

**Testimony of Gretchen Davis, Foster Parent from Arlington, Virginia,
United States House of Representatives Early Childhood, Elementary, and
Secondary Education Subcommittee Hearing “Picking up the Pieces:
Strengthening Connections with Students Experiencing Homelessness and
Children in Foster Care” Wednesday, May 19, 2021**

Good afternoon, Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Owens and Members of the Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today as you address the impact of COVID-19 on students experiencing homelessness and children in foster care.

My husband and I have been foster parents for over 8 years in Arlington, Virginia. We have adopted one child through foster care, who is now 7. We have had 22 other children ranging in age from 4 days to 14 years old in our home. Being a foster family has been the most rewarding and also the most difficult endeavor we have undertaken.

In March 2020, a week after quarantine began, 2 girls, ages 4 and 5, joined our family. We welcomed these scared and sad little ones into our home, and over the following days, began to figure out “school” for 5 kids - our own 3 and 2 foster children. We set up a makeshift classroom and began using activities and iPad programs provided by the schools. The girls adjusted well in our home, but as often happens with kids who have experienced trauma, we saw they were very behind in school. Addressing the girls’ educational needs was a priority for me, and as I emailed with their teachers, it was clear the schools were unable to provide the same supports these girls would have received if they were in-person. Instead they provided a few daily activities totaling 30 minutes, and a Microsoft Teams call twice a week.

From March to June, the girls made some progress, but not without a lot of supplemental tutoring from me. I remember last spring what would keep me awake at

night was not actually my own children's struggles during the pandemic, but the damage being done to vulnerable children- students who were homeless and in foster care, English language learners, and families in crisis whose children would not or could not log on or interact with school. Basic academic goals of reading, writing and problem solving for many came to a standstill. I had the resources and time to support the kids in my care, but what about those who did not?

The girls returned home in November and are doing okay. Life is not easy, but their mother is resilient and has made great strides to keep her kids safe. The girls are finally in hybrid education and they go to school 2 days a week from 9 AM to 2:20 PM. They go to school on different days. This young mother, who needs a job to keep her subsidized housing, has had a difficult time finding work with this abbreviated school schedule and no extended day-care provided. Currently I help her by picking the girls up from school so that she can work a full day. I am glad to help her, but once again, I lay awake at night thinking about those families who do not have community support.

Another devastating effect of COVID-19 is the absence of mandatory reporters. As a foster parent, I am a mandatory reporter. When I notice child abuse or neglect, I am required by law to report it so that the concern can be investigated. Mandatory reporters are a critical safety net we have in the United States for vulnerable children. Teachers, school administrators and staff are also mandatory reporters. When students are stuck at home and not allowed to be out in society, mandatory reporting cannot happen. How well can a teacher see bruises on a student over a Microsoft Teams call? How comfortable will a student feel confiding in a trusted adult about sexual abuse over a Zoom call? As a foster parent and a former teacher, it concerns me that one of the consequences of staying shut down for so long is underreported child abuse and neglect.

I would suggest to you, as we look back on how we handled COVID-19 as a nation, that best practices going forward ensure that just as grocery stores and hospitals need to be open, schools also offer critical lifelines for communities. All are staffed by essential employees. Just like hospitals care for sick people, schools care for children,

who are among the most vulnerable populations we have. Teachers have always been on the frontlines for children. I was a teacher for 15 years and never questioned that for a minute. Why now, all of the sudden, are many teachers hidden away and not able to do what they do best, which is to care for and educate children?

Many public school systems have yanked stability and support from children and instead handed them iPads and free WiFi. In my experience as a teacher, a mother and a foster mother, I am convinced that a good education is a life line for all children. Schools have been closed for way too long. What began as an important step to “flatten the curve” and protect people from an unknown virus, became over a year of excuses and panic to make everything “just right” and 100% safe before reopening. Vulnerable children do not have the luxury of time. Many local educational agencies, including my own, have NOT prioritized return to school for vulnerable children. The services they have provided during this past year have been weak and insufficient. Our children deserve much better. Thank you.