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March 25, 2020

The Honorable Betsy DeVos
Secretary, Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary DeVos,

We are at a critical juncture with the outbreak of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) and its impact on our health, economy, and educational system. As such, I write today to seek answers on how the Department of Education is planning to support our schools and ensure that they are equipped to serve their students and families as schools issue closures and move to online learning models.

Both counties in my district – Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties – have closed their K-12 schools, and the only two higher education schools, Stanislaus State University and Modesto Junior College have switched to distance-learning models.

Early on in my term, Knights Ferry Elementary school in Stanislaus County didn't have internet access. While I was happy to see the school finally get access last year, many of its students still lack reliable internet access in their homes. Nearly 12 million students nationwide don't have reliable broadband in their homes, and neither do 27% of rural Americans. In a situation like this, the students of Knights Ferry are left behind without guidance or resources from the Department on how to succeed in an online learning model without reliable internet access. This is also true of students in other rural areas across the Central Valley. California's stay-at-home order and closure of many public spaces has made technological solutions even less accessible.

It is crucial that you develop guidance and procedures that consider the needs of students who live in rural areas and have limited internet access. We must ensure that states, localities, and educators have the resources and information they need to include every student in their plans to continue their programming during the crisis.

To that end, I request answers to the following questions:

1. How will the Department make it a priority that students without internet access or the necessary equipment to participate in their school's curriculum get those resources – whether in the form of mobile hotspots, laptop computers, or anything else they require?

2. Will the Department ensure schools and Local Education Agencies have the support they need to create alternate modes of instruction that is as high quality as possible without compromising safety?
3. How are parents, who will be more crucial than ever in guiding their children's participation in education, have the information they need to make sure their children continue to succeed?

Thank you for your department's efforts during this crisis, and I look forward to working together to mitigate the effects of the Coronavirus on student learning and achievement.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Josh Harder". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Josh Harder
Member of Congress