



May 14, 2020

The Honorable Betsy DeVos  
Secretary  
United States Department of Education  
400 Maryland Ave, SW  
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Madam Secretary:

The National Federation of the Blind commends you for encouraging innovation and ingenuity among local education agencies by allotting \$180 million for the Rethink K-12 School Models Grant. The COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly transformed the 21st-century classroom more than anything that has ever come before. As a result, interactive online distance-learning activities are becoming the norm for K-12 students. As President of the largest organization of blind people in the United States, I urge you to consider the needs of blind students in virtual learning environments when awarding the Rethink K-12 School Models Grant to local education agencies.

We know that blind students have been adversely impacted by virtual educational approaches that were developed without accessibility in mind. However, we also know that distance-learning opportunities have the potential to expand the circle of participation to include blind students when accessibility is at the forefront of these approaches. The National Federation of the Blind has taken initiative to develop resources for blind students in the midst of this national emergency. Our Distance Education Resources provide interactive online lessons, how-to videos, and written lesson ideas to meet the educational needs of blind students. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. § 794(Section 504) requires covered educational entities who remain open to provide equal access for students with disabilities to programs, benefits, and services regardless of the COVID-19 circumstances. This means that schools benefiting from the Rethink K-12 School Models Grant must do so in a manner that is equally accessible for blind students.

Furthermore, education agencies receiving the Rethink K-12 School Models Grant can and should do more to level the playing field between disabled and nondisabled students. For instance, a state receiving microgrant funding can ensure their blind students have access technology readily available in their homes, such as an embosser capable of producing diagrams for science and mathematics courses.

Moreover, grant recipients who continually relegate blind students and other students with disabilities to second-class status during this national crisis should not continue to be rewarded for failing to comply with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1401 et seq.) the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. 701 et seq.) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (42 U.S.C. 12101 [12131] et seq). Students with disabilities must not be robbed of distance-

learning services offered to their nondisabled peers. Our nation benefits when nonvisual accessibility and universal design are implemented in online learning environments from the outset, and when students with disabilities receive the educational opportunities they need to be ready for post-secondary education, post-secondary employment, and living independently.

As the father of two blind daughters, I urge you to take the needs of blind students into account as you review the local education agencies' proposals for the Rethink K-12 School Models Grant.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark A. Riccobono", with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Mark A. Riccobono, President  
National Federation of the Blind