April 1, 2020

Dear Governor Northam,

We are deeply concerned with the coronavirus pandemic, the health and safety of all Virginians and the immediate and long-term economic impact on the Commonwealth, particularly the impact on our K-12 public schools. That is why we were pleased to see your announcement ordering all K-12 schools to be closed for the remainder of the academic year. This action is critical to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and protect public health. We recognize that this situation is changing rapidly and urge your administration to take additional measures to prioritize the safety of all public school employees and the students and communities that they serve and ensure that both school districts and school employees are not financially harmed as a result of COVID-19 closures.

It is essential that our public schools continue to deliver quality education to our students during the COVID-19 pandemic. This necessitates a public commitment from your administration to provide adequate protection for all public school employees that deliver these essential services to our communities. We urge you to work with all school districts to commit to pay all school employees their full pay and benefits for the remainder of the academic year regardless of classification or category (all non-exempt essential, exempt essential and all non-exempt). We also urge you to work with all school districts to ensure that they maintain all staffing positions during the COVID-19 crisis and do not layoff, furlough or reduce the workforce of any public school for the rest of the academic year. It is also critical that the administration guarantee all employees planning to retire at the end of this academic year, their full retirement compensation and benefits. These employees' retirement should not suffer as a result of COVID-19.

In order to reduce the spread of COVID-19, it is essential that all public school employees are granted paid leave and medical insurance. We urge you to work with all school districts to ensure that all public school employees are able to receive paid leave and that they will not suffer loss to existing accrued leave under the following circumstances: the employee tests positive for COVID-19 or is experiencing COVID-19 symptoms while seeking a medical diagnosis, until the employee is medically cleared to return to work; the employee has been advised by an authorized medical provider to self-quarantine due to exposure or possible exposure to the coronavirus until the employee is medically cleared to return to work or the employee is caring for a family member who tested positive for COVID-19, until the family member is medically cleared. We also urge your administration to work with school districts to waive the waiting period and to reimburse out-of-pocket costs (i.e., deductibles, copays, coinsurance) for public school employees who seek testing and/or treatment after coming into contact with someone carrying, or suspected to be carrying, the coronavirus.

We were pleased to see that the U.S. Department of Education is allowing Virginia to cancel SOL tests for the 2019-2020 school year, pending formal approval later this spring. Given the unprecedented circumstances of COVID-19, we urge you to direct the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to cancel all state-required tests including writing, social studies and history as well as non-ESSA accountability systems such as A-F school grading systems, exit exams for students, or value-added teacher assessments. We also urge you to work with VDOE to extend the deadlines for teacher licensure.
We do not want to see any Virginia teacher licensing credentials jeopardized as a result of COVID-19. In addition, as a result of the unparalleled year public school employees are experiencing, we urge your administration to work with all school districts to end the evaluation process for the 2019-2020 school year, classify all employees as “reappoint” and end all disciplinary proceedings with no findings.

While it is critical that public schools close for the remainder of the academic year to reduce transmission of COVID-19, the move to distance learning is creating a digital divide across Virginia. Unfortunately, not all of our students and public school employees have access to the technology required for distance learning during these closures. Further, distance learning is not appropriate for many English language learners, students with learning disabilities and students that are sensory impaired. We urge your administration to provide extra resources, training, guidance and support to all school districts in the Commonwealth to ensure the needs of these students and families are met and that distance learning instruction for these populations is equitable and in compliance with state and federal law.

Our public schools not only serve as places of learning but are often the only place our children can count on receiving a nutritious meal and healthcare. We thank the Virginia Department of Education for assisting school districts across the Commonwealth in ensuring federally reimbursable free school meals are distributed to Virginia students pursuant to federal USDA programs and guidance during this time. We encourage the administration to continue to work with school board food and nutrition services to ensure equitable access for students and families in receiving such school meals during school closures.

We urge your administration to take these critical steps to protect the health, safety and economic security of our students and public school staff. We are hopeful that by taking these steps we can prevent long term catastrophe for public education in the Commonwealth.

Sincerely,

Delegate Jennifer Carroll Foy
Member, House of Delegates
2nd District

Delegate Kaye Kory
Member, House of Delegates
38th District

Delegate Elizabeth Guzman
Member, House of Delegates
31st District

Delegate Sam Rasoul
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