April 3, 2020

Via Electronic Mail

The Honorable John Bel Edwards
Governor, State of Louisiana
c/o Matthew Block
Office of the Governor
Louisiana State Capitol
900 North Third Street
Baton Rouge, LA 70804
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RE: Meals and Instruction in Louisiana Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Dear Governor Edwards:

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (“LDF”) writes on behalf of the thousands of Black schoolchildren and their parents whom LDF represents in school desegregation lawsuits across Louisiana. Many of those schoolchildren have missed meals and have gone without instruction since your office ordered the closure of schools on March 13, 2020.1 We respectfully, but very strongly, urge you to immediately require all school districts to provide: (1) meals for schoolchildren who are eligible to receive a free or reduced price lunch, and (2) distance learning that will continue the education of Louisiana’s schoolchildren despite the closures. Failure to do so will disproportionately harm Black schoolchildren throughout the state, in violation of federal civil rights laws.

I. Louisiana Must Ensure Racial Equity During the School Closures

Titles IV and VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibit racial discrimination by public primary and secondary schools and federally funded institutions. “A recipient [of federal funds], in determining the types of services . . . which will be provided under any such program . . . , may not . . . utilize . . . methods of administration which . . . have the effect of defeating or substantially impairing accomplishment of the objectives of the program as respect individuals of a particular race, color, or national origin.” 34 CFR § 100.3(b)(2). Moreover, dozens of school districts in Louisiana, including St. James, St. John, St. Mary, and St. Martin Parishes, remain subject to federal school desegregation orders. Under these court orders, each of these districts have an
affirmative duty to both end express racial segregation and “eliminate its effects ‘root and branch,’” which requires the demonstration of a good faith commitment to comply with desegregation orders and federal anti-discrimination laws. Any actions or inactions by your office that disparately harm the Black schoolchildren in these school districts impede compliance with these federal court orders.

II. The Failure to Provide School Meals Disproportionately Deprives Black Children of an Essential Source of Nutrition.

For many children, the breakfast and lunch provided by schools are their only reliable source of nutrition each day. For this reason, it was important that your proclamation closing the schools states that “schools shall, if able, continue to provide meals or other essential services with applicable staff.” Yet, many districts have not provided meals since the schools closed on March 22, 2020, while others have failed to make meals practically accessible to disadvantaged students.

For example, the St. Mary Parish School District failed to offer any meals whatsoever during the week of March 16, then belatedly announced that just three (14%) of its 21 schools would serve as “Grab n Go” meal distribution sites. Yet, 79% of its students are economically disadvantaged, every single student at 19 (90%) of its schools is eligible for free meals, and many students at the remaining two schools are eligible for free meals as well. The district initially did not plan to have a Grab n Go site near the City of Baldwin, where the vast majority of students are Black, even though all of the children attending Baldwin schools qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

In Louisiana, 17% of Black households do not have access to a car as compared to just five percent of White households, meaning that Black households are over three times more likely than White households to lack access to a car. A child without access to transportation by car in the Four Corners neighborhood in St. Mary Parish would have had to walk four hours each way to get to the nearest “Grab n Go” site, each of which were open for a mere hour and a half. Even after the district eventually added a Baldwin site, children in the Four Corners neighborhood still would have had to walk two hours each way to pick up their breakfast and lunch.

St. Mary Parish’s school district, like many other Louisiana school districts, ceased providing meals altogether after you issued your March 22, 2020 Stay At Home order – in St. Mary Parish, the “Grab n Go” sites operated for just a single day. The children have not received any meals since your March 22 order even though your office informed school districts that the order does not apply to schools or their food delivery services. Like the website for the St. Mary Parish school district, the website for St. John the Baptist’s school district explains that that they stopped distributing meals because they believed it was required to comply with your Stay At
To date, St. John the Baptist Parish has no public plans to resume any form of meal delivery or distribution services to students this year.

The St. James Parish School District stopped offering meals on March 22, 2020, because a district employee tested positive for COVID-19. It is unclear whether the employee had any connection to the food program. To date, St. James Parish has declined to offer any alternative meal delivery services, which has a devastating and disproportionate impact on many Black families as compared to white families. According to recent U.S. Census data, in St. James Parish, Black residents are five times as likely as their white counterparts to live below the poverty line and use food stamps: 16.9% of Black families with children live below the poverty line and 23.1% of Black households receive food stamps. Only 3.5% of white families with children live in poverty and just 4% of white households are on food stamps. In addition, 13.9% of the Black working age population in the parish, compared to 2.8% of the white working age population, were unemployed per Census data released before the current unemployment and economic crisis wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some school districts, including those in St. Martin and St. Mary Parishes, recently partnered with Baylor University’s “Meals-To-You” program, which will deliver meals to children in participating school districts who signed up through the program’s online platform on a first-come, first-served basis by March 31, 2020. However, application for this program was not available to many children, who are disproportionately Black, because they do not have internet access or did not learn about the program in time. For example, in St. Mary Parish, 2,239 (14%) of Black residents do not have an internet subscription and 3,849 (24%) do not have a computer, as compared to just 8% and 11% of white residents, meaning that Black residents in St. Mary Parish are about twice as likely as white residents to lack an internet subscription or a computer. Likewise, over 29% and 28% of the Black households in the rural St. Martin and St. James Parishes, respectively, lack broadband internet connections. Moreover, St. Martin Parish initially gave families a week (March 27 to April 3) to sign up for the Meals-to-You program. But, on March 30, the district suddenly shortened that window to close on March 31. Children should not be deprived of much-needed school meals simply because they could not sign up for the “Meals-To-You” program online within four days.

III. Instruction.

We also have grave concerns about the absence of appropriate educational instruction, if any at all, during the school closures. Your proclamation closing the schools states: “Schools may offer complete distance learning, as capabilities exist.” Your proclamation adds that “[t]he required 63,720 instructional minute requirement per year shall also be suspended.” The Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (“BESE”) clarifies that instructional “minutes will not have to be made up.” Should the schools remain closed for the rest of the school year, that would mean students would lose nine weeks of instruction, or nearly a quarter of the 2019-20 school year.
As the longest-serving member of BESE, Jim Garvey commented, “We don’t want a child going on to the fourth grade without learning the things third graders are supposed to learn before the fourth grade, and you can say that for all the grades.” Yet, nearly half of Louisiana school districts have failed to offer any distance learning whatsoever, while other states (e.g., Florida, Alabama, and Illinois) require distance learning. St. Mary Parish’s website and St. Martin Parish’s website refer parents to online educational resources, but these optional enrichment activities are not appropriate substitutes for an academic curriculum and, regardless, are not available to students who lack internet access. Similarly, St. James Parish’s website posted optional enrichment activities, including online resources and worksheets for K-8 families to print out or pick up from school that, of course, would be unavailable to students without access to a car, the internet, or a printer.

According to the latest available data from the U.S. Census Bureau, only 74% of Louisianans had an internet subscription at home. Strikingly, Black households in the state are about two times more likely than White households to lack an internet subscription or a computer: 210,302 (14.6%) Black households lack an internet subscription and 258,263 (17.9%) lack a computer, compared to 8.3% and 8.5% of White households, respectively. As the Advocate recently and correctly observed, “Even that figure may be misleading because some connections, especially in rural areas, are often too weak to handle routine streaming services.”

Although some districts have partnered with telecommunications companies to offer free broadband internet access to families, there are significant obstacles to actually obtaining internet service. For example, St. John the Baptist’s website directs families to contact Charter Communications for 60 days of free internet service. However, most of the school district is outside of Charter Communications’ coverage area. Moreover, Charter Communications is only extending its offer of 60 days of free internet service to “qualified residential customers who have not subscribed to Internet services within the previous 30 days and have no outstanding obligation to Charter.” This caveat disqualifies people who recently had to cut off their internet services because of the economic hardships brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, although Charter Communications opened to the public its Wi-Fi Hotspots across its footprint, some of those Wi-Fi hotspots’ signals do not extend beyond the inside of buildings, such as libraries, that have closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, community members in other locales have alerted us that there is a four-week wait for a Charter Communications representative to provide the equipment needed to install broadband internet service.

IV. Recommendations.

Louisiana school districts must immediately provide accessible meals and appropriate educational instruction to all eligible students—even to those students who lack transportation, computers, printers, or internet access. We urge your office to ensure that each school district across throughout Louisiana implement the following recommendations:
First, your office must unequivocally mandate all school districts to promptly resume some form of equitable meal distribution and/or delivery service to eligible schoolchildren in a manner that is reasonably accessible to all students. Unless the district is providing meals to all eligible students in the Meals-to-You program (as recommended below), it should comply with this mandate by: (a) using school buses to deliver meals to students at the stops along pre-existing bus routes, and (b) reopening, and increasing the number of, “Grab n Go” meal distribution sites. To conserve resources, school districts should consider providing several days’ worth of meals at once at meal distribution sites and bus stops. Even in places like St. James Parish, where a district employee tested positive for COVID-19, school districts should continue providing meals while taking a number of reasonable steps to protect the health of district staff and students and their families. In fact, the State Department of Education has offered guidance on using personal protective equipment to prepare food and using “Grab n Go” or “car pick up” programs to limit personal contact.  

Relatedly, on March 26, 2020, the U.S. Department of Agriculture waived the requirement that a school provide meals directly to a student, allowing parents and guardians to pick up school meals on behalf of their children. As noted above, however, for those families who lack a vehicle or may not be able to leave a child home alone, it is prudent for districts to offer delivery.

Second, for those districts using the Meals-to-You program, your office should require that school districts automatically enroll all eligible students in the program. If all students cannot be served through the Meals-To-You program, school districts should grant the following students priority access: (a) students who have medical conditions (or whose parents/guardians have medical conditions or of an advanced age) that make it inadvisable for them to leave home in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and (b) students who lack transportation and are not within walking distance (1 mile) of a school bus stop. If the district is unable to include all eligible students in the Meals-to-You program, it should nonetheless ensure reasonable access to school meals as recommended above.

Third, we urge you to require Louisiana’s schools to provide distance learning that approximates their normal curriculum to prevent learning loss and enable children to progress in their studies. Distance learning should be offered both online and via hard copy instructional materials, videos, and/or audio recordings that are accessible even to students who do not have access to a car, the internet, computers, or printers. Moreover, educators should take an active role in the provision of distance learning through whatever mode of communication is available to their students. Students and their families should not bear the sole responsibility of educational learning. Given newly available federal funding, school districts should purchase personal mobile hotspots and laptops, then loan them to students who need them. Indeed, school buses delivering meals can also be used to deliver instructional materials and pick up completed schoolwork.

Fourth, we ask you to require Louisiana’s schools to make up lost instructional time, perhaps through an extended 2020-21 school year with a longer school day and/or compulsory,
free summer school during the summer of 2021. Even if students were to uniformly have a computer, printer, internet service, and a robust collection of instructional materials, there will still be children who do not have a home living environment that is conducive to learning. These children will not have equal educational opportunities via distance learning, so school districts should offer live in-person instruction, as soon as it is safe to do so, that gives students an opportunity to make up what they missed.

Fifth, we ask that you ensure that school districts provide reasonable access to meals and adequate distance learning to vulnerable student populations, such as students with disabilities, undocumented students, and homeless students. As a reminder, all school districts are legally required to provide public educational services to these students, and that obligation continues through this pandemic.39

Some school districts can serve as models for many of these recommendations. For example, St. James,40 Iberville,41 West Feliciana,42 and St. Helena43 Parishes previously used school buses to deliver meals. Outside of Louisiana, the Duval County School District in Florida, which has 198 schools,44 hosts meal distribution sites for two hours each weekday at every single school45 and uses its buses to deliver meals and school work to students at pre-existing bus stops.46 This multi-pronged approach allows students to access meals and instructional materials even if their parents and guardians lack access to the internet, a computer, a printer, or to a car. Louisiana can and should implement a similar multi-tiered approach across school systems to address the varied needs of its schoolchildren in a demonstrated commitment to ensuring their continued education despite this unprecedented public health crisis.

Thank you for considering our recommendations. Because many of our thousands of clients continue to go without meals and instruction, we request a prompt response, in writing, to Michaele Turnage Young (mturnageyoung@naacpldf.org) and Deuel Ross (dross@naacpldf.org) on or before Wednesday April 8, 2020. Please do not hesitate to contact them or me in the meantime.

Sincerely,

Sherrilyn A. Ifill
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7 94% of the students at Raintree Elementary School, 92% of the students at B. Edward Boudreaux Middle School, and 80% of the students at West St. Mary High School—all of which are majority Black schools—are economically disadvantaged. Id. (within Excel sheet, navigate to the second tab, “Total by Site”; see rows 989-1010 at column AI).


13 Id.


15 St. Mary Now.com, ST. MARY SCHOOLS WILL LAUNCH FEEDING PROGRAM; SIGN-UP DEADLINE MONDAY (Mar. 27, 2020) (quoting a press release from the St. Mary Parish Schools that states, “Meal boxes will be provided on a first come, first served basis, so parents/guardians should sign up online as quickly as possible.”), https://www.daily-review.com/news-local/st-mary-schools-will-launch-feeding-program-sign-deadline-monday.
Eight percent (2,328 of St. Mary Parish’s 29,100 Non-Hispanic White residents) lacked an internet subscription and 11% (3,272) did not have a computer. U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. According to the United States Census Bureau, nearly one third of families in the District do not have a broadband internet connection. Quick Facts, St. Mary Parish, Louisiana (July 1, 2019 estimates) https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/stmaryparishlouisiana (scroll down to “Computer and Internet Use”).


Id.

Only just over half (39 out of 69) of Louisiana districts are providing distance learning, according to a State Department of Education survey. Will Sentell, During coronavirus closures just over half of Louisiana school districts offering online classes, The Advocate (Mar. 23, 2020) (also noting, “But educators said even districts that provide distance learning are only offering a different form of enrichment for their students, not delivering the same instruction that students are used to in traditional settings that include grades.”), https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/coronavirus/article_7eaabbd0-69ea-11ea-bfbd-034328cab262.html.


https://sites.google.com/sjpsb.org/covid19/home/for-students/learning-resources.


Will Sentell, During coronavirus closures just over half of Louisiana school districts offering online classes, The Advocate (Mar. 23, 2020) (also noting, “But educators said even districts that provide distance learning are only offering a different form of enrichment for their students, not delivering the same instruction that students are used to in traditional settings that include grades.”), https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/coronavirus/article_7eaabbd0-69ea-11ea-bfbd-034328cab262.html.


40 https://sites.google.com/sjpsb.org/covid19/home/for-parents/frequently-asked-questions?authuser=0
45 Alimacani Elementary, A “grab and go” school lunch and snack available for All students from 11:00 am to 1:00 pm in front of the school (noting, “Beginning Tuesday, March 17, a “grab and go” school lunch and snack will be available for ALL students. These lunches may be picked up curbside at all district managed school campuses between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. Students may receive the meal at their nearest school location. They do not have to go to their attendance school . . ..”), https://dcps.duvalschools.org/site/default.aspx?PageType=3&DomainID=123&ModuleInstanceID=27837&ViewID=6446EE88-D30C-497E-9316-3F8874B3E108&RenderLoc=0&FlexDataID=61913&PageID=240 (last visited Apr. 2, 2020). See also, Allyson Henning & Travis Gibson, Free meals for students during unscheduled coronavirus break, News 4 Jax (Mar. 15, 2020), https://www.news4jax.com/health/2020/03/15/free-meals-offered-to-duval-clay-students-during-unscheduled-coronavirus-break/.

46 “For all elementary, middle, and high school students, school buses will deliver school meals to elementary school stops using neighborhood elementary boundaries and bus routes.” See Duval Co. Pub. Schs., The Big Yellow Lunch-and-Learn!, https://dcps.duvalschools.org/Page/27738.