

CHRIS VAN HOLLEN  
MARYLAND  
SH-110 HART SENATE OFFICE BUILDING  
WASHINGTON DC 20510  
OFFICE (202) 224-4654  
FAX (202) 228-0629

## United States Senate

COMMITTEES  
AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND  
FORESTRY  
APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE  
BANKING, HOUSING, AND URBAN  
AFFAIRS  
BUDGET COMMITTEE

April 1, 2020

The Honorable Lawrence J. Hogan Jr.  
Governor  
State of Maryland  
100 State Circle  
Annapolis, Maryland

Dear Governor Hogan,

Last week, Congress passed and the President signed, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to provide support and financial assistance to hospitals and health centers, small and mid-sized businesses and non-profits, and state and local governments battling to keep up with the demand for public services in light of the coronavirus. The CARES Act also creates a new grant program, the Education Stabilization Fund, and increases funding and expands authorities within the Rural Utilities Service and the Safe Schools and Citizenship Education program, all of which can be used by states and localities to expand digital learning for students. I urge you to dedicate some of this new grant funding to address the homework gap in districts that need help to meet their plans of delivering digital learning to their students. We must ensure equal access to distance learning for all students in Maryland. If not, children without computers or disconnected from the internet will be left on the wrong side of the digital divide.

The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the homework gap experienced by the estimated 12 million students in this country who do not have internet access at home and are unable to complete their homework. While some reports rank Maryland third in the nation in broadband coverage and speed, this statistic belies the affordability and accessibility challenges that remain in our state. Approximately 16 percent of Maryland households with school-aged children do not have broadband at home and an estimated 12 percent do not have a computer at home. Research has shown that the homework gap affects students in both rural and urban areas and disproportionately affects lower-income students and students of color. Students without internet access at home consistently score lower in reading, math, and science.

As schools create new learning platforms they must ensure that their new policies provide equal online access for all students. These measures are required by law in compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Title II).

Some Maryland school systems have already undertaken extraordinary efforts to ensure that all students are connected. Initially, Prince George's County Public Schools could not shift all classes online because, they could not guarantee every student had access to technology and the Internet. To resolve this issue, the school system will invest \$2 million to guarantee that every student has access to a device that can connect to the internet and an affordable internet plan. Not every school system has the capacity to take such comprehensive steps and as a result some local parents have started soliciting donations to make sure that students in their schools have access to computers at home during this crisis. I encourage the state to work with local school districts to them create digital learning plans to fit their needs and ensure resources are well distributed.

I've introduced federal legislation that would create a two to four billion dollar trust fund dedicated to closing the homework gap. While the funding allocated in the CARES Act falls far short of my proposal, I continue to press for a meaningful solution to the homework gap in future relief packages. In the meantime, I urge you to leverage federal resources to expand digital learning opportunities for Maryland students. We must work together in light of this unprecedented disruption of K-12 education. We cannot afford for students to be left behind during this pandemic.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to my office for assistance.

Sincerely,

/s/Chris Van Hollen