

**Responses to Questions for the Record
Virginia Gentles
Director, Education Freedom Center
Independent Women's Forum**

**Full Committee Hearing:
"American Education in Crisis"
February 8, 2023
10:00 a.m.**

Representative Elise Stefanik (R-NY)

1. In your testimony you mention the recent NAEP scores and the significant decline in student reading ability, and the first ever documented decline in math.
 - The American Rescue Plan alone in some cases spent more than double our annual average per student, yet we see declining results. What is not working here and how do we correct our course to best address this?

Even before the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) [scores](#) were released, research had revealed that lengthy school closures, disrupted learning, and deplorable remote instruction, often imposed upon students in response to teachers unions' demands, resulted in alarming [declines in reading and math scores](#). It's important to acknowledge that students entered the pandemic with weak academic skills, with only [one-third of students reading proficiently](#) and less than one-quarter of 12th graders proficient in math in 2019. Covid-era education policies accelerated a disaster already in progress and compounded the literacy crisis, lowered math achievement, and disproportionately impacted the youngest students, low-income and minority students, and students with disabilities.

In addition, states like Virginia quietly lowered academic standards, masking students' struggles and preventing parents from realizing their children were not learning reading or math. In 2017, before the Virginia State Board of Education lowered state reading standards, 43% of fourth-grade students tested at the proficient level on the NAEP reading test. While not an impressive percentage, it exceeded the 2017 national average of 35% proficient. According to 2022 NAEP [results](#), only 32% of both the nation's and Virginia's students are currently proficient readers.

Although states and school districts received \$190 billion in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding, much of the funding remains unspent or was invested unwisely. Districts should prioritize the students with highest need, especially the young students still struggling to read, and invest in intensive high-dosage tutoring and summer school programs with proven track records. The state of Indiana, for example, measured the impact on learning of summer learning programs, and state leaders intend to focus funding on approaches that positively impact students academically. States and districts should provide learning loss microgrants to parents so that they can choose from an array of academic supports and direct funding to the tutoring, after school or summer program, or enrichment options that best meets their child's needs.

- What concerning trends in schools have you seen further exacerbated since these lockdowns that impact future educational attainment?

I regularly speak with parents who are perplexed by the lack of homework and discipline in their children's schools. The country's [learning loss crisis](#) is an undeniable reality that many schools appear determined to exacerbate by lowering academic standards, expecting less from students, prioritizing activism over academics, and refusing to address chaotic classrooms that prevent teachers from teaching and students from learning. Too many school districts insist on embracing progressive education fads like "standards-based grading," which removes A-F grades, and [debunked](#) "whole-language" or "balanced literacy" reading programs. Our nation's students will never recover lost learning if districts continue to chase fads, rather than prioritize academic instruction.

- What impact does this learning loss have for students down the line in their education?

The Covid-era closures and excessive quarantine policies significantly disrupted learning and caused students to miss out on opportunities to develop age-appropriate social and behavioral skills. According to [McKinsey and Company analysis](#), "They are at risk of finishing school without the skills, behaviors, and mindsets to succeed in college or in the workforce." Too many students remained disengaged from learning with hundreds of thousands "missing," according to [Stanford University analysis](#), and likely no longer receiving an education. Districts across the country are reporting alarmingly high rates of chronic absenteeism, with students missing over 10% of instructional days. Half of [Chicago Public Schools](#) students were chronically absent last year, for example; double the pre-Covid rate. Covid-era policies condemned these children to low literacy skills, limited employment opportunities, higher rates of poverty and incarceration, and bleak futures. Education bureaucrats, superintendents and local and state leaders must acknowledge their mistakes and take drastic measures to teach literacy effectively and re-engage students in education.

2. Under the guise of equity, schools are doing away with merit-based achievement. Look no further than in Virginia, where at more than a dozen schools, students were not told about national merit awards that they rightfully earned.
 - In your experience, what impact does moving away from merit have on success for students?

Eliminating educational opportunities hurts students. The education system's failures in Virginia and elsewhere trap students in an environment that dismisses their achievements and potential, while prioritizing equity posturing over student success. No one benefits from an education in which excellence is meaningless and students are intentionally not challenged. My Independent Women's Forum colleague, Patrice Onwuka, recently [observed](#), "Today, as part of a war on merit in K-12 education, honors classes are eliminated, accelerated math is abandoned, admissions to selective high schools are relaxed, and high-school entrance exams are scrapped in the name of equity. Critics claim such programs contribute to racial segregation, although data suggest otherwise." Opponents of honors classes "ignore the Black and Hispanic students who stand to suffer from the elimination of gifted educational programming. Merit-based programs operate as burners lighting a fire under a gifted young person. Kids, especially those from low-income households and struggling minority homes, are pushed to the limits of their abilities in these programs, rather than being held back."

- Can you explain the importance of reprioritizing merit and keeping schools transparent and accountable to parents?

Students deserve to have their potential, talent, and accomplishments acknowledged, and every student should be challenged and encouraged to learn and achieve. In a transparent education system, parents can stay informed on the course offerings and curriculum provided by their schools. Parents across the nation are responding to school districts' quiet decisions to eliminate merit-based education by making their disapproval crystal clear. Patrick Henry High School in San Diego, California, for example, [reinstated honors](#) literature and history courses after concerned parents and students objected to the decision to quietly remove them. In Rhode Island, [parental outcry](#) resulted in school officials returning honors and "honors with distinction" English and social studies classes at Barrington High School.

School systems should not keep parents in the dark. Instead, they should disclose their curriculum, budget, safety procedures, and any violent activity that takes place on school grounds. In some schools, transparency is non-existent, and parents are barred from accessing information about instructional materials or how their tax dollars are being spent. Parents have a right to direct the upbringing, care, and education of their children. This means that parents, in collaboration with educators, should be involved in deciding what students are learning. Families should also be kept in the loop on the policies and safety procedures in place at their children's school.

Representative Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ)

1. Ms. Gentles, you touted the success of Arizona's ESA program, but you did not mention the exploitation of the program with over 70 percent of enrollees having never attended public schools or reports of gay parents being excluded from their child's school – a private school that was receiving ESA funds. Does this sound like a successful program?

[According](#) to the Arizona Department of Education, as of February 13, 2023, 49% of the students participating in Arizona's Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESAs) have transferred into the program from public schools. The number of students with prior public school attendance has been steadily increasing since the program began implementation of the universal ESA in August 2022. Because all students, regardless of current or prior school enrollment, are eligible, of course there initially would be a higher proportion of participating students from private schools. A private school simply had to send an email to existing families with the application link, whereas families with children enrolled in public schools had to embark on a multi-step process of learning about the program, researching their educational options, determining how to apply for the ESA, and transferring their child. Arizona's democratically-elected legislature and governor decided to amend the existing ESA law to allow all families to participate, whether or not their child was previously enrolled in a government-assigned public school. There is no "exploitation" involved.

The ESA program allows parents to make decisions about where to send their children to school. The relationship is between the family and the school, not the government and the school or education provider. In the [story](#) in question, a mother with the legal right to make education decisions for her child chose a school with specific, religious beliefs. No one is forced to choose a religious school that has values that differ from their own. We live in a free and pluralistic society and our education system should reflect that freedom and pluralism. That includes the freedom to create learning environments that stand for particular values. If a family doesn't share the values

of a particular school, they are free to choose from among a myriad of other schools that share their values. The fact that the father of the child disagrees with the mother's choice is a matter for family court, not the Department of Education or the state legislature.