To: The Honorable Tom Wolf, Governor of Pennsylvania  
From: Susan Spicka, Executive Director  
Re: Remote Learning Task Force  
Date: April 10, 2020  

Dear Governor Wolf:

Education Voters of PA, a project of the Keystone Research Center, is a statewide, nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy and policy organization that supports strong public schools in every community in the commonwealth.

We are writing to ask you to convene a Remote Learning Task Force to develop short-term plans to help fill current gaps that prevent school districts from providing students with remote learning and to lay the groundwork for a long-term plan to provide universal remote learning capability across the commonwealth.

As schools move to remote learning for the rest of this school year, we must recognize that the unpredictable nature of this pandemic may force additional school closures in the future. We appreciate the efforts of PDE, the IUs and PATTAN to provide support and technical assistance for school districts to develop remote learning plans under difficult circumstances. However, schools need additional support to ensure they will be equipped to deliver remote education to students both now and in the future.

The COVID-19 virus has exposed the tremendous inequities in Pennsylvania’s education system, laying bare the vast differences in school districts’ ability to provide remote learning to students during the extended school closures.

Many schools in affluent suburban areas have seamlessly transitioned to remote learning using school-issued iPads or personal computers and online platforms, where teachers and students meet in real time to conduct classes.

In other districts in less wealthy urban and rural areas, school districts have faced monumental challenges as they work to restart learning. Many districts struggle to provide even the most basic resources during the best of times and can’t afford to give each student a personal computer. The laptop or iPad that is standard issue in some districts is a distant dream in others.

Many families in these districts cannot afford high speed internet service in their homes to connect students to materials and instruction. In Philadelphia alone thousands of students lack home access. In Pennsylvania’s broadband deserts, high speed internet is simply not available to many families, so school districts are left to figure out how students will access content before they can receive remote instruction on a device.

In addition, in communities where bandwidth is scarce, providers continue to charge outrageous sums to connect homes to high speed internet services and a news report exposed how vendors have exploited increased demand for hot spots to profit greater revenue from a school district desperate to keep students connected and learning.

Opportunity gaps from school closures today will exacerbate achievement gaps in the future—increasing the well-documented gaps that yawn wider each summer. If these gaps are not addressed, the long-term harm caused to Pennsylvania’s most vulnerable students will be substantial. Studies are clear - children who don’t read on grade level by 3rd grade, or who are disengaged in 9th grade, are at greater risk of academic failure.

Online learning is no substitute for everything that our local public schools provide students, including nutritious food, healthcare and mental health care, sports, music and art classes, connections with friends, and countless supports from
caring adults. And parents throughout the commonwealth recognize more than ever the value of the trained professionals who teach our students every day.

However, with schools closed for the rest of the school year and with potential future closures looming, all school districts must have the capability to provide remote learning to all of their students, including students with disabilities and English learners. And we must recognize the value of all Pennsylvania students having equitable access to 21st Century technology when schools are open during normal times.

We commend the strong efforts of PDE, the IUs, PATTAN, and school district administrators and educators. PDE’s equity grants will provide substantial financial assistance to districts that receive them. The licenses for online curriculum that PDE is offering districts will help districts and the educational programming that will be provided through a partnership with public television stations will connect students with thousands of hours of educational programming. In addition, creative solutions in school districts and intermediate units — such as mobile hot spots and Wifi hubs in school parking lots — will help many students access learning.

While these actions are critical, they are, unfortunately, not universal. And Pennsylvania’s educators need help.

We call on you to convene a Remote Learning Task Force that to support school districts and intermediate units that will:

- Identify technology gaps both in terms of student devices/hardware and access to broadband.
- Ensure the remaining hardware gaps are filled.
- Support professional development for educators so districts can build their internal capacity to provide remote learning during this crisis and moving forward.
- Work with the business community and internet service providers to help connect communities and individual families that lack broadband access.
- Investigate allegations of price gouging to help prevent vendors and internet service providers from profiteering off of the pandemic.
- Conduct a statewide comprehensive assessment of connectivity gaps. This will help students today and put Pennsylvania in a strong position to leverage potential federal funds in the future.
- Address other issues and create proposals as determined by the task force.

Universal broadband has been a high priority for your administration and we are grateful for your strong leadership and extensive work on this issue. Recent school closings and the struggles students face receiving remote instruction have demonstrated the clear need for statewide broadband access that you have championed.

We most strongly urge your administration to convene a Remote Learning Task Force that will include rural electric cooperative providers, educators, members of the business community and labor organizations, university researchers, and advocates who have been working to broaden internet access in rural and urban area. Focusing their knowledge on the immediate need of ensuring that students can engage in remote learning now and creating long term solutions will both help students during the pandemic and ultimately close the digital divide to create a more equitable and just system of education for all of Pennsylvania’s students.

Thank you for your leadership during this very difficult time. If we can be of assistance, please do not hesitate to contact Susan Spicka at sspicka@educationvoterspa.org, (717) 331-4033. We will be sending a list of potential task force members for your consideration early next week.