Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 10, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden:

We are writing to urge you to live up to your pledge to follow the science on COVID-19 and encourage state and local leaders to reopen schools across the United States.

According to an article published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, there is little evidence to show in-person instruction in classrooms contributes to the spread of COVID-19.[1] This study mirrors a report from the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control. The Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Rochelle Walenksy, herself said, "There is increasing data to suggest that schools can safely reopen and that safe reopening does not suggest that teachers need to be vaccinated." Despite her expert opinion, your White House continues to ignore the science. Our children are suffering, and it is time to allow them to resume their education with in-person instruction.

Approximately six percent of children in the United States struggle with some form of emotional or behavioral difficulties, including autism, depression, and trauma-related mental health conditions.[2] Many of these children depend upon their schools for access to the therapies they need. By allowing our nation's schools to remain shuttered, you are depriving these children of the people and support systems they depend on. The former Director of the CDC warned that an increase in adolescent suicides would be one of the worst consequences of closing schools and we are beginning to see the evidence. The suicide rate among teens and children in Clark County, Nevada in nine months was double the rate of the entire previous year.[3] If you continue to ignore the data and allow special interest groups to hold your Administration hostage, you will be directly responsible for exacerbating the mental health crisis many children in this country are experiencing.

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[1] Margaret A. Honein, PhD, Data and Policy to Guide Opening Schools Safely to Limit the Spread of SARS-CoV-2 Infection. JAMA, 2021.
[2] Cory Turner, 'I've Tried Everything': Pandemic Worsens Child Mental Health Crisis. NPR, 2021.
[3] Erica L. Green, Surge of Student Suicides Pushes Las Vegas Schools to Reopen. New York Times, 2021.

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In addition to the impact on the youth mental health crisis, school closures are increasing educational inequality in the United States. Many students in rural and underserved areas - especially those from low-income households - lack access to broadband, technology, and the support systems that make at-home learning possible. A new study authored by Yale economist Fabrizio Zilibotti predicts one year of school closures will result in a 25% decrease in the post-educational earning potential of low-income students. Students from the top 20% of the wealthiest neighborhoods, on the other hand, saw no substantial decrease in post-educational earning potential.[4] We must reopen our schools to give these children a chance to succeed.

On February 9th, your Administration stated that you would like to see a return to in-person instruction in fifty percent of U.S. schools by late April. However, that goal is wholly inadequate. Almost forty percent of U.S. schools are currently allowing in-person instruction and twenty-five percent are operating on a hybrid model. As you can see, your goal for late April has already been met.

Mr. President, during your campaign and as recently as your inauguration you pledged to follow the science when it comes to COVID-19. While your Administration may claim the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was "speaking in a personal capacity," that does not change the CDC director's recommendation or expert opinion. It is time to put politics aside and put people, especially our children, first.

Furthermore, we would like to stress that as case numbers and hospitalizations continue to drop across the country it is time to encourage state governors and local leaders to begin the process of fully reopening our economy. Many states across the country have already done so with little incident, and the risks of continued lockdowns and regulations to the American way of life are far greater. As you are no doubt aware, as of December 1st approximately seventeen percent of U.S. restaurants have closed permanently. Currently, there are nearly ten million fewer jobs in the United States than before the onset of the pandemic. Of those ten million jobs lost, more than half were held by women and minority populations.[5] We cannot allow our economy to be crippled any further.

We respectfully request you begin the process of reopening schools and businesses in the United States. The time for politics and stoking fear is behind us. The future of our economy and our children are at stake. It is time for leadership.

Sincerely,

Jason Smith
Member of Congress

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[4] Mike Cummings, COVID School Closures Harm Students from Poorest Neighborhoods. Yale News, 2021
[5] Annalyn Kurtz, The US economy lost 140,000 jobs in December. All of them were held by women. CNN, 2021

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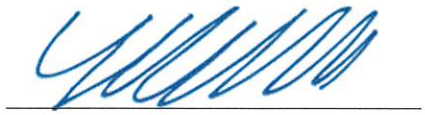

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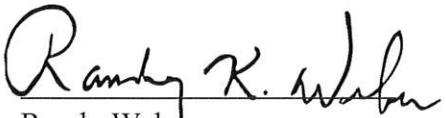

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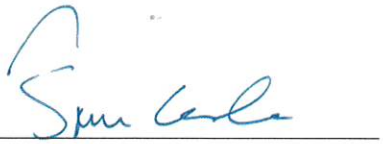

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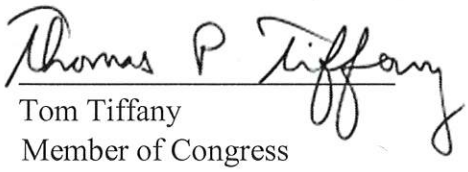

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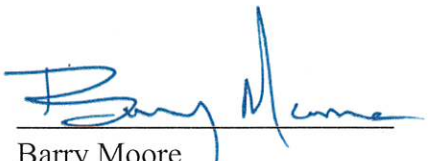

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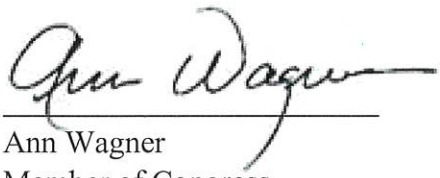

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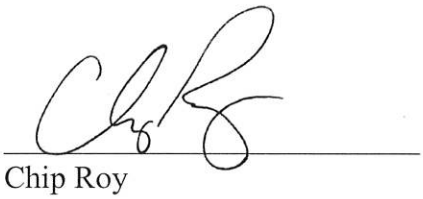

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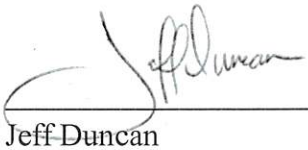

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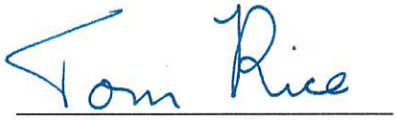

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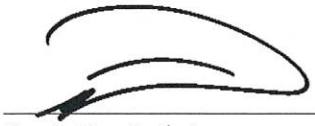

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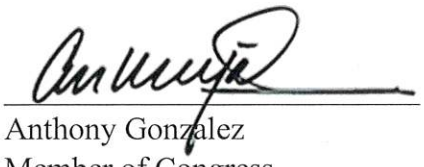

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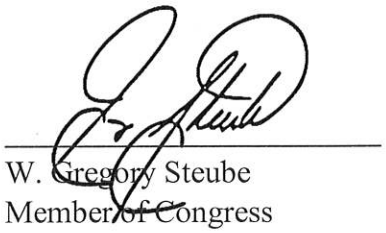

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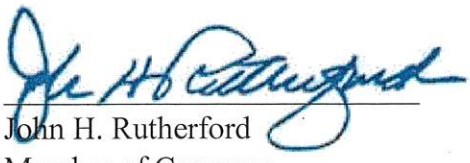

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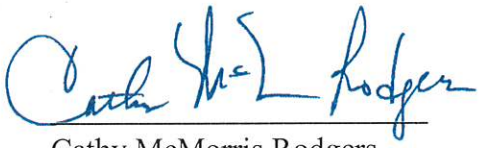

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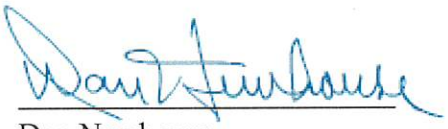

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