

Don't forfeit the future

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The American people have paid a heavy price for the unchecked spread of the coronavirus—at this writing, in the United States, 86,000 people have lost their lives, 36 million have lost their livelihoods, 1.4 million have contracted COVID-19 and 55 million students are not in school. President Trump has caused the country to lose ground in our fight to save lives and avert economic catastrophe. He downplayed the threat of the virus, undermined health experts, peddled potentially deadly theories, and failed to provide the needed testing and protective equipment. Now he is pushing reopening regardless of the consequences. The president appears to have given up at the very moment leaders must step up efforts to help cash-strapped states, cities and towns prevent even greater loss of life, maintain essential services and avoid permanent damage to the economy.

Last week, the House of Representatives did its part by introducing a new stimulus bill known as the HEROES Act. The Democrats' plan provides \$3 trillion in relief to support families, protect frontline healthcare and other essential workers, and sustain public education, public safety, healthcare and the Postal Service. It will help keep people fed and employed, continue unemployment benefits, preserve health coverage, protect elections and hasten economic recovery.

But Republican leaders in the Senate are ignoring the needs in their communities, even suggesting that states should just go bankrupt. That is an absolute dereliction of duty. Here's why.

Cities and towns had to pause much of the economy in order to prevent the virus from spreading. Now revenue is plummeting, unemployment is soaring, and they have huge unexpected expenses to protect health and safety.

Nearly every community is facing cuts. Some affect sanitation, like reducing trash pickups, and suspending street sweeping and property inspections. Some make life harder, like reducing transit service or operating hours at government offices like the DMV. Many threaten public safety, like closing fire stations and laying off firefighters and emergency responders. And if the more than 500,000 laid-off educators are not rehired, it will cause lasting harm to our children's futures.

If the Senate doesn't act, that could be just the beginning. Without federal aid, states and localities will need to lay off 2 million more employees and force devastating cuts in food assistance, unemployment benefits, health coverage, schools and other supports for struggling families, just when they need help the most. But that outcome is not inevitable.

Americans get it. An overwhelming 84 percent of voters approve of federal support to states, cities and towns, including large majorities of Republicans, Independents and Democrats, according to a new poll by the AFT, AFSCME and Hart Research. Voters are more concerned that the federal government will not spend enough than they are about the deficit. (See more at aft.org.)

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Yet Trump and Senate Republicans just throw up excuses. For years, their lavish tax cuts for the wealthy exploded the deficit, yet suddenly they are "concerned" about deficits when the country faces an unprecedented health and economic crisis. Unlike the federal government, state and local governments don't have unlimited authority to borrow money, even to meet their essential needs. Without adequate federal assistance to states and localities, there will be massive cuts in crucial services and layoffs of millions of workers, including many who today are protecting us on the frontlines of the pandemic.

Trump says he wants to reopen schools quickly, claiming that "young people are little affected" by the coronavirus. This is not true for young people, or for the adults who teach, support, transport, feed, counsel and coach them during the school day.

America's public schools are the heart of our communities. Reopening schools is key to reopening the economy, and we must do both safely. The AFT's "A Plan to Safely Reopen America's Schools and Communities" is grounded in scientific evidence and public health protocols that chart a path to safely, responsibly and sustainably reopen school buildings and other institutions. (The full plan is at aft.org.)

The AFT's plan calls for communities throughout the United States to:

1. Maintain physical distancing until the number of new cases declines for at least 14 consecutive days.
2. Put in place the infrastructure and resources to test, trace and isolate new cases.
3. Deploy the public health tools in public schools that prevent the virus' spread, and align them with education strategies that meet the needs of students—including measures from daily sanitizing of schools to staggered scheduling.
4. Involve workers, unions, parents and communities in all planning.
5. Invest in recovery, as the House of Representatives just did with introducing the HEROES Act.

Congress has what may be its most important charge before it—to ensure that states, cities, towns and schools have the resources to protect lives, maintain essential services and restart the economy. Our lawmakers must stay the course until the country is back on track.



Photo: Nejc Poberaj

Weingarten unloads personal protective equipment the AFT procured for members on the frontlines of the pandemic, amid widespread shortages.

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