



February 3, 2021

Chair Chamberlain
95 University Ave W
St. Paul, MN 55103

Re: Testimony on SF351

Dear Chair Chamberlain and members of the Senate Education Finance and Policy Committee,

When schools closed last March due to COVID-19, all students were impacted. From conversations we had with students, families, and educators, we know that while distance learning has worked for some, for many students it has meant losing out on academic rigor and achievement, socialization, and receiving appropriate accommodations and modifications. And for parents, this has meant extra educator and academic support duties, in addition to their work and family responsibilities, also made more difficult due to the pandemic.

During these times it's important that we offer supplemental support to underserved families in the most streamlined way possible so that they can easily access what they need to help their children. Prior to the pandemic, there was already a digital divide, with low-income students far less likely to have access to high-quality and reliable internet and devices. Data from the Pew Research Center found that 24% of teens whose annual family income is less than \$30,000—compared to just 9% for those in households earning \$75,000 or more—say the lack of a dependable computer or internet connection often or sometimes prohibits them from finishing their homework.¹

High-income families are able to afford extra support, tutors, and programs to help supplement learning for their students, which many low-income families find financially out of reach. Data from Zearn Math—an online math program for K-5 students—substantiates these assumptions with findings which indicate the pandemic may be exacerbating gaps between low, middle, and high-income students. Zearn analyzed participation data from January 2020, prior to school closures, through May 2020 and found that participation for low-income students dropped by 52% for low-income and by 30% for middle-income students, but rose by 5% for high-income students.²

We owe it to families to level the playing field by making financial support for unexpected and unprecedented educational expenses as easily accessible as possible. When we shift the burden for students' education directly to families, we should also provide support. SF351, in addition to proposals to increase the education tax credit, would provide resources directly to families when they are needed most. We applaud the initiative embodied in this legislation, and encourage the committee to support streamlined, accessible family and student-centered investments.

Sincerely,
Jenifer Loon
Senior Policy Fellow

¹ Anderson, M. & Perrin, A. (October 2018). "Nearly one-in-five teens can't always finish their homework because of the digital divide." Pew Research Center.

² Fay, L. (September 2020). "New Data Suggest Pandemic May Not Just Be Leaving Low-Income Students Behind; It May Be Propelling Wealthier Ones Even Further Ahead." The74.