

I am writing to you about my concerns regarding local, state, and federal government's response to the coronavirus pandemic. I am a paraeducator in a special program through Portland Public Schools for kids with high emotional, behavioral, and academic needs. The majority of the students I work with are part of the program because stress- and trauma- related factors that correlate with poverty-- including abuse, neglect, food scarcity, homelessness, and domestic violence. Many of our families live in extreme poverty, where even a couple of days of lost work may mean losing their homes or the ability to feed their children. It is as an advocate for these children and their families that I write to you today.

Due to the severity of the pandemic and need for social distancing, I am very grateful for Oregon Governor Kate Brown's decision to close schools, however, without expanded social welfare programs, the school closures mean a large loss of income for families due to lack of childcare and lack of access to food. The response by local government to give students 2 meals/day at neighborhood schools and freeze evictions is not adequate. We need a long-term emergency response from the government that keeps low-income families above water. This should include emergency supplies (including food, basic first aid and hygiene supplies), a statewide freeze on rent (a moratorium or equivalent, such as emergency rent control), a freeze on mortgage payments, evictions, and utility payments, expanded domestic violence resources, dignified housing for every person in the state, medicare for all (or, in Oregon, the option to opt-in to OHP), an end to sweeps of homeless encampments, and a freeze to student loan payments.

To be frank, I know that these measures will not help low income stress- and trauma-afflicted families *thrive*, because they need our schools and other social resources to access care and healing. But these measures will help to stabilize them during this crisis, for without them, surely many families-- and the majority of the families I know-- will face the decision of remaining in their housing or feeding their family, either during the pandemic, or after, with the huge debt they will incur without this necessary aid. Imagining families making that decision fills me with sadness and rage. It is totally unacceptable. And that decision is one we have the power to ensure that they don't have to face.

On a hopeful note, by providing these services, we can give people a short-term idea of what progressive, popular policies look like in reality. I hope we will be a state that responds to crisis by centering low-income and working families instead of acting to appease rich individuals and large corporations. When this is over, we will certainly remember which elected officials had our backs when the survival of our loved ones was in question.

By acting now to provide a sweeping emergency response to the coronavirus pandemic, we have the opportunity to be a resilient society. I hope you consider your duties in your position as well as what's at stake as this virus hits during an election cycle. Do what's right and act now to push a progressive, sweeping response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Sincerely,
Maia Watkins
PFSP/AFT Local 111
(541) 971-9370