

House Appropriations Subcommittee Hearing:
Federal Investments in Elementary Education
February 26, 2025
10:30 am, Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2358C

Testimony of Robert Kim, Esq., Executive Director, Education Law Center

My name is Robert Kim. I serve as Executive Director of Education Law Center (ELC), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to support and advance public education and the rights of students nationwide. ELC supports school finance litigation and advocacy in multiple states and disseminates an annual research report on K-12 public-school funding in all 50 states.¹

I begin by emphasizing the importance of federal funding to U.S. public schools and the millions of students who attend them. While more federal funding is not, by itself, a magic solution for the challenges we face in public education, depriving public schools of critical federal funding would have immediate and long-term negative consequences for millions of students and communities across the country.

Over the last decade, the federal government has provided a relatively small share of funding for public schools,² but what it *does* provide is crucial, especially for schools, districts, and states with large numbers of students living in poverty, students with disabilities, and other underserved students. Accordingly, I raise four essential considerations related to the federal government and school funding: (1) indisputable evidence that increased school funding contributes to positive outcomes; (2) the importance of *federal* funding to states and districts that struggle to provide adequate funding on their own; (3) the dangers of radically changing how federal education funds are distributed; and (4) the importance of preserving the U.S.

¹ Education Law Center (2024). *Making the Grade: How Fair is School Funding in Your State?*

² The federal education funding contribution to each state can be found at the University of Michigan's Federal Education Funding Data Dashboard: <https://poverty.umich.edu/federal-education-funding-data-dashboard/>.

Department of Education.

I. Quality research consistently demonstrates that increasing school funding leads to improved student achievement and other positive outcomes.

Recent studies using rigorous methods show that higher spending improves student achievement.³ For example, a study of school finance reform in California found that a \$1,000 per-pupil increase for three consecutive years led to a full grade-level of improvement in math and reading achievement across all grades.⁴ A study in Texas found that a 10% increase in spending led to improved reading and math scores, reduced dropout rates, and improved graduation rates. These gains accrued in later grades with greater exposure to funding increases and were largely concentrated in poorer districts.⁵

Research also shows that spending *cuts* have resulted in lower test scores, lower college attendance rates, and larger achievement gaps by poverty level and race.⁶ A study of state funding reductions in Kansas between 2010 and 2018 showed that funding cuts had more severe negative effects on achievement in rural districts.⁷

Studies asserting that additional school funding does not lead to improved outcomes, or that point to lagging national or international test scores as evidence that money does not matter, omit important context.⁸ In addition, they fail to account for the fact that students in well-funded

³ See, e.g., Jackson, C.K. (2020). *Does school spending matter? The new literature on an old question. An equal start: Policy and practice to promote equality of opportunity for children*. American Psychological Association. https://works.bepress.com/c_kirabo_jackson/38/.

⁴ Johnson, R. (2023). *School funding effectiveness: Evidence from California's local control funding formula*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/529.194>

⁵ Kreisman, Daniel and Matthew P. Steinberg. (2019). *The effect of increased funding on student achievement: Evidence from Texas's small district adjustment*. *Journal of Public Economics*, 176, 118-141. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2019.04.003>

⁶ Jackson, C.K., Wigger, C., & Xiong, H. (2021). *Do school spending cuts matter? Evidence from the Great Recession*. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 13 (2), 304-35. <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/pol.20180674>

⁷ Rauscher, E. (2020). *Does Money Matter More in the Country? Education Funding Reductions and Achievement in Kansas, 2010–2018*. *AERA Open*, 6(4), 1-38.

⁸ These studies did not account for new accountability goals and requirements that expanded the population served by public schools. For example, increased funding for students with severe disabilities is not intended to improve test scores. Likewise, declining dropout rates have led to higher enrollments in the older grades, though these students may depress test scores. See Education Law Center (2023). *Money Matters: Evidence Supporting Greater Investment in PK-12 Public Education*. <https://edlawcenter.org/assets/files/pdfs/School%20Funding/Money%20Matters%20Talking%20Points.pdf>.

school districts and states in the U.S. do comparatively well on national and international achievement tests.⁹ In fact, increased funding is linked to improved high school graduation rates, reduced student suspension and expulsion rates, and improved student outcomes in adulthood, including higher wages and reduced poverty.¹⁰

While money matters, how money is spent is also important. The U.S. Department of Education seeks to direct its spending to the most essential programs and initiatives through multiple, targeted funding streams. In addition, federal funding is spent on data collection and research that helps educators at the state and local level identify best practices so they can better ensure taxpayer dollars are being used efficiently and effectively.

II. Federal funding is critical to support states, school districts, and the most vulnerable students and families.

U.S. schools rely on property taxes for their funding, which puts students growing up in communities with less property wealth at a disadvantage. Importantly, federal dollars help balance these disparities.

First, federal K-12 education funding plays an essential role by allocating resources to districts serving high-need students. Specifically, the U.S. Department of Education distributes targeted funds for low-income and neglected or at-risk students (Title I); English learners (Title III); rural populations (Title V); American Indians, Native Hawaiians, and Alaska Natives (Title VI); students residing on Indian lands, military bases, low-rent housing properties, or other federal properties (Title VII); homeless students (Title IX); and students with disabilities

⁹ Carnoy, M. Garcia, E., & Khavenson, T. (2015). *Bringing it back home*. Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/bringing-it-back-home-why-state-comparisons-are-more-useful-than-international-comparisons-for-improving-u-s-education-policy>

¹⁰ Jackson, C.K., Johnson, R.C., Persico, C. (2015). *The effects of school spending on education and economic outcomes: Evidence from school finance reforms*. National Bureau of Economic Research. https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w20847/w20847.pdf

(IDEA). It is not a stretch to say that cutting federal funds would negatively impact hundreds of thousands of students and families in every school district in the United States.¹¹

In addition, federal funding helps provide educational opportunity for students, especially the most vulnerable, in states with less property wealth to provide for education.¹² Viewed as a whole, the current federal K-12 funding scheme reflects an overarching goal to ensure equal educational opportunity, consistent with multiple federal statutes.¹³ Additionally, public opinion polling has shown that Americans of all political parties support greater federal investment in key areas, including workforce preparation, teacher recruitment and retention, student mental health, and helping students who've fallen behind.¹⁴

III. Changing federal funding programs to block grants or private school voucher programs would worsen educational outcomes for millions of students.

Currently, federal education funds are distributed to states and districts via formula and competitive grants. Major K-12 programs, such as Title I and IDEA, are distributed using various mathematical formulas designed to ensure funds are directed to students and communities where the need is greatest. The Trump Administration has signaled its intent to convert large percentages of formula funds to block grants that shift funding to states, or to private school voucher programs that shift public funds to private education costs. Block grants are not as

¹¹ Winner, J. (2025, Feb. 13). *What the assault on public education means for kids with disabilities*. The New Yorker. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-lede/what-the-assault-on-public-education-means-for-kids-with-disabilities>; Floyd, K., Granville, P., Hinds, C., & Potter, H. (2025, Feb. 12). *How gutting the U.S. Department of Education Would Hurt Students and Their Families*. The Century Foundation. <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/how-gutting-the-u-s-department-of-education-would-hurt-students-and-their-families>.

¹² See data from the Urban Institute. *School funding: Do poor kids get their fair share?* <https://apps.urban.org/features/school-funding-do-poor-kids-get-fair-share/>.

¹³ These include the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 (EEOA), the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

¹⁴ PDK International. (2024). *The 56th annual PDK Poll: Federal focus on education initiatives wins broad public support*. <https://pdkpoll.org/2024-poll-results/>.

effective as grants that direct funds for certain populations of students or that are directed toward specific purposes. If a larger percentage of federal funds are distributed through block grants, Congress will lose its ability to ensure that federal funds are going to students facing the steepest barriers, or that schools are meeting minimum standards for student achievement and success.

Converting federal formula funds to voucher programs would be even more problematic, as it would transfer billions of dollars from public education to the private sector. The private schools that benefit from such programs do not have the same level of accountability as public schools for using taxpayer funds effectively, do not have to comply with federal and state laws requiring public schools to be nondiscriminatory and open to all, and do not improve (and in fact worsen) student outcomes.¹⁵ And research shows that the total public costs of education borne by taxpayers would increase by up to 33%, or \$203 billion, per year with universal vouchers.¹⁶ In addition, recent polls indicate that over two-thirds of voters, regardless of party, would choose to use federal funding on public schools over voucher programs.¹⁷

IV. The U.S. Department of Education plays a critical role supporting states, school districts and students and ensuring federal funds are spent wisely and efficiently.

Finally, I cannot overstate the vital importance of the role of the U.S. Department of Education to support states and districts in their efforts to provide high-quality education.¹⁸ The Department not only provides key funding for early childhood education, K-12 education, career

¹⁵ Lubienski, C. & Malin, J. *The New Terrain of the School Voucher Wars*. The Hill (Aug. 30, 2019); Prothero, A. & Harwin, A. *Private School Choice Programs Fall Short on Transparency, Accountability*. (Feb. 28, 2020) Education Week; Black, D. *Voucher Expansion and the Threat to Students' Educational and Civil Rights*. The School Voucher Illusion. Teachers College Press (2020); Abdulkadiroğlu, A., Pathak, P. & Walters, C. (2018). *Free to Choose: Can School Choice Reduce Student Achievement?* American Economic Journal: Applied Economics 10 (1): 175–206.

¹⁶ Shand, R. & Levin, H.M. (2001). *Estimating a price tag for school vouchers*. National Education Policy Center.

¹⁷ All4Ed. (2024). *OpinionatED: Voters' views on education in 2024*. <https://all4ed.org/publication/executive-summary-opinionated-voters-views-on-education-in-2024/>.

¹⁸ The Department was created in 1979 by the Department of Education Organization Act; see 20 U.S.C. §3401 *et seq.* Prior to the establishment of the Department, education functions were scattered throughout multiple agencies, and Congress found that there was fragmentation, duplication, inconsistency, and lack of coordination and accountability in education programs and determined that a single Department was necessary.

and technical and adult education, and postsecondary education, it also provides guidance and technical assistance to state and local governments. The Department conducts and supports evaluation, research, and data collection on education trends, conditions, and needs. It ensures accountability in the use of federal funds. It provides funds and assistance for hundreds of thousands of students who rely on federal loans and grants for higher education. It disburses funding in times of emergency. And, critically, it enforces federal civil rights laws to ensure equal educational opportunity in American public schools. These functions are important to the states, to the 14,000 school districts and 5,000 institutions of higher education within the states, and to millions of students and families across the nation.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony. I look forward to further dialogue with you on February 26.