



OPENING STATEMENT

House Committee on Education and Labor

Chairman Robert C. "Bobby" Scott

Opening Statement of Chairman Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan (CNMI)

Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Hearing

Back to School: Highlighting Best Practices for Safely Reopening School."

Wednesday, September 29, 2021 | 10:15 a.m.

Today, we are discussing the obstacles schools have faced to safely reopen, and how school districts are using the funding from the American Rescue Plan to protect students and staff and get students back on track.

Each of us here agrees that safely reopening schools for in-person learning is critical to our fight against COVID-19. Across the country, students are returning for their third school year under the cloud of a pandemic that has:

- Disconnected millions of our students from their education,
- Expanded achievement gaps for students of color, students with disabilities, and English language learners, and
- Eroded students' mental health.

The emergence of the Delta variant has elevated the threat facing our students. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, more than 240,000 children tested positive for COVID-19 during just one week earlier this month, alone – one week. Fortunately, young people who contract the virus appear to face lower risks of serious illness. However, lower risk is not zero risk. COVID-19 has claimed the lives of nearly 500 Americans under the age of 17. That's more than 2.5 times the number of students who have succumbed to influenza, the flu, over that same period.

And while young people are more likely to recover, the risk of lingering symptoms and the risk of transmission to adults must be taken seriously.

The Delta variant has intensified the challenges facing school districts and the importance of implementing a science-based, layered mitigation strategy to keep students and staff safe.

With the right precautions and resources—schools can mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and safely reopen classrooms.

This is why House Democrats passed the American Rescue Plan, providing \$122 billion to ensure school districts have the resources to follow public health guidance, reopen and remain open, and support students' academic and social-emotional needs.

Today, our witnesses will help us examine how schools are using these resources to navigate the difficult challenge of reaching these goals.

In North Carolina, for example, schools that implemented proper mask use largely prevented transmission of the virus, according to one study.

In San Francisco schools, where 90 percent of adolescents are fully vaccinated, there have been no COVID-19 outbreaks since classrooms reopened.

And a recent nationwide survey of school superintendents found that three-quarters of school districts are using federal funding for summer learning opportunities so that students can catch up on lost time in the classroom.

In my district, the Northern Mariana Islands, schools are also using this funding for summer learning as well as hiring more teachers to work with students needing additional support and installing new ventilators in each classroom to help prevent virus particles from accumulating.

Unfortunately, some states and school boards have chosen to play politics with these resources instead of following the science. In Florida, Republican education leaders have even blocked funding for districts that require mask use. The state has one of the worst COVID infection rates in the country and its schools desperately need resources. Undermining school funding only makes it harder for students to safely return to classrooms.

Research shows that schools that started the academic year without mask requirements were over three times more likely to have a COVID-19 outbreak between August and September.

However, we also know that reopening classrooms and making up for lost learning time is not enough to ensure equal access to quality education. Earlier this month, the Committee took the next step by passing its portion of the *Build Back Better Act*. This included significant investments in school infrastructure and teacher preparation that our schools and students need.

Today's hearing is an opportunity to learn from experts about the obstacles schools face to reopening safely, how schools can keep students in the classroom safely, and how states and districts can leverage federal funds to build a more equitable education system for the future.

I now turn to the Ranking Member, Mr. Owens, for the purpose of making an opening statement. I now recognize the distinguished Ranking Member.