



FLORIDA FREEDOM
TO READ PROJECT

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Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the hearing, "Breaking Trust: Attacks on Parental Rights, Inappropriate Content, and Legal Abuses in America's Schools."

We write as Florida public school parents and public education advocates deeply concerned about how so-called "parental rights" laws have been implemented in our state.

Florida has become a national testing ground for policies framed as "parental rights" initiatives. In practice, many of these policies have not expanded parental empowerment, but instead centralized authority in the hands of state officials, political appointees, and ideological activists while undermining local decision-making and public trust in schools.

Parents in Florida have always had the ability to engage in their children's education: communicating with teachers, monitoring assignments, attending school board meetings, and making decisions for their own child. What has changed is not the existence of parental rights, but who is allowed to impose restrictions on all families.

Public records collected from Florida school districts show that roughly 95% of public school students have no parental restrictions placed on library access. Yet thousands of books have still been removed or restricted across the state following political pressure, legal threats, challenges from individual, serial book banners, and state intervention. In many districts, books have been removed despite local review committees recommending they remain available.

This is not local control or parental empowerment. It is state-directed censorship driven by fear, political pressure, and legal uncertainty.

Meanwhile, the same state leaders advancing these narratives have aggressively expanded taxpayer-funded private school vouchers.

These vouchers were sold as a way to help students escape failing schools, but the data show that most new spending subsidizes families already in private education. After the state expanded universal vouchers in 2023, about 69% of new recipients were already enrolled in private schools, roughly 40% came from families previously too wealthy to qualify, and private schools charging \$15,000 or more annually added over 30,000 voucher students in the first year alone.

The cost to taxpayers surged to an estimated \$4 billion during the 24/25 school year. Audits uncovered major accountability failures, including roughly \$398 million in overspending, tens of thousands of unverifiable student records, and about \$47 million improperly sent to voucher recipients whose students were actually enrolled in public schools. Hundreds of millions more could not be reliably tracked because of duplicate or incomplete records.



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These findings raise profound concerns about oversight, stewardship of taxpayer dollars, and the long-term destabilization of Florida's public education system. Even as this occurs, public schools continue educating the overwhelming majority of children, including students with disabilities, English language learners, and students requiring specialized services, while navigating disruptive policy changes, increasing financial strain, and chronic staffing shortages.

Florida's constitution guarantees a "uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high-quality system of free public schools." Yet state leaders have increasingly promoted narratives about "indoctrination," "grooming," and "pornography in schools" that do not reflect the experience of most families, but instead fuel distrust and division while paving the way for privatization.

Efforts that control and manipulate schools to advance a narrow ideological perspective under the guise of "parental rights" are at play in Florida and do not work. They create chaos and fear for boards, superintendents, educators, and libraries and harm and restrict learning for students and families. As the federal government takes up this mantle, we must be clear that this is not about parental rights but about government control which has no place in our public schools, or our democracy.

Public education is not perfect, but it remains one of the few institutions designed to serve every child regardless of income, disability, religion, language, or background.

The solution to the challenges facing public education is not to undermine public confidence in it.

The solution is to strengthen it.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Stephana Ferrell
Florida Public School Parent
Director of Research & Insight, Florida Freedom to Read Project