Testimony of California Policy Fellow Jamey Olney Before the State Legislature Panel on
Reopening Schools
June 16, 2020

Good morning, Chairman O’Donnell and Members. I am Jamey Olney, a middle school teacher in a small Central Valley district and a Teach Plus Policy Fellow. I am also speaking on behalf of the Equity Coalition.

Thank you for the invitation to share my students’ experiences during Covid-19. The state knows them as English Learners and Socio-Economically Disadvantaged. I know them as Claudia, Miranda, and Luis. I’m here to ensure they do not become another statistic, a contributor to the “achievement gap”, or remain invisible.

I teach English Language Development at a Title I school. 95% of my families live below the poverty line. Many of my students are refugees fleeing violence in their home country, children who’ve been separated from their parents, and “Long-Term English Learners,” who come to me after multiple years of having been failed by the public school system. When school is closed, it’s common for our students to watch younger siblings, while parents work multiple jobs. Nevertheless, they are resilient, hard-working, and hungry to learn. My students fight a silent battle against inequity every day. Distance learning has made this battle much harder.

When school closed in March, 60% of my students immediately dropped off the radar. My district required teachers to provide packets from March-May. Teachers also had the option to post assignments electronically. In addition I called and messaged students and dropped off books on porches. I even roused one student, Luis, from sleep at 1 pm, to talk to him through a window.

I was surprised that Claudia, a talkative and engaged student in my class still hadn’t responded despite multiple voicemails and messages. When she finally answered the phone, she shared that she had neither access to a device nor wifi. At the beginning of May, remote instruction began in our district. Families could pick up one device from school sites. Claudia couldn’t pick up a laptop from school because her mom and sister work 12 hour shifts at a packing plant and she cares for her baby niece. She said, “I heard from my friends there was school but I wasn’t sure I could participate because I didn’t have my book or wifi. Am I going to get an F?” That same evening I drove to her trailer park with a school laptop and free Internet providers flyer translated into Spanish.

When I followed up with Claudia later that week, her mother, who was overwhelmed by the information, had not set up the “free” Wifi service. I tried to call myself and wasn’t able to connect to a human being or to get the right help despite multiple attempts. Imagine what this experience was like for Claudia’s mother? Other parents who had lost jobs due to Covid-19 were denied free internet access “because they already had an account,” while others had lost phone service.
Claudia spent much of her childhood hiding in her house in Mexico while cartel gun battles raged outside. She wants to prevent others from going through the same horrors by graduating from college with a criminology degree and becoming a drug enforcement agent. Before March, she was writing five paragraph essays. Now she speaks in halting English. There will be no summer school. Claudia will enter my classroom in August having not heard, spoken, read, or written English for five months. Unfortunately, her experience is far too common. Students like Claudia need and deserve so much more than the crisis schooling they have received since March.

Access to quality distance learning has been incredibly uneven across California. We need leadership from the state to ensure that we do better moving forward and put necessary safeguards in place so that our most vulnerable students get access to instruction, effective accommodations and support.

We urge policymakers to act intentionally, learning from the experience of educators, students and families. Specifically, we recommend the state create a framework for instructional continuity as we return to school. We must require LEAs to adopt plans that:

- Evaluate all students to determine how much learning loss and trauma they experienced during school closures.
- Ensure “a full curriculum of substantially similar quality” regardless of whether in-school or by distance learning, with accommodations for English Learners, special education students and students academically behind.
- Track students’ attendance and level of engagement daily.
- Provide live or “synchronous” distance learning opportunities between teachers and all students.
- Help families to support their children in distance learning in the languages that their parents speak.

I’m asking you to give Claudia an opportunity.
- To learn.
- To use her passion and skills to impact the world.
- To be seen as an asset, not a deficit.
- To live a life of freedom, rather than one spent in captivity.

YOU have the opportunity to help our English Learners not only acclimate, but to excel and become contributing members of the community. You will be the champions of change by ensuring ALL students are guaranteed their civil right of a “meaningful opportunity to participate in the public educational program.”