

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT



Memorandum

TO: Board of Directors
Council of the Great City Schools

FROM: Michael Casserly, Executive Director
Council of the Great City Schools

SUBJECT: Report on Council Activities Since Last Board of Directors Meeting

DATE: October 17, 2020

The staff of the Council of the Great City Schools has been particularly active since the last time the organization's Board of Directors met in March 2020. This brief memo is meant to summarize our work over the months since we last met and to describe our rationale and approach to this work.

In the 43+ years that I have been with the Council, I have never experienced anything quite like the last six months, although the years have been full of many existential challenges. As a staff, we pride ourselves with being a nimble and responsive group that can respond to both the immediate and long-term needs of member urban school districts. That flexibility and the expertise that the staff has developed over the years was put to full use over the last several months.

This spring, urban school districts faced a global pandemic, an economic crisis, and a nationwide racial reckoning in the wake of the George Floyd killing. Districts faced the challenges of safeguarding the physical and psychological wellbeing of students, families, staff, and communities, as well as transitioning to online learning environments to sustain the central mission of educating all students. School leaders faced the need to provide their communities with real-time information and guidance, and to effectively communicate the work they were doing on behalf of students, families, and staff. These tasks were not made any easier by the constantly changing signals they were getting from federal and state officials. Still, districts rose to these challenges even as they faced revenue shortfalls and legislative hurdles to receiving the resources and financial support they so desperately needed. As an organization, the Council also saw internal challenges that involved our own staffing and funding, and issues around the viability of the organization—in addition to our need to support the membership in this very trying time.

We responded to these various challenges in several ways.

First, recognizing the threat of widespread school closures to our school districts and their leadership, Council staff held an initial conference call with our member superintendents on

March 13, 2020. The success and productivity of this and subsequent calls with superintendents prompted staff to begin setting up calls with other job-alike groups. And some groups suggested that they have their own calls after hearing about what others were doing. Within a matter of weeks, the Council had set up weekly calls with—

- School board representatives and board presidents
- Superintendents, chancellors, and CEOs
- Chief academic officers
- Chief financial officers
- Chief operating officers
- Chief information officers
- Special education directors
- Bilingual and ELL directors
- Directors of research and evaluation
- Communications directors and public relations executives
- Legislative liaisons
- General counsels

The Council also set up rotating calls with groups who did not need to or could not meet as frequently. These included transportation directors, food service directors, security directors, labor negotiators, human resource directors, risk managers, athletic directors, and others. Between mid-March and the second week in October, the Council estimates that it held some 325 calls with its various job-alike groups.

Great City Schools ZOOM Calls by Group with Total Number of Participants

Group	Number of Regular Group Meetings
School Boards	29
Superintendents/CEOs/Chancellors	32
Chief Academic Officers (CAO)	30
Chief Financial Officers (CFO)	30
Chief Operating Officers	15
Chief Information Officers	10
Human Resource Directors	4
Transportation Directors	10
Facilities Directors	8
Safety and Security Directors	8
Food and Nutrition Directors	8
Special Education Directors and General Counsels	29
Bilingual Directors	30
Directors of Research and Testing	30
Public Relations Executives	22
Legislative Liaisons	21
Risk Managers	5
Athletic Directors	1
Labor Negotiators	3
Total	325

These calls provided participants with an opportunity to discuss shared challenges, trade information and emerging best practices, share lessons learned—good and bad—and provide mutual support. The Council estimates that some 15,000 people have participated in these calls. The calls also helped the Council gather information and stay in touch with its members.

Second, while the sharing of information was one of the most important features of the calls, many of the groups decided that smaller “working groups” would also be helpful in working through technical issues and designing and writing reports and guidance documents that would share expertise on a more formal basis. This led to the production of ten technical assistance documents that comprised the Council’s “Returning to Schools” series. The reports included—

- [Communications Toolkit for Reopening Schools after COVID-19](#), September 2020
- [Supporting English Language Learners in the COVID-19 Crisis](#), August 2020
- [Guidelines for Supporting Technology-based Learning Environments](#), July 2020
- [Financial Issues in the Reopening of Schools During the COVID-19 Crisis](#), June 2020
- [Addressing Unfinished Learning After COVID-19 School Closures](#), June 2020
- [Ensuring a Data-Driven Approach to Reopening Schools After COVID-19, Recommendations for Research and Assessment](#), June 2020
- [IDEA Best Practices During the COVID-19 Crisis](#), June 2020
- [Operational Issues in the Reopening of Schools during the COVID-19 Crisis- Facilities, Transportation, and Security](#), June 2020
- [Addressing Mental Health and Social-Emotional Wellness in the Covid-19 Crisis- A Resource Guide for School Districts](#), Spring 2020
- [Assessing Language Proficiency During Extended School Closures](#), May 2020

These reports were widely circulated across the membership and were extensively distributed by others to school districts nationwide. In addition to these reports, the groups often decided that it made sense to develop shorter reports on more specialized and tactical issues that member districts were dealing with. This has recently evolved into the Council’s “Spotlight” series. Four reports have emerged from this work.

- Spotlight on...[Increasing Ventilation and Improving Air Quality in Schools](#), September 2020
- Spotlight on...Water Safety in Reopened School Buildings, October 2020
- Spotlight on...Safeguarding the Right to Vote in the Great City Schools, October 2020
- Spotlight on...Staffing Considerations for Managing In-Person, Hybrid, and Distance Learning Instruction, October 2020

Third, the Council set up a dedicated page on its website that housed not only these reports, but also reports and guidance from the Centers for Disease Control, the U.S. Department of Education, the Department of Agriculture, and other external sources. This webpage also included the plans of each one of the Council’s member districts. This was not only a valuable resource for members, but also provided ongoing information to the press, researchers, and advocacy groups on what the nation’s major city school districts were doing to address challenges. The Council also set up a private, restricted site for its membership through the organization’s EdWires portal to allow districts to share draft information and documents that are

not ready for public viewing. This provides a safe space for the membership to share information and documents without risking public scrutiny.

Fourth, in addition to helping the membership share information and best practices—and also serving as support professionally and personally for the members—the Council has spent the past several months actively engaging the U.S. Congress, the Departments of Education and Agriculture, and the federal courts in order to advocate for urban districts and to help shape public confidence in what the membership was doing.

The Council has long been the most expert legislative advocate of any of the national education organizations. The last several months was no exception. The Council joined with its colleagues in developing and signing onto correspondence to the House and Senate on a variety of issues. The Council signed onto joint letters dealing with—

- Supplemental appropriations for elementary and secondary schools
- School meals and meal flexibility
- The Senate’s HEALS Act
- Equitable services under the CARES Act

The Council also identified legislative areas of concern that others missed, such as the prohibition on school districts from offsetting Social Security payroll withholding payments.

In addition, the Council added heft to the joint lobbying efforts by writing and submitting a letter signed by 62 of its member superintendents underscoring the request for some \$200 billion in federal aid for schools. It also drafted a resolution for its school boards requesting additional aid that was approved by numerous member boards. And the Council developed and disseminated to its members two sets of “talking points” to help them when talking to their Congressional delegations about the need for additional federal school aid.

Moreover, the Council provided Congressional staff with detailed information on the need for school meal flexibility as initial expiration deadlines were nearing. The Council augmented these efforts by providing regular updates to its boards, superintendents, and federal program staff on the latest Congressional activity. These legislative and regulatory updates included summaries of—

- The CARES Act—the fifth supplemental appropriations bill
- The House HEROES Act--Fifth federal supplemental appropriations bill
- The Updated HEROES Act
- The Problem-Solvers federal supplemental proposal
- The Senate HEALS Act
- The Senate Skinny Relief Bill
- The FY21 Continuing Resolution
- The National IDEA Class Action Suit
- The DeVos letter not to appeal recent equitable services rulings
- The Inclusion and Equity Enforcement Act (HR 2574)
- The Strength in Diversity Act (HR 2639)

The Council also sent a series of letters and comments to Congress and the agencies on a variety of issues, including—

- Letter to Secretary DeVos on IDEA flexibility
- Comments to the U.S. Department of Education on CARES Act equitable services rules
- Comments to USDA on simplifying school meal services and monitoring requirements
- Letter to Congress endorsing HR 1636 to establish a national commission on the social status of Black Men and Boys.

In addition, the Council argued for and sought clarification from the U.S. Department of Education on the counting of provisionally identified English learners for the purposes of Title III funding. The Department has indicated verbally that it will side with the Council on the issue.

Finally, Council staff called an emergency meeting of the organization's Executive Committee in May to discuss the possibility of filing suit against the U.S. Department of Education to block its proposed guidance to interpret the federal CARES Act in a way that would have distributed disproportionate and unprecedented aid to private schools. The Council's Executive Committee approved the action. Council staff then worked with legal staff from New York City, which stepped forward after the Executive Committee vote to serve as lead district in the suit. Ultimately, the Council and four of its member districts—New York City, Chicago, Cleveland, and San Francisco—decided to join with a similar coalition of states to file suit in the Northern District of California asking for a preliminary injunction on the Department's revised rule. As that suit was being filed, the State of Washington decided to file in the Western District of Washington. The Council sought and was granted permission by the plaintiffs to file in that case as well. (No other national education group filed suit in this case.) The Council also filed in conjunction with COPPA in the state of Maryland, as the NAACP and the Southern Poverty Law Center along with the Broward County and Denver Public Schools filed for a summary judgement in the D.C. federal court. Ultimately, all three courts ruled against the Department of Education in the multiple equitable services cases, and the Departments of Education and Justice decided not to appeal the rulings. The plain language on how CARES Act funding was to be distributed, i.e., according to the federal Title I formula, prevailed, saving Council members an estimated \$292 million.

It was also clear that the ongoing weekly calls that the Council held with its member general counsels helped not only with the equitable services case and the preparation of the IDEA Best Practices document mentioned earlier, but the calls also helped the members share information and coordinate responses to the national IDEA class action suit that was filed against every state and school system in the nation.

Fifth, Council staff has spent considerable time with the media, responding to inquiries and describing the work of the membership around the COVID-19 pandemic and other issues. Other issues of interest to the press involved the results of Council SST reports, the aftermath of the George Floyd killing, and the equitable services case. In addition to responding to press inquiries, the Council conducted three special interviews and articles for *Education Week* and wrote one article for *Education Next* on what the members were doing in response to the pandemic. Over the last six months since the last Board of Directors meeting, the Council was interviewed and quoted over 250 times in the following media outlets and others--

- New York Times
- Washington Post
- Wall Street Journal
- ABC News
- NBC News
- CNN
- Huffington Post
- U.S. News and World Report
- USA Today
- Politico
- National Public Radio
- Education Week
- Education Next
- Education Dive
- Face 2 Face Africa
- EdSource
- New York Post
- Albuquerque Journal
- Boston Globe
- Cincinnati Inquirer
- Chalkbeat—multiple cities
- Chicago Defender
- Charlotte Observer
- Charlestown Patriot
- Columbus Dispatch
- The 74
- Cleveland.com
- Dallas Morning News
- Dallas Hub
- Greensboro News
- Kansas City Star
- Las Vegas Review
- Omaha World Herald
- The Oklahoman
- The Tulsa World
- San Diego Union Tribune
- South Florida Sun Sentinel
- St. Paul Star Tribune
- Tampa Bay Times
- Voice of San Diego
- Winnipeg Free Press
- Wisconsin Examiner
- WLKY-Louisville
- WUMW-Milwaukee

- And many others

The Council also issued a strong statement for the press condemning the killing of George Floyd and the racism behind it.

Sixth, the Council was asked by the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) to testify on whether the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) ought to be administered on schedule in 2021. In preparation for that testimony, the Council surveyed the 27-member districts that participate in the Trial Urban District Assessment of NAEP. The superintendents from the TUDA districts were asked about their preferences to move forward with the 2021 NAEP testing or to delay the testing until 2022. Some 21 of the 27 superintendents indicated that they preferred to delay NAEP testing until 2022. These results were reported to NAGB with the recommendation to delay the administration of NAEP for a year. The Council also pointed out that the validity of test results might be in question because of the uncertainty of the sample, with some students working remotely and others in hybrid sessions. At its August meeting, NAGB voted 12-10 to move forward with the testing, but it gave the National Center for Education Statistics the discretion to alter the board's decision if circumstances required. With Congress unable to pass a fifth supplemental appropriations bill by the end of September with the extra funds that NCES needed to administer the test under the current circumstances, NCES leadership decided to cut the national sample in half and abide by the Council's recommendation not to include TUDA districts in 2021. Consequently, the state sample *may* be conducted in 2021, but TUDA districts will not be oversampled in a way that would yield city-by-city results.

Seventh, Council leadership was cognizant during this period that the pandemic could adversely affect the financial stability of the organization. Specifically, three potential threats were identified: a decline in membership dues; revenue loss from the cancellation of meetings and conferences (particularly after the board of directors had voted to increase registration fees); and the possible loss of external funding. The Council put several strategies in place to mitigate potential revenue losses. First, the Council was particularly aggressive in providing support to the membership during the pandemic to demonstrate the value of the group. This strategy appears to be shoring up membership dues for this year. Nonetheless, the Council was informed by three of its districts that they would be unable to pay their dues this year: Hawaii, Manchester (NH), and Stockton. (Dues for New Orleans and Puerto Rico have been waived.) Second, the Council applied for a forgivable loan under the federal Payroll Protection Program (PPP). The Council application was accepted on May 6 and a loan of \$457,411 was granted. The Council is expecting that the total amount will be forgiven under the terms of the PPP loan. Third, Council staff worked to raise additional outside funds to augment membership dues and offset the loss of conference revenues. Since the last Board of Directors meeting, the Council has been successful in raising some \$3.3 million from the following sources—

- Schusterman Foundation (two grants)
- Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (two grants)
- Hewlett Foundation
- Rand Corporation
- Wallace Foundation
- National Assessment Governing Board

The result is that the financial status of the organization has remained steady, the Council has been able to continue serving the membership, and it has retained its excellent staff.

Finally, the Council has continued most ongoing activities, but it has deferred action on several others. Activities that the organization has postponed over the last six months include—

- A national survey on vaping and anti-vaping activities
- Additional work on member bonding activities and on the companies holding these bonds
- Data collection for the females of color task force
- Strategic Support Teams, although the Council continues reporting to school boards on SST findings (e.g., Philadelphia, Clark County, and Columbus) and has conducted one virtual financial SST (Hillsborough County) and one partial special education SST (Omaha)
- Additional follow-up work on the U.S. Census
- Regular annual job-alike meetings
- Harvard ABC Institute for 2020

Nonetheless, the Council was able to continue the following in addition to the activities already described—

- Ongoing technical assistance on school board governance
- Data collection on non-instructional Key Performance Indicators and publication of the annual *Managing for Results* report, which is available at the fall conference
- Data collection on the academic Key Performance Indicators and publication of the annual *Academic Key Performance Indicators 2020* report, which is also available at the fall conference
- The Annual Report and annual city-by-city reports on Council activities and benefits
- Bernard Harris Scholarships
- Ongoing information requests
- Annual external audit
- *Urban Educator* (in digital format)
- Quarterly legal webinars
- Executive search activities
- Quarterly Executive Committee meetings (virtual)
- Annual Fall Conference (virtual)

In summary, the Council has been working diligently over the last six months since the last Board of Directors meeting to address the new and ongoing needs of the nation's Great City Schools. We hope that these activities have helped the members meet the challenges you are facing in the middle of this global pandemic. Staff stand ready to continue our efforts and create new strategies on behalf of our districts and the millions of students you serve.