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August 18, 2021

The Honorable Kim Reynolds
Governor of Iowa
Iowa State Capitol
1007 East Grand Avenue
Des Moines, IA 50319

Dear Governor Reynolds:

As we work to curb the spread of COVID-19 and return to in-person learning in the upcoming school year, I write to urge you to use all available assistance to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to children, teachers, staff, and more. With COVID-19 cases rising and the Delta variant posing an increasing risk to young people, a comprehensive testing and tracing program deployed in schools will protect the health of our schoolchildren while we increase Iowa's vaccination efforts. I specifically urge the State of Iowa to utilize the \$95 million from the American Rescue Plan dedicated to the state in the Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity (*ELC Reopening Schools*) program through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that the State declined to use earlier this year.

On April 23, Kelly Garcia, Interim Director for the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH), informed the CDC that Iowa would be declining \$95,029,161 in funding through the *ELC Reopening Schools* program.¹ Given the dramatic increase in new cases, I strongly urge you to reconsider this decision. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed. The Delta variant is now impacting children more severely than when the State made its determination. When you declined, the State requested "the opportunity to seek reconsideration of our acceptance of this funding" should allowable uses of the program change. Since then, *ELC Reopening Schools* program guidance has expanded allowable uses to include vaccine promotion, testing events, and upgraded air filtration systems, among other changes.²

The pandemic has worsened in recent weeks, and the risk to our children is increasing. Our response must change for schools to be safe and ready for in-person instruction this fall, and schools should not be required to use either normal or emergency funds that can go towards educating students for testing when other money is available. While some students are now vaccinated, a majority of K-12 students are too young or otherwise ineligible for vaccination. Rising case counts, the more-transmissible Delta variant, and the lack of masking have all contributed to widespread concern among parents about sending their children back to school.

As of August 5th, almost 4.3 million children nationwide have tested positive for COVID-19 – including over 45,000 children in Iowa.³ Cases in children, driven by the Delta variant, are also rising. In the week

¹ <https://who13.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2021/04/Letter-to-Ashley-Treharne-ELC-Project-Officer.pdf>

² <https://www.cdc.gov/ncezid/dpei/pdf/guidance-etc-reopening-schools-508.pdf>

³ <https://downloads.aap.org/AAP/PDF/AAP%20and%20CHA%20-%20Children%20and%20COVID-19%20State%20Data%20Report%208.5%20FINAL.pdf>

ending August 5, 93,824 positive tests were reported in children. This represents a 143% increase over the week ending July 22 and a 298% increase over the week ending July 15.

I am deeply concerned that the return to school will only lead to more COVID-19 cases, including cases requiring hospitalization, unless schools have the resources to develop and implement mitigation strategies that fit their needs. When Interim Director Garcia made this determination, she stated that the state had ample testing capacity, but unfortunately, more testing is needed. While Iowa recently stopped updating child testing data on their website, data from last month indicated that children comprised only 6% of total tests in Iowa, a rate far below other states for which data is available.⁴ In addition, 35.6% of child tests were positive – indicating that tests were not as widely available for children as in other states and, critically, positive cases were being missed. Additional resources, such as those from the CDC, would allow schools to do more testing, identify who may have COVID-19, and better protect kids, teachers, and parents from COVID-19.

If we continue to deny adequate protections to our schoolchildren, we may be faced with the dire consequences other states, particularly in the South, are facing. For example, Arkansas has seen a 517% increase in COVID-19 cases for those under 18 years of age just since April, including a 690% increase in children 12 and under. Hospitalizations among children are up 270% in recent weeks.⁵ In Iowa, we lack the detailed information to understand and respond to outbreaks in children before our children end up in the hospital. This is particularly concerning given that Blank Children’s Hospital in Des Moines has been operating at or near capacity for several weeks and recently announced they would be suspending all elective surgeries.⁶

As a mother myself, I know that in-person instruction is crucial for students’ academic, emotional, and social wellbeing. As we enter a new school year and new chapter of the pandemic, it is imperative that we all come together – federal, state, and local partners alike – to ensure Iowa schools have the tools necessary to provide in-person instruction in a healthy, safe space. *ELC Reopening Schools* funds are one key tool at our disposal to keep our children safe.

I strongly urge the State of Iowa to reconsider its position to decline *ELC Reopening Schools* funding, and I stand ready to work with you to ensure that relief enacted by Congress makes its way to schools across Iowa.

Sincerely,



Cindy Axne
Member of Congress

⁴ <https://downloads.aap.org/AAP/PDF/AAP%20and%20CHA%20-%20Children%20and%20COVID-19%20State%20Data%20Report%208.5%20FINAL.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.fayettevilleflyer.com/2021/08/03/secretary-of-health-nearly-19-percent-of-active-covid-19-cases-in-arkansas-are-in-children/>

⁶ <https://www.kcci.com/article/blank-childrens-hospital-suspends-elective-surgeries/37264348>