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September 3, 2020

Governor Lujan-Grisham and Secretary Stewart,

I write this appeal for the children of Carlsbad and New Mexico. The Governor has made her decision and the Secretary has issued his instructions on how some districts may make a small incremental return to in-person learning. Carlsbad Municipal Schools will not be one of those districts. As I post this letter, we are well into our second week of on-line learning. Under current criteria, determined by the state, Carlsbad will be unable to return to in-person learning anytime soon. As with all districts, in the state and the country in on-line learning, we have had some successes and some failures.

On-line learning is not the answer for the majority of our children. Everyone, but children in particular need to experience the validation that comes from completing a challenging task, knowing they did their best, and having that validated by a caring adult. Children need new perspectives. They need to learn empathy. They need to be “wowed” by science. They need to feel valued by more than their small family group.

Teaching our children to live in fear of others is quite possibly one of the most damaging concepts they will learn. Many of our children currently live in homes that are anxious and stressful, this is even greater in the homes of our students in poverty. The longer children are isolated and taught to be fearful of interacting with others, the less likely they are to grow up to be positive members of their community.

The issue is not whether we can deliver on-line instruction or not. We are educators and we will do the best we can with the tools and circumstances before us. The issue is how many children in poverty, non-English speaking students, and children with special needs we will fail. Every child we fail now is placed on a fast track to dropping out of school. The current rules and regulations are sacrificing our students’ potential for a life full of promise and hope for the public good. The students we fail will be lost in the statistics on suicide, health issues related to drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, and deaths from senseless violence. Casualties of decisions made to save lives.

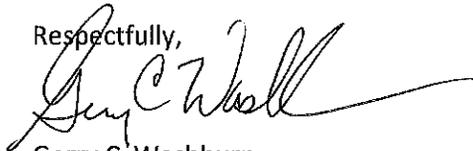
The struggle with the pandemic has been likened to a war. This seems appropriate as we are being asked to sacrifice our young on this battlefield. Leaders have been asking that of communities for centuries. Soldiers in a war usually know why and what they are fighting for. Our students don’t understand this “war” but it will most certainly scar them permanently. As usual, our more fortunate

citizens will be able to find a way to avoid the worst of the war. The poor will not, and they will most certainly bear the brunt of this war.

Our children's futures are at stake! We must get children back in school and on pathways to a better life. Not six months from now; not when it is safe; not when there is a vaccine. Now! It is true that starting school in-person may raise the number of people infected with COVID-19. However, the data shows that children are the least impacted by this disease. The data on the impacts of isolation and trauma on children have been shown to be long-lasting and life threatening. Those impacts will be with our society long after this disease has run its course.

Medical providers are now more prepared to treat infected patients. We currently have no hospitalized COVID-19 patients in our county. We are prepared to bring students and staff back safely. Our processes and communication protocols have been tested and work. We have a Health and Safety Officer who monitors adherence to practices and protocols and is in contact with NMDOH, OSHA and local medical providers. We have trained all of our staff to be contact tracers using the Johns Hopkins Contact Tracing Course. We have sufficient PPE for all students and staff. We know our community needs to get better at COVID-19 practices and we are working with them. We have an on-line school option for students who are fearful or have compromised health issues. We have placed staff that are at risk in on-line only teaching positions. The majority of our staff wants to work with students in an in-person learning environment. The majority of our students want to return to in-person learning. We need to be able to offer students the safety, structure, opportunities and hope that in-person instruction can provide. Their future and ours depends on it. Please allow all districts in the state the flexibility to bring our students back to school in the numbers and manner they deem appropriate. We will provide children the education and promise of a better life that is essential to growing healthy children and communities.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gerry C. Washburn". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Gerry C. Washburn
Superintendent