**COVID-19 K-12 School Closures: Where do we go from here to mitigate learning loss?**

Linda Darling-Hammond

President, State Board of Education

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Assemblymember McCarty and members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to be part of this important hearing. You are asking exactly the right questions at the right time. It is critical that we think now about advancing learning progress and mitigating learning loss. In CA, this is a time of crisis, but it also a moment of opportunity, as the pandemic has put a flashlight on longstanding equity and achievement gaps, and it gives us the urgency and focus needed to pull together solutions for closing those gaps and to reimagine our system of public education so that we emerge with a more innovative and equitable system with whole child approaches embedded throughout.

I want to note that CA has a better start on these goals than many other states that closed schools and have done nothing to continue education for their students. While districts varied in how they managed school closures initially (some started with enrichment activities while others immediately moved to instruction), 100% of them are now engaged in formal distance learning with a coherent curriculum and daily instruction from teachers, along with important social-emotional touchpoints from staff. However significant inequities remain. To address these and to support our children’s learning, we need to do at least 5 things:

1) First and foremost, we need to close the digital divide. When the pandemic began, 1 in 5 CA students lacked devices or connectivity at home. Through the heroic efforts of districts large and small – from Los Angeles to tiny Alpaugh – who dug deep into their reserves to buy computers and hotspots, I estimate that we have cut the digital divide by about half. [According to the most recent FCMAT survey, 96% of districts are providing devices to students who need them and 86% are providing connectivity.] In about 70% of districts, virtually all students have current access to devices and in about 60% of districts virtually all students have access to connectivity. This is much better than it was just 2 months ago. However, in about 1 in 5 districts, at least 40% of students lack access to connectivity or devices. Often these are small and rural, but the digital divide exists in all kinds of districts all across the state. The governor, First partner, state superintendent, and I have been working to raise private donations from corporations and foundations to close this divide and have received some impressive contributions. However it is not enough. Even with these ongoing efforts, we will need at least $100 million to ensure that we close the divide and maintain access for students.

This will be important well beyond the next few weeks, because 1) summer efforts to support learning progress will often need to be digital, 2) we will need to anticipate both potential closures again the fall or winter if there is another wave of COVID and 3) we are likely to see use of blended learning when schools are open in order to support social distancing and students who may need to be quarantined to preserve safety. For learning to be continuous we must have all students and families fully connected. [Note: this is of equal importance to low-income families who otherwise cannot participate in tele-health, secure benefits, apply for employment, or protect their health by shopping on-line.] And to pursue equity we need all students technologically proficient in a state where technology is the driver of the economy.

 2) We will need to use the summer well, in particular to provide support to students who are likely to fall furthest behind – English learners, students with disabilities, homeless students, and others who were not able to access instruction early on. Many districts are making plans to do so with both in-person and digital options. Several counties are working with expert teachers to design curricular materials that can be used on-line if needed, in collaboration with CCEE. Some districts have discussed continuing instruction past the normal close of the school year and/or opening the next school year earlier for some students who have greater needs, in order to close gaps, to keep them attached to school, and to maximize their learning progress.

 3) We need to develop instructional continuity plans in every district that provide a coherent curriculum grounded in our state standards and curriculum frameworks with in-person and distance learning resources at every grade level for all students, including students with disabilities for whom plans should be incorporated into IEPs. We have to think about this not only as an immediate need, in cases where school buildings may have to toggle between being open and closed while COVID-19 is still an issue, but also to support long-term school resiliency: so that we can ensure that learning continues when other natural disasters like wildfires force school closures. With the prospect of climate related challenges growing, we need to plan for flexibility in the places of learning – but not the prospects for learning - so that we are not confronting learning loss regularly. [Note Miami-Dade model.] We should create instructional plans that can work within a distance learning model, and/or within hybrid models where students spend part of their time in class and part of their time engaged in distance learning.

The state can support this effort with thoughtful curriculum resources and training. We will also need to support a competency-based approach focused on learning progress and remove barriers to blended learning that exist in the antiquated systems we now have for counting instructional minutes by in-school seat time.

4) When school buildings re-open, we will need to take stock of students’ learning needs, both social-emotional and academic. We should start with the importance of relationships. Some experts have advised that students should return to the teachers they had this past year, who know them and their families, who understand their learning approaches and needs, and are best positioned to welcome them with understanding and compassion, to diagnose where they are in their lives and learning, to connect them to necessary social service and mental health resources where those are needed, and to help them make rapid progress. Such a connection point might last only for the first quarter before students are passed off to the next grade teachers, or where it is viable, this practice of looping might last for the entire year. We know from research that continuity in student – teacher relationships brings significant gains in achievement, because teachers can teach more effectively when they know their students well, and students learn more effectively in an environment of trust and belonging.

We will also need to evaluate where students are academically. This should happen initially through regular classroom diagnostic assessments. Many teachers and schools have useful diagnostic tools that they routinely use to guide instruction (DRDP, DRA, and others). We are also fortunate to have as a state asset the resources of the Smarter Balanced interim assessments that are freely available to all CA districts. These can be used in customized ways around particular areas of the curriculum or as a full-fledged assessment that mirrors the end of year test. This kind of tool however should not be used as a high-stakes test that creates fear and tension among students that they will be identified as deficient in some way. It should be used to support learning progress, not to create stigma or a sense of deficit. We should remember that children are always learning and the question is what they are ready to learn next, not how they should be labeled in ways that shake their confidence in their ability to learn. We know from many decades of research that stigmatizing school labels actually impede learning – this is one of the reasons that massive grade retention does not ultimately improve achievement.

5) To meet students’ learning needs we will need to focus both on expanded learning time and opportunities and on social-emotional and mental health supports. In addition to skillful teaching in regular classroom settings, expanded learning opportunities may include intensive literacy or math instruction within multi-tiered systems of support and within expanded learning time that may be created by summer school, starting the school year earlier, adding afterschool or Saturday school time, or rethinking holiday schedules within the school year. Some districts are thinking about variations on the traditional school year schedule that reduce opportunities for learning loss (much like the schedule in places like Singapore where 11 weeks of teaching are followed by 2 weeks of recess over 4 quarters of the year). There are a number of curriculum and instructional approaches that can be used with small group and one-on-one tutoring that can effectively produce learning gains quickly that we should be prepared to support.

We should also be prepared to support students’ physical and mental health needs and social-emotional learning, which have very large effects on academic achievement. This can be done in part by leveraging community partners to help ensure families are supported. For example, SFUSD has established partnerships with 200 community-based organizations to support distance learning and to meet family needs. We are finding that the community schools that some districts and counties have created to integrate student health, mental health, and social service supports at the school site are making a big difference in the way schools can support students during this crisis – and they bring efficiencies in ensuring that mental health and social service resources actually get to children and families effectively without creating a blizzard of separate, fragmented programs that overwhelm schools and families with bureaucratic red tape. These schools bring the resources, services, and expert staffing that students need together at the school site through partnerships with community organizations. The state could support this local asset base more intentionally, by incentivizing more of this kind of coordination among county agencies, community-based organizations, and schools.

The funding that will be coming to CA through the initial CARES Act now on the way – and a second CARES Act currently being written – should be used to help support these near and long-term efforts, but we will need to be intentional and purposeful in our planning and actions to take advantage of these opportunities. I am happy to answer further questions.