



A Union of Professionals

Reopening Schools During a Time of Triple Crisis: Financial Implications

The safe and effective reopening of America's schools requires two types of federal action. First, it requires a substantial federal investment to address the impact of budget cuts that have already cost local public education systems more than 750,000 jobs, twice what they lost during the Great Recession. And second, it requires a federal investment to help pay for the costs of a safe reopening. We estimate that, for public schools, this second piece will cost at least \$116.5 billion. This aid should be provided in addition to other funds included in the HEROES Act to help state and local governments generally and public education in particular.

America faces three crises right now: the coronavirus pandemic, the devastating impact of racism in our communities, and the need to move the economy forward and heal the harm caused by this downturn. Public schools are essential to addressing each of these crises. And reopening safely is a key to moving our economy forward.

A Legacy of Austerity

A recent analysis by the Economic Policy Institute shows that public education started the school year employing 60,000 fewer staff than prior to the Great Recession.ⁱ New numbers from the census show, when adjusting for inflation and enrollment growth, that 20 states still spend less on K-12 education than before the recession.ⁱⁱ We entered the current crises without having recovered from the last.

That austerity undermines our ability to reopen safely. A 2016 report found that public schools had more than a half-trillion dollars in deferred maintenance needs.ⁱⁱⁱ There are 36,000 schools with pre-existing ventilation issues.^{iv} This matters when trying to mitigate the spread of droplets and their accumulation on surfaces. Similarly, half of American public schools do not employ a full-time school nurse.^v And they have lacked the resources to address students' social and emotional needs, including those needed to reform school discipline by moving from systems built on legacies of racial injustice toward restorative systems.^{vi}

Crushing Budget Cuts on Tap

State and local governments face the largest budget gaps on record. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates that states alone face gaps of \$765 billion through the next two years. The gaps at the local level are at least half as big, meaning that the overall size of the gap is more than a trillion dollars.^{vii} That is why the HEROES Act's \$1 trillion in aid to state and local governments is necessary. While \$1 trillion would be enough to fill the hole left by the economic downturn, it would not cover the additional costs of addressing the harms caused by any of our three crises.

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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Paying for a Safe Reopening

There is a broad consensus that safe reopening can only happen if substantial resources are made available.

- The superintendent of the San Diego Unified School District estimates that it will cost 20 percent more than usual to safely reopen.^{viii} If applied to all school systems, that cost would total approximately \$130 billion.
- AASA, The School Superintendents Association, and the Association of School Business Officials estimate that a mid-sized district would need to spend \$486 per pupil. If that number were applied to schools nationwide, it would be \$25 billion.
- The Learning Policy Institute has estimated costs of \$41 billion associated with addressing the digital divide, providing nutritional supports and expanding learning time for students.

The variations speak to different points of emphasis, to the uncertainty caused by this new situation, and to the need to keep working through it. Building from these efforts, we believe that the data and evidence point toward a need of at least \$116.5 billion to reopen most effectively. We reach that estimate by synthesizing the work done by these analysts and our own work with affiliates. We expect it to change as information changes. The elements of that estimate follow:

Instructional Staff. Because of social distancing, class sizes for in-person instruction should be reduced substantially.^{ix} To cover each room, schools should increase the number of instructional staff. Schools are looking at innovative solutions—for example, a teacher and an aide covering two adjacent rooms together. The number of staff needed will vary based on existing facility capacity and availability of staff. A 10 percent increase in instructional staffing would cost approximately \$35 billion.^x

Digital Divide. Our goal is to have as full a reopening as possible. But, given social distancing, it is likely that many schools will not be able to fit all students every day. Even schools with space may face challenges in transporting all students to school daily. And an additional outbreak of the coronavirus would require districts to move back online. Online learning will still be a broader part of our education system for at least the next year. The Learning Policy Institute estimates that \$500 is enough to provide a child with a high-speed internet connection, a working device and associated support materials.^{xi} If we needed to provide this support to the poorest 15 percent of our 51 million public school children, it would cost \$3.8 billion.^{xii}

Resuming Before- and After-Care. AASA and ASBO estimate the cost of safely resuming before- and after-care at \$46 per pupil. Taken to a national scale this would be \$2.4 billion.^{xiii}

Transportation. In 2017, U.S. public schools spent \$26.5 billion on transportation.^{xiv} Social distancing means those costs will likely rise. One Colorado district expects each bus to hold only 1 out of every 7 students it previously held.^{xv} AASA and ASBO estimate transportation in an average district will work at 25

percent capacity. There are limits on how many buses can be found, but schools should still seek to add capacity in order to help get kids safely to school. If capacity could be expanded by 10 percent, that would raise base costs by \$2.7 billion a year. AASA and ASBO also estimate that there are additional costs for temperature checks, bus cleaning and protective equipment. Taking these costs into account and expanding them by 10 percent as well, we estimate that transportation costs should increase by \$9.6 billion in total.

Personal Protective Equipment. Both students and staff will need access to masks, and in some instances, staff will also need gloves or other protective equipment. AASA and ASBO estimate the cost of providing a student in an average district with a reusable mask every day is \$133. Their analysis estimates one-third of students will need masks. If we provide every student and staff with masks, without placing burdens on parents, as well as providing appropriate staff with gloves, the cost will be \$7.5 billion. We add an extra 10 percent to cover costs of more intensive protective equipment for those staff charged with higher-risk duties—like school nurses and staff who work with particular special needs students—for a total of \$8.3 billion.

Cleaning Materials and Health Supplies. AASA and ASBO estimate the cost for hand sanitizer, cleaning materials, thermometers, oximeters and wipes for an average school district at \$33 per student. On a nationwide basis this would be \$1.6 billion.

School Health Staffing. Many schools lack a full-time school nurse who can manage students in need of isolation and direct other health staff. ASBO estimates that the cost for ensuring a school nurse in every school for an average district is \$400,000, or \$109 per pupil. On a national basis this would be \$5.6 billion. It is unclear to us whether this many nurses are available, but this level of investment in school health staffing is necessary.

Custodial Services. America's schools employ about 310,000 janitors and cleaners who cover about 7.5 billion square feet of space.^{xvi} That means there is approximately one janitor for every 24,190 square feet. For a "Level 2 cleaning," which is the standard for bathrooms and food service areas, the staffing is one janitor for every 18,000 square feet.^{xvii} For areas like clinics, the staffing is one janitor for every 10,000. If we move toward cleaning schools at a Level 2 standard generally, but with 10 percent of space cleaned to a higher level, it would mean hiring 140,000 additional cleaning staff. The cost would be \$6.6 billion.

Meeting Children's Social and Emotional Needs. Schools play a vital role in helping children cope with traumas, such as those caused by the pandemic, the economic downturn and the nation's confrontation with its legacies of racism. But they will need more resources to do so. One element of that investment is school counselors. We would need 94,000 additional counselors to bring the ratio of counselors and

students to a recommended level.^{xviii} That would cost \$7.6 billion.^{xix} This provides a reasonable starting point for a real investment in attending to children’s social and emotional needs during this difficult time.

Helping Students Who Need Extra Support. We know that some children are unable to adapt to online instruction and that many students experience difficulty learning without the regular structure of in-person school. To help address gaps and provide support for children, schools should create expanded-time programs, starting in the summer, to help vulnerable students. The Learning Policy Institute estimates the cost of such a program, to be made available to half of America’s public school students, at \$36 billion.

AFT Research Preliminary Estimates of Additional Costs For Reopening	
Element	Cost
Instructional Staff	\$35 billion
Distance Learning	\$3.8 billion
Before- and After-Care	\$2.4 billion
Transportation	\$9.6 billion
Personal Protective Equipment	\$8.3 billion
Cleaning and Health Supplies	\$1.6 billion
Health Staffing	\$5.6 billion
Custodial/Cleaning Staff	\$6.6 billion
Children’s Social and Emotional Needs	\$7.6 billion
Additional Academic Supports to Students	\$36 billion
Total	\$116.5 billion

This analysis is based on the best information available at the moment. It does not include some additional costs that we could not estimate, especially for facility retrofits. Such retrofits include no-touch faucets and doors, hand-washing stations, upgrades to ventilation systems, signage, and reconfiguration of classrooms and other spaces. We believe the cost of these would be another several billion but cannot make a more specific estimate.

Investment Needed for Stabilizing the System AND Reopening

The need to safely reopen comes as schools are making the largest budget cuts since at least the Great Depression. Already, more than 750,000 workers in local government public education have lost jobs as a result of the pandemic and the downturn. It is vital to stabilize the workforce and restore jobs as a prelude to making the additional investments to see that schools can safely reopen.

The HEROES Act would help states address these and other potential teacher and support staff job losses by supplying \$57.9 billion directly to school districts to offset revenue losses and costs related to the

pandemic. We estimate that this is enough money to save and restore 633,000 jobs in public schools nationally, in addition to paying for all the materials and supplies that these workers and their students would typically use.^{xx}

K-12 Education Jobs Saved or Restored by the HEROES Act Stabilization Fund	
Teachers	316,365
Teaching Assistants	74,739
Other Education Personnel	241,896
Total	633,000

Given that we have already lost 750,000 jobs, that money is essential just to stabilize the system, but it is not enough to both stabilize the system and address the \$116.5 billion needed to reopen schools safely.

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://www.epi.org/blog/public-education-job-losses-in-april-are-already-greater-than-in-all-of-the-great-recession/>

ⁱⁱ AFT Research analysis of data from <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/school-finances/newsroom/updates/fy-2018.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://kapost-files-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/published/56f02c3d626415b792000008/2016-state-of-our-schools-report.pdf?kui=wo7vkgV0wW0LGSjxek0N5A>

^{iv} <https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2020/06/schools-COVID-era-return-air-system-problems-watchdog.html>

^v <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020086.pdf>

^{vi} <https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/resource-restorative-justice-in-u-s-schools-an-updated-research-review.pdf>

^{vii} <https://www.upjohn.org/research-highlights/updated-proposal-timely-responsive-federal-aid-state-and-local-governments-during-pandemic-recession>

^{viii} <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/05/21/too-expensive-to-re-open-schools-some-superintendents.html>

^{ix} For example, Los Angeles is expecting to have 16 students in classes that normally hold 30.

<https://edsources.org/2020/classes-outside-face-coverings-and-one-way-hallways-how-los-angeles-schools-may-reopen/632399>

^x Starting with the assumption that 53 percent of spending is for instructional staffing, and states had current expenditures of approximately \$630 billion in 2018. Adjusting for inflation, we estimate a need of just short of \$35 billion.

^{xi} <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/what-will-it-take-stabilize-schools-time-covid-19>

^{xii} Enrollment numbers at

[https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372#:~:text=How%20many%20students%20will%20attend,the%20United%20States%20\(source\).&text=Of%20the%2050.8%20million%20public,1.4%20million%20will%20attend%20prekindergarten](https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372#:~:text=How%20many%20students%20will%20attend,the%20United%20States%20(source).&text=Of%20the%2050.8%20million%20public,1.4%20million%20will%20attend%20prekindergarten)

^{xiii} ASBO estimates that for an average school district, the cost of resuming before- and aftercare is \$168,750. Its hypothetical district has 3,659 pupils, so the cost is \$46 per pupil. Extrapolating to a national basis indicates a cost of \$2.3 billion (see https://www.asbointl.org/asbo/media/documents/Resources/covid/COVID-19-Costs-to-Reopen-Schools.pdf?utm_source=PDF%20Link%20-%20Reopening%20Schools&utm_medium=Link&utm_campaign=Reopening%20Schools).

^{xiv} Adjusted for inflation to 2020 dollars https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_236.30.asp?current=yes

^{xv} <https://stnonline.com/news/colorado-districts-piece-together-covid-19-puzzle-for-new-school-year/>

^{xvi} <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes372011.htm#st> and <https://www.centerforgreenschools.org/green-schools-are-better-planet>

^{xvii} See, for example,

<https://www.worthington.k12.oh.us/cms/lib/OH01001900/Centricity/Domain/38/Custodial%20Staffing.pdf>

^{xviii} <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/Publications/ASCAEdTrustRHFactSheet.pdf>

^{xix} <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/school-and-career-counselors.htm>

^{xx} Our model uses preliminary data on the distribution of K-12 stabilization fund money by state. Then the task is to estimate how many jobs would be saved or restored by this funding in each state. We start with the same data point that the Learning Policy Institute uses in its estimations of teaching jobs lost at different levels of budget cuts: that 53 percent of funds are used for instructional salaries and benefits. Our second point is the ratio of teachers to teaching assistants within a given state, for which we use data from the Digest of Education Statistics. We use data on teacher and teaching aide salaries by state from the National Education Association's rankings and estimates to calculate how many teacher and teacher assistant jobs would be saved or restored.

Again using the Digest of Education Statistics, we take the ratio of teaching and teaching assistant jobs to all jobs in public education (from crossing guards to school superintendents) and estimate a number of other jobs that would be saved or restored. For Nevada and Puerto Rico, the Digest did not provide detailed breakdowns on staffing. We substituted national ratios to make estimates in those two cases. Finally, we treat the job category of "Instructional Coordinator" as if it was a teacher job.