Dear CIS Family,

In more ways than any of us could have anticipated, 2020 is shaping up to be a year of challenge and change for our network, our country and our world. In this work, with 40 years of history to guide us, we have been called to confront the constant challenges faced by our students. Through lived and trained experiences, CIS is uniquely prepared to meet the moment ahead.

Over the last several weeks, the two of us have been working closely on the one change we have anticipated and could control - our leadership transition here at the national office. As we prepare to make that transition at the end of this month, we firmly believe the national office has never been stronger in its commitment to sustaining, deepening and growing our network.

But like many of you, we’ve also been busy considering the unfolding effects of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on our country and most importantly the communities we serve.

We believe that any steps that school districts, local leaders and national lawmakers take must place equity front and center. Our students and families already face enormous obstacles in their lives, even without the added pressure of this crisis that may impact them more than others.

Today as we write this, school districts across the country are making plans or preparing contingencies to shut down their school campuses for weeks, if not months. Some CIS-served schools have already closed. Experts advise that school closings may be a necessary part of a comprehensive effort to help contain or mitigate the spread of the virus. We should be supportive of local decisions meant to protect public health, but we should also recognize that it can have a negative effect on the 1.62 million students we serve across the country.

While districts prepare for the possibility of providing remote learning, we know that many students will be left behind. It’s estimated that nearly 12 million children live in homes lacking a broadband connection. It’s unclear how many don’t even have access to a connected device at home. That digital divide is often pronounced in poor, rural communities.

Even if our students are connected to e-learning, school closings will mean they will lose access to the critical hub that connects them to free or reduced-price breakfast and lunch, medical and dental care, as well as laundry facilities and hygiene kits. More importantly we know how important it is for our students to maintain a consistent relationship with dedicated CIS staffers who can help support their social and emotional well-being, even as we adapt to a world of social-distancing and quarantines that will call for innovation in our practice. Community services
related to trauma and anxiety will be in high demand; CIS will need to be there to help.

Please know that our national office staff and lobbyists are vigorously advocating for a package of benefits that would place vulnerable families first. For example, here in Washington, DC the USDA is beginning to process waivers allowing some schools to provide student meals offsite. And lawmakers are hurriedly working on legislation that may provide working families some economic relief.

We know that all of you are preparing contingency plans in the event your staffs and families are impacted by the virus or your operations are affected by the shutdown of schools. Our Student Supports team will be here to offer you technical support, advice and reference materials to help you prepare to face this unprecedented crisis. Please be on the lookout for materials from the team and share with us any local roles you’re being asked to take on as you support your students and school partners. At the national level, elected officials are interested in hearing on-the-ground stories so please share them with the Student Supports team. Also share any stories of “red tape” that is preventing you from serving our students during this uncertain time. National office staff and our lobbyists need to hear these stories to help with their lobbying efforts on your behalf.

Bill Milliken has often said that during our more than 40-year history, our network has faced other challenges that have seemingly been out of our control. But CIS has endured and grown even stronger -- in no small part because of strong leadership at the local level, the fierce passion of our staff and our unwavering commitment to do whatever it takes to support this country’s young people. We pledge to keep the bright light of that commitment burning as a way to guide our network and national office through these times of change.

Thank you for all you do every day. Be well.

Dale and Rey