

# U.S. SENATOR BEN CARDIN



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Dear Friend,

Another week has passed as we continue to navigate the best ways to have our country and economy return to a sense of normalcy, post-pandemic. At the same time state health care systems are attempting to keep up with the [wildfire spread](#) of this virus, pressure is mounting to reopen schools in the fall.

We all want to see our schools reopen. But we must ensure they reopen in a safe manner. This means keeping our students, educators, staff – and the families they go home to at the end of the day – safe and healthy.

Closing the doors to our classrooms and moving curricula to online or remote learning was not easy. Maryland was the second state to close its schools when the pandemic hit. This necessary but abrupt shift exposed long-term disparities and barriers in our current education system. We witnessed how the ongoing technology gap quickly turned into an urgent “homework gap,” leaving many students behind.

I was proud to [join](#) my Senate Democratic colleagues in introducing the Emergency Educational Connections Act, legislation aimed at ensuring all K-12 students have adequate home internet connectivity and devices during the coronavirus pandemic. This legislation followed a series of [letters](#) to internet providers to expand internet

access for low-income Americans throughout the COVID-19 crisis to prevent millions of families from falling further behind. T-Mobile has been an incredible partner in Maryland, providing 10,000 Wi-Fi hotspots during this crisis, and Comcast continues its Internet Essentials program.

Closing schools also put a spotlight on the food insecurity facing students in Maryland and nationwide. The Maryland Department of Human Services estimated that approximately 427,000 children in our state were eligible for free- or reduced-price lunches. Closing school buildings meant cutting off the only consistent source of nutritious food for many students. Schools and local communities jumped in immediately to provide emergency food distribution to families in need. On the federal level, the CARES Act created a new Pandemic EBT to allow these families to directly purchase food to feed children.

Plans to reopen schools or continue remote learning will need to consider additional ways to fill the ongoing technology needs as well as how best to continue community-based nutrition programs for children and families. Growing unemployment related to COVID business closures has only added to the ranks of families in dire need.

Reopening plans also must consider many logistical factors, such as implementation of masks, social distancing in the classrooms and on school sponsored transportation, acquiring PPE materials, thorough cleaning of facilities, and contact tracing of the virus.

The Centers for Disease Control has issued [guidance on reopening America's schools](#). In their "Guiding Principles to Keep in Mind," the CDC says that "The more people a student or staff member interacts with, and the longer that interaction, the higher risk of COVID-19 spread. The risk of COVID-19 spread increases in school settings as follows:

- "Lowest Risk: Students and teachers engage in virtual-only classes, activities and events.
- "More Risk: Small, in-person classes, activities, and events. Groups of students stay together and with the same teacher throughout/across school days and groups do not mix. Students remain at least 6 feet apart and do not share objects (e.g. hybrid virtual and in-person class structures, or staggered/rotated scheduling to accommodate smaller class sizes).

- “Highest Risk: Full-sized, in-person classes, activities, and events. Students are not spaced apart, share classroom materials or supplies, and mix between classes and activities.”

At the state and local level, reopening our schools must be evaluated and executed in a manner that puts the safety of our children and communities as a priority. I encourage our Maryland school systems to listen to health experts and strongly consider the CDC guidance.

Bullying tactics and rhetoric calling for schools to fully open and resume in-person classes are not helpful to our students, educators or communities. Yes, there is still an enormous amount of research to be conducted and completed on the spread of the virus between individuals – and especially children. This should be cause for more caution, not less.

This past Thursday, I was proud to have hosted a [Facebook Live event](#) with leaders from the Maryland Parent Teacher Association and the Maryland State Education Association to discuss the challenge of reopening Maryland’s schools. With the help from questions from constituents, we discussed the concerns of students and educators who may have underlying health conditions, the importance of listening to public health officials, the lack of broadband access and ways to expand it, maintaining social distancing in overcrowded schools and on school buses, as well as funding for our state and local jurisdictions.

It is up to the federal government to make sure the state and local governments have the resources they need to maintain essential services. The House of Representatives passed the HEROES Act on May 15 – more than two months ago. This robust legislation allocates more than \$100 billion nationwide and creates the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund for Education. About \$90 billion would be provided to states. Through this funding, Maryland would receive at least \$1.3 billion. This week, as Congress resumes negotiations for the next stimulus and recovery package, funding for state and local governments, particularly for schools, will be a high priority.

We all would love to return immediately to a sense of normalcy and pre-COVID life. The reality is that we cannot go back. Coronavirus is going to be with us for a long time. We may not know what the “new normal” will be for several months, or even a year. What I do know is that if we all come together and do our part, we can get through this.

Please, wear a mask, wash your hands frequently and avoid large gatherings.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ben". The letters are cursive and fluid.

Ben Cardin

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