

**Testimony of Mary-Patricia Livengood Wray, Parent from Baton Rouge, LA
Before the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
Hearing on Generational Learning Loss: How Pandemic School Closures Hurt Students
Wednesday, July 26, 2023**

Chairman Beane, Ranking Member Bonamici, Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Scott, and committee members, thank you for the invitation to participate in this hearing. My name is Mary-Patricia Livengood Wray. I am the owner and founder of a successful public policy consulting firm, and I serve as adjunct faculty at Tulane University Law School, teaching the next generation of lawyers how to draft legislation and agency regulations. Though I'm used to presenting myself in the context of many other credentials, today I'm proud to speak to you within the context of my highest-ranking position and most crucial life qualification: Mom. Ira Wray, my husband of fifteen years, and I are parents to two beautiful boys who attend a Public Magnet Montessori program in the East Baton Rouge Parish School system at the Dufrocq School, our neighborhood public school in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. My sons, Henry Lee Wray and Weber Wray, are currently 5 and 2, preparing to celebrate birthdays next month.

I have a long personal and professional history of advocating for the potential of public schools and our teachers and support staff in Louisiana. And as a Mom, I am an outspoken critic of our school district, the state board of elementary and secondary education, and all those charged with educating our children. This is why when I say that our local education authority and state education leaders did something right, you can trust that I am a legitimate voice of praise and appreciation.

My son began attending East Baton Rouge Parish schools in the fall of 2019. He was adjusting to that setting in March 2020. When our world shut down for Covid, I was four and a half months pregnant with Weber, in the middle of a boom for my maturing small business. And I was already two years into my experience as the mother of a child with disabilities. When Henry Lee was about one year old, I had a gut feeling - the kind moms have - that his speech wasn't developing quite right. Today he's five-year-old and attends school in an inclusive setting with the implementation of an Individual Education Plan - an I-E-P (IEP) which includes speech therapy to help him overcome the challenges of apraxia of speech and occupational therapy that gives him more practical skills to help him overcome the communication barriers that exist when your speech isn't easily understood. As you might imagine, when a child's speech doesn't develop in a typical way, they can experience social setbacks and emotional difficulties. My son's speech delay has taught me empathy that no other challenge could render. Put yourself in the shoes of our young learner, who talks all the time but is never understood; One who can't quite understand why the other children around him ask for what they want and receive it while he is stuck in a loop of communication feedback. Layer that with typical childhood, everyday frustrations, and emotional outbursts, and it's a complex and challenging situation to see your child struggle through.

Now, layer all that with a shutdown that leads to delays in needed services like speech therapy, a lack of appropriate socialization, and the challenges of online learning: by the way, that's difficult

for any two or three-year-old, but when you can't meaningfully participate, it *can* feel like it's a waste of time.

So, while learning to be a business owner dealing with lost revenues, I was also, like most American parents of school-aged children, working to prevent learning loss for my children while our schools operated remotely.

Our district took immediate precautions to protect the health and safety of our children, our "Teacher of the Year" award-winning, highly qualified, certified teacher Mrs. Phillips, her colleagues, and all our loved ones who would have been further endangered by exposure to Covid-19. And they didn't stop with school shutdowns or give up on making gains with our kids. Within a few weeks, a schedule of virtual learning was fully implemented. This regiment included small groups with our teacher, extensive group activities, and at-home exercises to connect our kids to their curriculum. Our children's electronic devices were available for pick up or delivery, hot spots were provided to families without high-speed internet options, and the fidelity to the Montessori curriculum we saw in our classroom was attempted at every student engagement point, even with remote learning.

Our child received compensatory services for speech and OT and qualified for extended school year programs that Summer to help him keep on track with his IEP goals. Was this perfect? 100%, absolutely, no. Was it "desirable"? No. Those who know me well will tell you I'm not a Pollyanna. And with a baby on the way and a son I was worried would regress due to his disability, I was not optimistic in 2020 about how things would turn out.

Our district employed available funds to reach vulnerable families. They implemented nutrition delivery services to ensure that for children with little access to healthy meals, that barrier to their learning did not interfere with their virtual school experience.

Children in our district with severe and profound disabilities, those with ever-present, dangerous immune compromised conditions, would have been the most at risk of dying if our school had operated in person. Our son later befriended Carter Hart, a student in East Baton Rouge Parish schools living with Cortical Vision Impairment, among other disabilities that present challenges to learning in person on a good day and complex health challenges for him daily. Because of the school re-opening guidelines, Carter went almost three years without getting Covid, which posed a significant, life-threatening risk for him. When he was fully vaccinated in January 2023 and picked up COVID, he only needed supplemental oxygen for one day. Contrast that to when he had RSV in 2021 and missed seven days of the extended school year because he needed so much supplemental oxygen that he could not get out of bed. With Carter's mom's permission, I share that context to fully explain what was on the line for our children when school opening procedures were being designed and implemented. To suggest that the better course of action would have been to keep schools open during peak virus spikes makes education which is supposed to be guaranteed to every child, instead conditioned upon each family, student, and educator's willingness to risk their lives or risk infecting a loved one. That is not a choice that reflects American values or our commitment to providing every child with the opportunities they need to be successful. So, instead of making education accessible only for students and educators with low risk, Congress supported ALL children.

By allocating \$122B of ARP funds for public education, of which East Baton Rouge Parish Schools received a large share, Congress recognized that school safety measures, individualized instruction, different tools, technology, and methodology were needed to meet the moment while keeping our children safe. And for those of you who were instrumental in supporting those resources: thank you! By supporting our schools and children with needed resources to temporarily deliver services and curriculum remotely instead of through in-person learning pending safe conditions to return to school, you kept the most vulnerable students and families rather than creating a situation where the only way to receive an education was to risk our lives.

Not all American families experienced the pandemic the same. And I respect that our experience is different from other parents and families. But here's another thing about American families and how we've experienced school shutdowns, remote learning, and "learning loss": Dead children don't suffer from learning loss. Dead educators don't get to wonder if they could've served students better. Grieving parents and families don't have the luxury of complaining about, or even better yet, finding solutions to learning loss in the aftermath of Covid-19 shutdowns. Their chances for confronting those questions and challenges are buried and gone. I'm grateful that due to my district's Covid policies, my child and his friend Carter were protected from the worst harm to seek and receive an education and have age-typical experiences with their peers that support all aspects of their development. Those possibilities for them are truly endless. And I am grateful.

My son and every other child in America have suffered learning loss, social deficits, behavioral health challenges, and yet unknown consequences of a global pandemic. Many of his peers lost parents, grandparents, and loved ones to Covid-19. And they can never be replaced. Their homes lost income, leadership, and support to raise incredible children who will carry our nation to its next great challenge. But it is intellectually dishonest to talk about learning loss without acknowledging that many students were already behind and that there were achievement gaps, especially among students with disabilities, students of color, and low-income students already happening in our schools long before COVID illuminated that. Congress has worked to meet the needs of our children since key laws such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) — and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) were passed in 1965 and 1975 respectively. This shows that for generations, this body has known that achievement gaps exist and has acknowledged that the causes are systemic, a symptom of more significant inequalities, not originating from a school closure due to a global pandemic. Most children our district serve qualify for free and reduced lunch, and over 80% are from a minority community.

So, for these children who need responsible, evidenced-based approaches to public policy on this issue, what do we do about it? Say we regret saving lives? Turn against the public school system that serves more than 80 percent of America's children, including the more than 7.3 million (ages 3-21) with identified disabilities and who receive early intervention services and attend public schools, including public charter schools? I think the answer is no.

Instead, let's show our children what American problem-solving looks like. Let's acknowledge that before the pandemic and after, schools struggled to recruit and retain qualified special

educators and specialized instructional support personnel critical to educating children with disabilities. Before the pandemic, children with disabilities were already reading and performing in math well below proficiency [in 4th and 8th grade] - according to our nation's assessment of educational progress (NAEP), they dropped out of school at twice the rate of their non-disabled peers. This was all before Covid; unfortunately, the numbers have remained flat or worsened. And Congress has yet to provide the promised funding under IDEA that states and districts offset with more than \$22 billion annually.

Given these realities and the ongoing need for schools to educate children like Henry Lee, who comes with both extra needs but also the beautiful potential of any 5-year-old child, I urge Congress to support our schools and provide additional funds so that the lessons we learned from Covid can be implemented across the board even after ARP funding end. The targeted, remedial, and compensatory programs that are happening now need to continue. That need is evident in the fact that Kindergarten enrollment (which wasn't always mandatory in Louisiana but now is) has declined in my home state and that the percentage of students adequately assessed by pupil appraisal and identified as having a disability has decreased. These statistics indicate that we are falling behind in addressing student needs, not catching up — independent from the pandemic and also because of it.

Proposed cuts to public school funding are harmful. First, because they will directly impact our kids, children like mine who are the most vulnerable, chief among them. But also because we will discourage a generation of leaders from entering the education workforce. My grandfather, who I am sure would marvel at my invitation from the Committee to speak today, was a high school history teacher in my home state of Ohio for over 30 years. If you want career educators passionate about serving children most in need, the last thing you should do is rob their employers, our public schools, of the resources we desperately need.

As a mom from Louisiana, I speak for the least among us. Our schools consistently produce the lowest-ranked student outcomes in the nation. Until recently, our teacher pay lagged behind the southern regional average for over a decade. We have some of the highest maternal-infant mortality rates in America. We already had enough challenges to improving public education BEFORE Covid-19 shook our families and institutions to the core. I am speaking from the heart, not with self-important condemnation when I tell you that cutting funding to our public schools is a death sentence for our children, who also experience the highest incarceration rate in America.

Nothing is partisan about the notion that you cannot do more with less. And no one disagrees that our children need more: More love, encouragement, qualified teachers, evidence-based services and supports to help them catch up to grade level, career training and opportunities, behavioral and mental health services, and better access to school-based healthcare. They don't need more fighting over whether protecting them from a virus and keeping them alive was the right decision to make a few years ago. They need our attention and our action **now**.

Our school district has already announced that as the Covid-19 funding it used to implement programming dwindles, it will have to make tough decisions about addressing learning loss and what vital services and programs to cut. What scares me most is that if funding is reduced,

districts like mine will fail to identify children like mine who need extra resources, putting off interventions until their implementation is less effective, costing more overall. I'm employing cautious optimism that you will also speak for the least among us and fully fund the needs of our children, spending your time focused on solutions rather than blame.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today and for your time and attention to my testimony. I hope I've made my sons proud and that they will know that as their parents, we will always advocate responsible policies over political posturing to create the brightest future possible for every child, regardless of their circumstances.