Statement before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Hearing on "Generational Learning Loss: How Pandemic School Closures Hurt Students"

Pandemic Closures and Learning Loss:

Extended Remote Schooling Drove Student Learning Loss, and the Time for Recovery is Running Out

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Chair Bean, Ranking Member Bonamici, and members of the subcommittee: Thank you for inviting me here today to share my assessment of this important issue.

In March 2020, at the start of the pandemic, my work as an education scholar at the American Enterprise Institute abruptly shifted to collecting data on how schools responded to the pandemic. My team began by collecting the first nationally representative data on school district pandemic response in Spring 2020 and continued our work through the 2020–21 school year with the Return to Learn Tracker, which monitored the duration of in-person, hybrid, and fully remote instruction districts offered in 8,600 school districts, covering 88 percent of all public school students at the pandemic's outset. The data we collected is critical for answering the question at the root of this hearing, "How Pandemic School Closures Hurt Students."

The pandemic caused the largest negative shock to student learning the country has ever seen. Average pandemic learning losses exceeding those of one of the worst natural disasters in recent history, Hurricane Katrina, but affected tens of millions of students instead of hundreds of thousands. Though they had been slowly closing for decades, achievement gaps widened over the course of the pandemic, as low-income students, black and brown students, and students who entered the pandemic behind academically all fell further behind their peers.

Differences in the Return to In-Person Learning

Multiple factors drove declines in expected academic progress. Chief among these was the duration of remote schooling, a factor over which policymakers had the most control. Unfortunately, by the start of the first full pandemic school year, school district instructional offerings were politically polarized such that local voting patterns, not local COVID case rates, were aligned with reopening decisions. We knew this in 2020, when a Brookings analysis[i] described these patterns:

> There is no relationship—visually or statistically—between school districts' reopening decisions and their county's new COVID-19 cases per capita. In contrast, there is a strong relationship—visually and statistically—between districts' reopening decisions and the county-level support for Trump in the 2016 election.

Our Return to Learn Data show this pattern persisted across the 2020–21 school year, during which the duration of remote instruction was weakly tied to local COVID threat levels, but strongly tied to a county's 2020 presidential vote share. [ii] As late as April 2021, when COVID cases were low and vaccines widely available, only about a *third* of districts in counties that voted for President Biden had fully reopened, compared to over 60 percent of Trump districts. During the first full pandemic year, the highest percentage of Biden districts offering full in-person instruction—38% at the year's end—never reached the lowest percentage of Trump districts—40% in January.

Despite high COVID rates, the start of the 2021–22 school year reflected these same divides. Nearly all districts reopened with full-time in-person schooling—a tacit admission that the previous year's early reopeners had made the right call—but districts showed similar divides over school masking, data we also captured as part of our Return to Learn Tracker. [iii] Though

masking decisions were lower stakes, they reflected a more important reality: districts prioritization of returning schools to some sense of normalcy. The slow return to normalcy in schools was divided along the same lines closures had been the previous year and may have been an additional drag on student academic progress and recovery.

Though politically polarized, these differences were not purely attributable to politics as much as they were to local attitudes on the "right" way to respond to the pandemic. For instance, county level masking behavior, measured before the school year began in summer 2020, appear much more predictive of remote and hybrid schooling over the course of most of the year than were weekly local COVID case rates. Similar patterns are evident for other static attributes, measured early or late in the pandemic, which were more predictive of closure durations that weekly local COVID measures. These patterns suggest that though the correlation between political affinity and pandemic school reopening is clear, the causes of reopening differences are not, as several interconnected factors were more predictive of remote and hybrid schooling than were local COVID case rates.

The Clear Connection Between Remote Instruction and Learning Loss.

In comparison, the evidence connecting the duration of closures and related learning loss is quite clear. Test scores from millions of third through eighth grade students in 29 states, gathered by the Education Recovery Scorecard,[iv] combined with AEI's Return to Learn data on show that between 2019 and 2022 the third of districts that were most in-person during 2020–21 lost 44 percent of a school year in math, compared to 60 percent of a year in the most remote third of districts—a difference of over a third. Districts in the middle third for in-person learning lost about half a year of typical math progress. Losses in reading were smaller than in math, but the relative differences from remote instruction were even larger. Numerous studies bear out these stark patterns. [v]

A key to understanding these gaps, and the importance of extended closures to them, is that most studies measure losses from before the pandemic to a time after most closures ended. The data I referenced above come from spring 2019 and spring 2022, and show significant gaps between more and less in-person districts. Gauging the importance of extended closures requires attention to that fact that these declines stemmed from both spring 2020 closures for all school districts, during which learning losses were greatest, and closures during the 2020–21 school year when district instructional offerings varied. Given the total academic progress differences stemmed from a uniformly fully remote spring 2020 and a differentially remote 2020–21 school year, the differences between instructional offerings in the first full pandemic school year appear significant.

However impactful, the duration of remote learning was not the only source of difficulty for schools and students over the pandemic. The instability of quarantines over the 2020–21 school year hampered learning, and would have been more difficult for schools offering in-person instruction. Chronic absenteeism spiked during the pandemic—and remains high—and undoubtedly hampered academic progress for students as well as teacher and administrator capacity. The introduction of novel instructional practices to allow similar instruction for

students who opted out of available in-person learning posed a steep learning curve for teachers and students, and were instituted without sufficient time to work out the kinks that come with substantial technical and instructional changes. In addition, the introduction of millions of new devices and their adoption for much larger portions of instruction than teachers and students had been accustomed to posed challenges during an already difficult time. Even for schools that returned to in-person instruction early, the pandemic posed substantial and varied headwinds for instruction and student learning. It would be a mistake to believe that all of those headwinds have now died down.

Academic Recovery is a Priority.

Academic recovery is a major priority for policymakers, educators, students, and their families. Federal Pandemic Aid to public school districts, amounting to $189 billion in ESSER funding, has been provided to, at least in part, aid in academic recovery. School districts have used these funds for widely varied uses, including many efforts to shore up lost academic achievement. Students, with the support of families, have made some progress on academic recovery. While data are somewhat limited, the recovery we have seen so far has progressed, but not at a pace necessary to close pandemic gaps.

Without substantive changes in the near future, especially considering that districts still have substantial ESSER funding to take bold action, hopes of a substantial recovery for this academic generation are dwindling. This reality is underscored by recent data from NWEA on the pace of recovery in the 2022–23 school year for grade 3–8 students in reading and math.[vi] Those data show that in the 2021–22 school year, students had made slightly faster progress compared to pre-pandemic trends, but in the 2022–23 school year academic progress actually fell below pre-pandemic trends for grades 4 through 8, and fell substantially in middle grades. Simply put, academic recovery requires students to learn faster than their pre-pandemic peers to close the pandemic gap, but in the past year students in this sample learned more slowly than their pre-pandemic peers.

The recovery challenge schools and students face is daunting, and I do not purport to have easy solutions or quick fixes to offer. However, a greater sense of urgency is an essential element that I believe, though not sufficient, is necessary for substantive progress on academic recovery.

A number of measures have been offered by districts to help student make up lost ground, two of the most promising being intensive tutoring and increased learning time. Both measures have a clear logic and empirical evidence suggesting they may hasten the academic progress of students. However, these efforts will not be productive unless students actually participate in them. Available data and reporting suggest that even when tutoring is offered, too many parents do not know about it and too few students participate regularly. One national survey in December 2022 found that about 15 percent of households reported their student was receiving any tutoring, and that just two percent were receiving the kind of high intensity tutoring that promises substantial progress. Among students who need it the most, participation was 4 percent. [vii]

Increasing learning time by extending school days and school years, or by adding summer school, is another promising tack. Instituting these "extra time" programs have proven difficult in many places—sometimes due to staffing challenges or the difficulty of negotiating programs within structures of collective bargaining agreements. For example, in 2022, Los Angeles Unified's proposal to add five extra days to its calendar on a voluntary basis was met with a boycott from its union, United Teachers Los Angeles. Large scale increased time is possible, as proven by large districts like Atlanta and by one state, New Mexico. However, these exceptions prove the rule that, in most places, significant expansions of learning time have not been made.

A far higher percentage of districts have offered summer school and after school learning options, but, like tutoring offerings, these appear to suffer from a lack of demand from families. The "if you build it, they will come" model of voluntary participation is not meeting the scale of pandemic learning loss, in part because schools and policymakers have done too little to communicate urgency around the need for recovery.

Policymakers should use the bully pulpit to promote a sense of urgency in the minds of parents and the general public. Battles over appropriate books in libraries, undue ideological influence in classrooms, and the school culture wars seem to get daily coverage in the press and in political discussions, while acute learning loss, most acute for the least advantaged, gets relatively little attention. Efforts to put more attention on this issue, such as today's hearing, are welcome, but to move the needle for students, those efforts must be more focused and more sustained than they have been.

Policymakers have a role to play in communicating the urgency of this issue, but teachers and schools alone have the access to parents and the authority to effectively communicate students' needs to individual families. Test scores clearly show that student performance has fallen, but grades and graduation rates do not appear to reflect this downturn. How can we blame parents for not taking the steps offered to them, such as tutoring or summer school, if teachers and grades do not communicate the losses students have faced? No test score on an emailed report will convey the message that a student needs intensive help like direct communication from teachers will. A lack of forthrightness about where students are academically, coupled with the threat of sliding expectations for student progress, will keep families from seeing the educational damage wrought by the pandemic—damage that students will bear the costs of far into the future. Communicating the severity of pandemic learning loss is a difficult task to lay at the feet of the nation's beleaguered teachers and schools, but if we do not ask it of them, who will accomplish it?

Conclusion

The pandemic is over, but its effects on student academic progress are not. The perspective we take on this issue is important. If we begin to assess learning loss as something that happened in the past—as something that we are now moving on from—we will be complicit in cementing these losses for an academic generation of students. Pandemic learning loss is not yet cemented, but it is hardening in place, and if we—policymakers, administrators, teachers, families and

students—treat this as a problem of the past, we will abdicate our responsibility to fix it and resign our students to a dimmer future.

Thank you for the opportunity to give testimony in this important hearing. I look forward to presenting these comments and evidence to the subcommittee and answering questions.

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