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March 22, 2019

Governor Gavin Newsom
1303 10th Street, Suite 1173
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Governor Newsom,

First and foremost, thank you for your visit to Middletown last fall and again today. We so greatly appreciate that you actually visit ground zero when it comes to wildfires, and that you are taking action through your budget and your actions to help this county avoid further conflagrations.

I am writing to you because I believe you might be able to remedy an inequitable situation relating to support for school districts impacted by wildfires. I am the Superintendent of the Middletown Unified School District. On September 12, 2015, the Valley Fire started on Cobb Mountain, within school district boundaries. As the Lt. Governor, I know you were not only aware of it, but also worked to help the community get through the disaster.

Roughly 78,000 acres and 1,200 homes burned. Twenty percent of our students and staff lost everything. One hundred percent of the community evacuated through flames. All of our students experienced an Adverse Childhood Event (ACE) of huge magnitude. We were able to get most schools reopened in two weeks and were fortunate that our schools didn't sustain more serious damage. We did lose our continuation program building and our whole maintenance facility and all equipment. The bigger loss was our students' sense of safety and security.

I recently found out that the Assembly Education Committee held a hearing on wildfire response and recovery. We were not told of this hearing, much less invited, even though we were among the first to go through it and have much to offer those who more recently experienced such horrendous loss. Much of the reporting of the event includes comments such as "firestorms have caused unprecedented damage to school districts statewide *since 2017*." The articles go on to discuss the supports CDE has put in place to help these Districts.

Back in 2015, I worked diligently to get this same sort of relief from the state and CDE for my District, which also survived a severely damaging firestorm. We, too, incurred exceptional transportation costs as we followed McKinney Vento protocols to transport our now-homeless students to school from far-flung locations. We also struggled to get adequate mental health support for our traumatized students and staff. And naturally, we lost ADA, just as the other

Districts have. I asked the state to hold our ADA flat for a few years as we recovered. I asked for some of the reserved McKinney Vento funds to be released to help offset our costs. We begged for help in getting trained trauma counselors into the District. We also asked for relief from state accountability measures. All I got were “Noes”.

Three and a half years later, we are still feeling the impact from the Valley Fire. Only 20% of the burned homes have been rebuilt. 62% of Lake County, the second poorest county with the worst health care in the state, has burned in the last 3 years. Each of the succeeding fires re-traumatizes our community. Every year, we are an evacuation site and have to close school to accommodate that. I bet the students in my District have lost more days of school to fire and fire-related reasons than any other District in the state over the last 3.5 years. We have to file waivers for attendance every year. We are struggling, and yet the resilience of this community is remarkable. Everyone is still working hard to recover, including our students.

So why haven't we gotten the visibility and help other Districts have gotten? Why aren't we invited to the various hearings to give our input, especially since we are further along in the process and have a lot to offer? We've contacted our legislators, and Senator McGuire has tried to help us. We've also worked through our various education advocacy groups. The light bulb went on when I spoke to Steve Herrington (Sonoma County Superintendent of Schools) and asked how they had been able to procure funding. He said, “We got a lobbyist.”

Governor Newsom, this is wrong. It is inequitable and it strongly underlines the divide between many rural districts and everyone else. We are expected to meet the same standards, have the same staffing ratios, and provide the same services, yet our funding is not the same. We can't afford to hire a lobbyist to get post-wildfire assistance, much less the extra teachers we need in order to provide things like AP classes and electives, or the mental health professionals to support our traumatized students. We run on a shoestring and do a darn good job preparing our students. But we shouldn't have to hire a lobbyist in order to get the same support as others. This is an issue of cultural capital – those with wealth have the resources to get more resources while our pleas fall on deaf ears.

I had a visceral response when I read about the February hearing. I am so sad, frustrated, and angry at Middletown Unified always being left out. I hope there is something you can do to put this District and its staff and students on the radar. We may be rural, but we have value, and our students deserve the same support as any other students in the state.

Sincerely,

Catherine Stone, Superintendent