millions of American families. This heavy debt burden has led to defaults, loan balances that never shrink, homes that cannot be purchased, marriages and families that are delayed, potential small businesses that cannot start, retirements that are not saved for, and college funds that remain unfunded. And while it affects numerous populations, the student debt crisis has hit Black and Latinx communities and women especially hard: Half of Black borrowers and a third of Latinx borrowers are forced to default on their loans within 20 years, according to a recent report from Brandeis University’s Institute on Assets and Social Policy.¹ Additionally, women hold two-thirds of the country’s student debt and on average borrow \$3,000 more than men to attend college, according to the American Association of University Women—yet, because of the wealth and wage gap, women find it harder to repay their loans.²

Now our nation is facing an unprecedented public health and economic crisis. Individuals and families are struggling with job losses and financial insecurity while confronting the risk of the COVID-19 outbreak and their anxieties about what the future might hold. Borrowers were already facing difficult choices between making their student loan payments or buying groceries—and given the pandemic, their choices will become even more difficult notwithstanding the suspensions of student loan payments provided by the CARES Act. Today, the student debt burden and the fallout from the pandemic threaten to sink our economic security altogether.

¹ “Stalling Dreams: How Student Debt is Disrupting Life Chances and Widening the Racial Wealth Gap,” September 2019, Institute on Assets and Social Policy, The Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University.

² “Deeper in Debt: Women & Student Loans,” May 2019, AAUW.

In the midst of this uncertainty, essential workers, especially public service professionals, are holding our society together. Our doctors and nurses, members of the military, social workers, and so many others are risking their lives to care for, protect, and support us, providing assistance that is desperately needed. Our essential state and municipal workers are keeping our water clean, our streets and public spaces sanitary, and our communities safe. Our educators are developing distance learning strategies and staying close to our young people, despite the challenge of social distancing, to keep them learning.

Even those public service workers who are not in health care professions are to be applauded as they continue to fulfill their responsibilities under tremendous duress. These workers deserve our gratitude, but they also deserve relief from the student debt that holds them back and limits their choices.

Through the CARES Act, Congress has already recognized the hardship student borrowers face and taken steps to temporarily help them through this traumatic time. However, more must be done:

- Current suspension applies only to select federal student loans, leaving many student loan borrowers with no relief whatsoever. Measures must be expanded to include those with commercially held Federal Family Education Loans (FFEL) and institutionally held Perkins Loans.
- As proposed in the Student Debt Emergency Relief Act (H.R. 6363), monthly federal student loan payments and interest accrual should be canceled, at a minimum of \$30,000 for each student borrower, at the conclusion of this crisis.

Student loan debt is already an immense strain for the individuals and families who must bear it, and it slows spending and investment in communities that hinders our nation's growth. As we look toward the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, we know that we will be coping with its aftereffects for months and years to come. We must consider the strategies that will not only help us regain to our footing, but also position us for growth. Canceling at least \$30,000 in outstanding student loan debt per borrower will provide relief for individuals and families and enable the economic vitality that America must experience in order to fully recover.

Thank you for your consideration. We stand willing to work with you on strategies to cancel student loan debt, increase borrowers' financial security, and invigorate our economy.

Sincerely,

National Education Association

American Dental Education Association

American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees

American Federation of Teachers

American Library Association
American School Counselor Association
American Veterinary Medical Association
Americans for Financial Reform
Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges
Association of Chiropractic Colleges
Association of Young Americans (AYA)
Augustus F. Hawkins Foundation
California Association of Nonprofits
Civil Service Bar Association
Council on Social Work Education
Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund
Equal Justice Works
Japanese American Citizens League
NAACP
National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity (NAPE)
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Association of Social Workers
National Center for Lesbian Rights
National Center for Transgender Equality
National Consumer Law Center (on behalf of its low-income clients)
National Human Services Assembly
National Women's Law Center
Navigate
OCA - Asian Pacific American Advocates
Physician Assistant Education Association
School Social Work Association of America

Service Employees International Union (SEIU)

Young Invincibles