

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**

September 24, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker  
House of Representatives  
H-232, U.S. Capitol

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Majority Leader  
Senate  
S-230, U.S. Capitol

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Minority Leader  
U.S. House of Representatives  
H-204, U.S. Capitol

The Honorable Chuck Schumer  
Democratic Leader  
Senate  
S-221, U.S. Capitol

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader McConnell, Leader McCarthy, and Leader Schumer,

We write to urge you to include in any additional COVID-19 relief legislation robust and targeted funding to help school districts combat the threat of cyberattacks.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reported an increase in cyber and ransomware attacks targeting K-12 schools. The agency released Private Industry Notifications (PIN) in 2019 and 2020 citing industry warnings that said schools ranked second only to city governments on the list of vulnerable targets.<sup>1</sup> From January 2019 to April 2020, 94 school districts representing 1,150 schools reported multiple attacks—including student and staff data breaches, ransomware and other malware outbreaks, phishing attacks, denial-of-service links, and a wide variety of other incidents.<sup>2</sup> With most schools implementing some form of online instruction this year, educational facilities now rank as the most-targeted sector for malicious software cyberattacks.

As you know, school districts were caught unprepared by the gravity and speed of disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic, with almost every state either ordering or recommending that schools remain closed through the end of the 2019-20 year. At their height, closures affected at least 55.1 million students in 124,000 public and private schools—leaving kids without access to in-person classroom instruction, counseling, and other services.<sup>3</sup> While some districts made a relatively smooth transition to virtual learning, others have struggled to adjust, due to the absence of reliable broadband, network infrastructure, or technology resources. These districts typically cite a lack of dedicated funding and skilled staff to vet and improve cybersecurity defenses. The result is thousands of schools leaving their networks unprotected and making basic security errors that allow cybercriminals access to millions of records.

Several school districts that have seen cyberattacks in 2020 reported losing total access to their computer networks, files, and communication systems. Hartford Public Schools in Connecticut was paralyzed by a ransomware breach that forced administrators to postpone the first day of school.<sup>4</sup> Like many other districts, Hartford adopted a hybrid model, provided equipment to students, and spent significant funds upgrading its security network. But the attack

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<sup>1</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation, Cyber Division (2020). “*Ransomware Targeting of K-12 Schools Likely to Increase During the COVID-19.*” (PIN) No. 20200623-001 Retrieved from: <https://www.politico.com/f/?id=00000172-e1bf-d7d3-afff-f9bfc6820000>

<sup>2</sup> 17 New US School Districts and Colleges Compromised by Ransomware, a Total of 94 in the Past 15 Months - Armor. (2020). Retrieved 13 September 2020, Available online: <https://www.armor.com/resources/school-ransomware-victims-april20>

<sup>3</sup> COVID & School Closures. From: <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/map-coronavirus-and-school-closures.html>

<sup>4</sup> Gold, Michael. “First Pandemic, Now Ransomware: Attack Forces Hartford to Postpone School.” New York Times. 8 September 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/08/nyregion/hartford-schools-ransomware.html>

still infiltrated the district's student information system, which has personal data, academic records, and a transportation system that provides real-time information about school bus routes. In Louisiana, Governor John Bel Edwards declared a state of emergency after a virus disabled thousands of computers in three separate school districts, including one in which the virus also knocked out the district's office phone system.<sup>5</sup> Similar cases have affected school openings in Seattle, Las Vegas, and Houston, where an orchestrated website crash left as many as 200,000 students staring at error messages for hours.

In Fairfax County, the Commonwealth's largest school system was recently the victim of a ransomware attack. Criminals are threatening to publish potentially sensitive data from school system networks unless their monetary demands are met. Fairfax County is currently working with the FBI to determine the nature of the compromised data. Faculty, students, and their families are understandably concerned about becoming victims of identity theft or having their sensitive personnel and education information disclosed publicly. During 2019, such incidents resulted in school closures, the theft of millions of taxpayer dollars, stolen identities, tax fraud, and loss of access to technology and IT systems for weeks or longer.<sup>6</sup>

In one of the worst breaches yet, Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS), the nation's fourth-largest school district, with more than 357,000 students, was hit with multiple cyberattacks on the first day of class. The district suffered a Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack, simultaneously with a software glitch that blocked access to its servers, rendering multiple online features useless and teaching nearly impossible.<sup>7</sup> One of the attacks prevented more than 170,000 students and teachers from logging into the virtual portal and ejected users who were already in the system. The chaos was later found to have been perpetrated by a 16-year-old student with help from other hostile actors, including foreign cybercriminals.

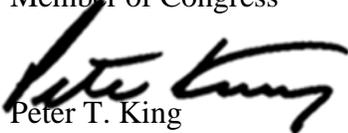
With more and more districts transitioning to online and virtual learning, we will continue to see millions of teachers and students fall victim to cyberattacks. It is our responsibility to make sure schools have the necessary tools and resources to protect their digital defenses. We respectfully request that future COVID-19 relief legislation include robust and targeted funding to help school districts combat cyber threats. Without proper investment, it will become impossible to provide our children with the safe and high-quality educational environment they deserve.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

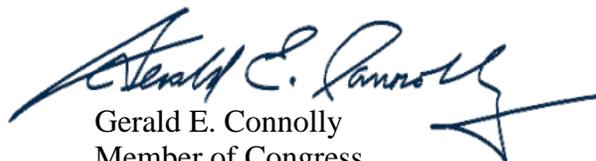
Respectfully,



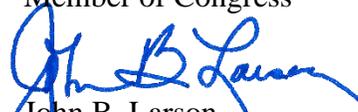
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Member of Congress



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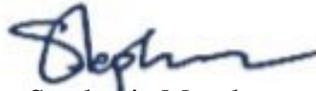
John B. Larson  
Member of Congress

<sup>5</sup> See "Gov. Edwards Declares State of Emergency" From: <https://gov.louisiana.gov/index.cfm/newsroom/detail/2270>

<sup>6</sup> Levin, Douglas A. (2020). "The State of K-12 Cybersecurity: 2019 Year in Review." Arlington, VA: EdTech Strategies, LLC/The K-12 Cybersecurity Resource Center. Retrieved from: <https://k12cybersecure.com/year-in-review/>

<sup>7</sup> Wright, Colleen. "Cyberattack, plus software failure, responsible for Miami-Dade Schools' woes, Carvalho says." Miami Herald. 1 September 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/education/article245421585.html>

  
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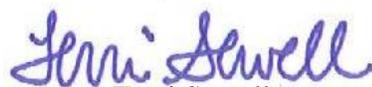
  
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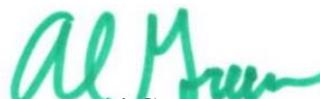
  
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