

**AMERICA'S REPORT CARD:
OVERSIGHT OF K-12 PUBLIC EDUCATION**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH CARE
AND FINANCIAL SERVICES

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT
AND ACCOUNTABILITY

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Documents are available at: docs.house.gov.

AMERICA'S REPORT CARD: OVERSIGHT OF K-12 PUBLIC EDUCATION

Tuesday, January 30, 2024

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH CARE AND FINANCIAL SERVICES
Washington, D.C.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:23 p.m., in room 2154, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Lisa C. McClain [Chairwoman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives McClain, Foxx, Grothman, Burlison, Porter, Ocasio-Cortez, Lee, Crockett, and Norton.

Also present: Representative Moskowitz.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. The hearing of the Subcommittee on Healthcare and Financial Services will come to order. Welcome, everyone.

Without objection, the Chair may declare a recess at any time. I recognize myself for the purpose of making an opening statement.

Don't I have to do the witness stuff first?

OK, I will make an opening statement first.

In all sincerity, thank you for coming. This is an extremely important bipartisan, I think, topic. We are here to talk today about K through 12 public education and it is often failing our American children. Educating American children should absolutely be a priority. The return on that investment is unmeasurable, really.

During the pandemic, children's education was put on the back burner. Teachers were put on the back burner. And the left chose to keep schools shuttered and put policies over students, right? We have got to get back to both sides caring about the student.

The problem since the pandemic is it has only gotten worse. Just as the left has made work optional since the pandemic, showing up for school has seemingly become less optional as well.

I want to talk about chronic absenteeism, missing at least 10 percent of the school year was 74 percent higher last school year than prior to the pandemic. That is scary to me. I mean, if children and students are not in school, it is very difficult for them to grow, for them to learn, whether it be educationally as well as socially, and it shows.

I mean, nationwide, the average reading and math scores for a 13-year-old declined 4 points and 9 points respectively from before the pandemic to this past school year. In 2022, the average score

for 9-year-olds also declined 5 points in reading and 7 points in math compared to 2020.

Prolonged school closures were a major cause of this failure. When children are not in school and they are not going to school, it is difficult for them to learn. And I think that the children are crying out for help.

Students can only benefit from teaching, extra tutoring, and extended class time if they are at school. So, instead of addressing the student's performance, schools are investing in nonacademic programs to serve political agendas. We need to get back to getting the politics out of school and getting back to reading, writing and arithmetic. Leave the social agendas for the parents, please.

Federal COVID-19 pandemic relief funds that were appropriated by Congress are being used to support the teaching of radical ideologies instead of the actual curriculum, reading, writing, arithmetic, right? Let us get those math scores up, let us get those reading scores up. And instead of investing these funds in evidence-based recovery for struggling students, many states and local governments are choosing to pursue politics. That is not a place for opinions, it is a place for facts and educating.

Instead of investing in additional tutoring and class time, states and local governments are dividing students by race, pushing anti-Semitic tropes, teaching students that American institutions perpetuate White supremacy and promoting sexually explicit gender ideology. Again, let us get back to the facts and the core principles of learning.

Leave the social issues, leave the politics to the parents. And they do this for the sake of equity. Schools are reducing advanced math courses and gifted programs. Let us focus on those.

Schools are inflating grades, dummifying down curriculum, and eliminating disciplinary actions. Those do not help students. It actually harms them in the long run. Equity lowers the bar for the sake of equivalence rather than raising the bar for the sake of excellence. Let us focus on the positive. Let us focus on what unites us.

I mean, we do not want students to suffer because of that. This is not the first time that I have sat in this chair asking government employees to do their job. It is the state and local government's job to set curriculum that teach kids how to read and how to do math, that is the job they signed up for. It is the school's administrator's job to make sure the kids want to attend school, give them a place that they want to go. And it is the parents' job to make sure that their children are attending school.

And finally, it is the teacher's job to teach the children fundamental skills that will help them grow into successful adults. Teaching is often a thankless job. So, we are grateful for the hard-working teachers and all the work that they do. We need to do everything we can do to support our teachers to enable them to educate the next generation. And the best way to support them is to provide them with resources that they need to teach the fundamentals and not saddle them with political agendas from each side of the aisle. The success of our Nation's children should not be a partisan issue.

I hope that we can find ways to come together and agree to do everything possible to ensure that our children's education is a priority. I actually believe this Committee puts children first and puts their education first. And we are all trying to make good investments into our students for a better future, for not only the students but for everyone.

To the panel, thank you for being here for the Subcommittee today. I am looking forward to having this very important discussion with you. And I now recognize Ranking Member Porter for her opening statement.

Ms. PORTER. I am OK actually; you can keep them. Thank you, Madame Chairwoman.

As a single mom of three school-age children and a former eighth grade teacher, I know how important it is that kids learn in the classroom and that we encourage their curiosity. Many Members of this Committee are also parents and we all want what is best for our kids. We want them to feel supported and capable. We want them to be learning and be able to obtain good, high-paying jobs in the future.

Where we as parents cannot reasonably teach our kids everything, we, of course, rely on our communities, including after school programs and sports to help fill in the gaps. We rely on our school to help our children learn. And working parents like me rely on educators to keep our kids safe so that we can do our jobs.

We are here today to discuss our Nation's K through 12 public education system. And it is true that in many communities, our elementary and secondary schools barely get a passing grade.

I am concerned, though, that over the next hour or more my colleagues will be more interested in pointing fingers than in fixing problems, more interested in looking backward than in looking forward.

Two of the fingers that are being pointed are at COVID-19 school closures and then its so-called woke programs that indoctrinates students. Look, none of us, least of all me, miss the day of Zoom school with people yelling about who is taking up the bandwidth and who is using the iPad right now. It sucked. It was terrible for parents, it was terrible for teachers, and most of all it was terrible for all kids.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 disrupted learning. Many kids missed out and there is a real learning recovery that we need to be focusing on, so I am not arguing with my Republican colleagues about that point.

But the reality is that even before COVID-19 reached our shores and long before Republicans made critical race theory a rallying cry, K through 12 achievement was less than outstanding, less than where it needed to be for us to have a strong, stable, globally competitive economy.

In 2019, our national K through 12 achievement score was a C. I will say it again, a C. If we are serious about solutions, we have to start with the facts and look at the real reasons that kids are struggling. There is a long history of unequal and inadequate funding for public education that has not set our kids up for success. And I fear, and I think we need to be careful not to devalue the hard work of teachers.

We need to not paint them as agents of indoctrination. Instead, we need to be acknowledging their partnership in raising our kids. We should be using this hearing to discuss solutions and support our states and localities in fully funding K through 12 schools, including what we need to be paying our teachers to recruit the next generation of educators. That is how we are going to achieve better outcomes for students.

So, I want to encourage my Republican colleagues today to look forward, to look for solutions to the problems rather than looking at the past, and to really have a collaborative approach on what we can do to make a difference.

Not just pointing fingers at Democrats or at Progressive policies, but instead asking what are the best policies for our kid, period, regardless of which side of the aisle they are coming from.

Whining about leftwing ideologies, that is not going to bring us closer to solving the challenges of K through 12 education. So, if we really want to address problems in our school system, we are going to need to take a closer look at how our education system is funded, how things have changed post pandemic, and we need to uplift data-driven strategies that are working to educate kids.

Elementary and secondary education matters to all of us, whether your kids are out of school, whether you have never had kids, whether you are glad to see them go in the morning, we all benefit from having a strong educational system where kids are safe to focus on learning. And to get there we need to find the solutions and make sure that we are adequately funding them.

So, with that, again, I thank our witnesses. I look forward to your testimony and I yield back.

Mrs. McCLAIN. Thank you.

Without objection, Representatives Waltz and Moskowitz from Florida are waived onto the Committee for the purposes of questioning the witnesses at today's Subcommittee hearing.

I am pleased to welcome our witnesses for today, Virginia Gentles, Nat Malkus, and Denise Forte.

Virginia is the Director at Education Freedom Center at the Independent Women's Forum.

Nat is a senior fellow and the Deputy Director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute.

And Denise is the President and CEO of the Education Trust.

We look forward to hearing from you and what you have to say on this important subject. And pursuant to Committee Rule 9(g), the witnesses will please stand and raise their right hand.

Thank you.

Do you solemnly swear or affirm that the testimony that you are about to give is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Let the record show that the witnesses answered in the affirmative. Thank you and you may take a seat.

We appreciate you being here, and we look forward to your testimony. Let me remind the witnesses that we have read your written statement, and it will appear in full in the hearing record. Please limit your oral arguments to 5 minutes. As a reminder, please press the button on the microphone in front of you so that it is on, and the Members can hear you.

When you begin to speak, the light in front of you will turn green. After 4 minutes the light will become yellow. When the red light comes on, your 5 minutes has expired, and we would ask that you please wrap up.

I now recognize Ms. Gentles for her opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF VIRGINIA (GINNY) GENTLES
DIRECTOR
EDUCATION FREEDOM CENTER
INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM**

Ms. GENTLES. Thank you. Chairwoman McClain, Ranking Member Porter, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to appear today. My name is Virginia Gentles, and I am the Director of the Education Freedom Center at Independent Women's Forum.

At IWF, we celebrate that states are responding to parents' concerns with the K-12 education system by rapidly expanding education options. We remain concerned about the consequences of lengthy school closures which severely harmed a generation of American students causing devastating learning loss and soaring chronic absenteeism and revealing the brokenness of the country's K-12 system.

Starting in March 2020, bureaucrats desperate to stay in teacher unions' good graces implemented cruel policies that barred students from attending schools for months and in some areas over a year.

The foolish school closures morphed into convoluted hybrid schedules and nonsensical quarantine policies that once again banned students from schools for days and weeks at a time. Districts bizarrely required outdoor lunches in below freezing temperatures, canceled sports and extracurricular activities and imposed mask mandates that blocked young readers from seeing or clearly hearing their teachers form sounds and words.

Callous COVID policies taught students that in-person education is optional, so now they do not show up. Chronic absenteeism rates have doubled since 2019. Compounding the COVID era chaos, activists successfully pressured schools to stop enforcing discipline creating unsafe classrooms for educators and students.

Over the past few years, states and districts have also lowered academic standards, canceled homework, and either inflated grades or dropped grading all together.

Schools opened back up in 2021, but in too many places they still do not prioritize educating students. A common excuse for declining student performance, which began years before the COVID-era closures, is that schools are chronically underfunded. Yet scores have plummeted to historic lows, despite the \$190 billion Federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief, or ESSER, windfall, coupled with soaring Federal, annual, and state annual K-12 education budgets.

Plus, Congress mandated that 20 percent of the ESSER III funds address learning loss. So, if districts were awash in funding the last 4 years and required to address learn loss, why did they abysmally fail to educate students? Because too many schools do not

prioritize academic instruction and too many districts spend irresponsibly.

Union trained activist teachers delight in lessons steeped in climate alarmism, alternative identities, oppression, anti-Semitism and decolonization. Many school district bureaucrats spent ESSER funds on athletic fields and trendy social and emotional learning materials rather than high dosage tutoring and added instructional time.

In addition, and importantly, districts imprudently hired permanent staff and provided pay raises with temporary ESSER funding, creating a perilous fiscal cliff that is compounded by declining K-12 public school enrollment.

Let us be honest, the students that districts profess to prioritize when they purchase glossy SEL materials and expensive DEI inspired contracts, were harmed the most by school closures. No amount of public posturing about DEI will ever undo the extremely inequitable impact of union-pushed extended public school closures, closures that were avoidable.

Private schools proved that it was possible to quickly reopen in 2020, possibly the greatest advertisement for school choice in a generation. But we are all facing a learning loss crisis that imperils our country's future, only 26 percent of eighth graders are proficient in math and 31 percent in reading according to NAEP.

State assessment scores continue to decline in reading, our PISA math scores hit historic lows, ACT and SAT scores continue to decline.

It is tempting for those of us who fought to reopen schools to see the mounting appalling and unacceptable learning loss evidence and say we told you so. But this sense of vindication is fleeting in light of the wrongs in our education system.

One group that was egregiously wronged is students with disabilities. During closures, districts either coerced parents like me into rewriting individual education programs, IEPs, or outright refused in-person evaluations, services, and accommodations, abandoning their responsibility to our Nation's most vulnerable students.

Parents from across the country can provide evidence that school districts failed to provide Free Appropriate Public Education or FAPE. Their children have a right to compensatory services. Unfortunately, K-12 education headlines this year likely will fixate on laughable book ban claims or semi hysterical mass layoff assertions due to the long-scheduled end of Federal-funded ESSER funding. Choose instead to focus on students' academic recovery needs.

Please pressure school districts to prioritize the needs of students rather than adult employees while adjusting the post ESSER budgets. Investigate districts that were closed for extended periods, so that students with disabilities can receive compensatory services. And demand the districts that directed billions in COVID-era Federal funding to education fads or permanent labor costs report on the academic progress of their students.

Thank you.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. Thank you. I now recognize Dr. Malkus for his opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF DR. NAT MALKUS, PH.D.
SENIOR FELLOW & DEPUTY DIRECTOR
EDUCATION POLICY STUDIES
AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE**

Dr. MALKUS. Thank you. Chair McClain, Ranking Member Porter, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to testify.

I began tracking school responses to the pandemic at its outset; work that, unfortunately, is still needed today. AEI's Return to Learn tracker monitored weekly remote instruction for 8,600 school districts in the first full pandemic year. The following year, we tracked district masking policies. We also tracked districts Federal ESSER allocations, enrollments, and chronic absenteeism. Our tracking has consistently produced data the Federal Government either never collected or released far later.

The pandemic effects on students and schools stem from many sources, but chief among those that were under policymakers' control was the duration of school closures. Early on, school reopening became politically polarized as our data bear out. All schools closed for spring 2020, but the duration of remote instruction varied the following year. The weekly related to local COVID threats, the length of closures was strongly correlated with local Presidential votes. By April 2021, with vaccines available and COVID cases low, a third of school districts that voted for President Biden had fully reopened, compared to 60 percent of Trump districts. That year, the highest percentage of fully in-person Biden districts never reached the lowest percentage of Trump districts.

Our district mask policy tracking the next year reflects similar patterns. Though masking decisions seem less consequential, they do reflect districts prioritization of restoring normalcy, and inconsistent Federal guidance was part of the problem. CDC's blanket guidance for universal school masking from September 2021 to February 2022 is an example. The CDC did track local COVID threats, but not district masking policies. When CDC changed guidance to be based on its local COVID data, its 100 percent masking recommendation dropped to 37 percent overnight.

This was not a post omicron anomaly, as we showed CDC's new guidance would have recommended masking for 61 percent of students on average while the CDC recommended 100 percent do so. With such uncertain guidance, it is unsurprising that many district masking policies did not match local COVID threats. The connection between closures and learning loss is clear, education recovery scorecard and return-to-learn data show that in math the most in-person third of districts lost 44 percent of a year's progress. The most remote third lost 60 percent, over a third more.

Numerous studies bear these stark patterns out. While Federal assessments captured a learning loss, since the Federal Government did not systematically track closure data, they do not capture differences by school closures.

While important, closures were not the only school pandemic struggle. Quarantines, social distancing, staffing, shifting public health guidance, and absenteeism challenged all schools, even those that reopened earlier.

In my testimony last year, I said that academic recovery was public education's primary challenge. Learning loss remains a priority, but today absenteeism is the principal challenge facing schools.

Chronic absenteeism exploded over the pandemic rising from 15 percent to 28 percent in 2022, with increases in every state and demographic group. Regrettably, 2023 data saw scant improvement, falling 2 points in the 39 reporting states. At that pace, we will return to pre-pandemic rates in 2030.

Worse still, absenteeism hit lower achieving and higher poverty districts harder, the same districts hit hardest by pandemic learning loss. And rates varied by race, with 2020 K–12 rates for Hispanic and Black students hitting 36 and 39 percent respectively.

Addressing absenteeism is crucial for overcoming learning loss and it will hamper interventions like tutoring or extended learning time. The current levels threaten the productivity of American schools.

What can be done to address chronic absenteeism? First, we need to bring both carrots and sticks. Positive supports, alone, will not meet the scale of this problem today. Districts should couple meaningful supports with clear communications and consequences for parents and students who fail to meet their moral and legal duties on school attendance.

Second, we need clear leadership from the President down to the principal. The President and Governors, leaders on Capitol Hill and in districts must decisively communicate that pandemic-era exceptionalism in schools is over.

Support from above, gives local leaders, principals and teachers the backing they need to ask for, and when necessary, demand that families and students do their part.

Third, only teachers have the relationships to effectively communicate on attendance, no central office letter, text or email will carry the weight, personal contact from teachers' will. Teachers bear heavy burdens, but those burdens will only grow if chronic absenteeism does not improve.

Finally, we ask much of schools and teachers, but students and families must meet their responsibilities. Standard behavior from a few short years ago would be a huge improvement and it is not too much to ask. If we are unwilling to ask this of them, who should we blame if this absenteeism crisis becomes the new normal?

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to the Subcommittee's questions.

Mrs. McCLAIN. Thank you, doctor.

And the Chair now recognizes Ms. Forte for her opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF DENISE FORTE
PRESIDENT AND CEO
THE EDUCATION TRUST**

Ms. FORTE. Thank you. Good afternoon, Chairwoman McClain, Ranking Member Porter, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Denise Forte, and I am the President and CEO of the Education Trust, a national advocacy and research organization committed to advancing policies and practices that dismantle the racial and economic barriers embedded in the American education system.

But I am also very proud to have been a congressional staffer for 20 years, most recently as the Staff Director for the Committee on Education & the Workforce for Ranking Member Bobby Scott, but I am proudest to be the mother of two young boys who currently attend public school in Washington, DC.

Today, I am pleased to share with you Ed Trust's assessment of how students have fared as a result of the pandemic, and recommendations on how we address the multigenerational inequities that existed long before COVID-19. We can all agree that we must provide the highest quality education for all children to reach their academic potential and overcome the devastating impact of unfinished learning exacerbated by the pandemic. We know that too far, far too many students, especially those of color and those from low-income backgrounds, suffered disproportionately due to the pandemic because of many structural inequities, such as instructional quality, home broadband access, mental health support and many other external factors.

As we advise states and districts on how to best prioritize investments, Ed Trust research indicates there are two strategies most effective to accelerate learning. You have heard about them already from my colleagues here. Targeted intensive tutoring and expanded learning times. These solutions are agreed upon by experts across the political spectrum.

We also know that strong, positive relationships with teachers and school staff can dramatically enhance students' motivation, academic engagement, and social skills.

Additionally, many students have already begun investing in—sorry, many states have already begun expanded learning time in the summer and after school which research shows could accelerate learning.

Parents are also deeply concerned about their student's recovery. They are focused on their academic progress and their well-being. Parents want better data to know how their students and schools are performing at this time. And whether resources are being allocated in an equitable fashion. And they want the Federal Government, states, and districts to invest in strategies for increasing access to mental health, including more trained counselors, nurses, and school psychiatrists.

We are also calling for professional learning opportunities for educators on learning acceleration, culturally affirming practices in pedagogy, and technology enabled instruction to ensure that students have the guidance necessary to reach high standards.

Finally, because the pandemic is far from over, we must look beyond this year. States and school districts should lay the foundation for long lasting structural changes. The average district has relied on ESSER funding to support roughly eight percent of its budget in recent years.

The loss of these funds will be hardest on Title I school districts since they receive more Federal dollars on average. A state like Ar-

kansas, for example, where 84 percent of all ESSER funds have been exhausted, 11 percent of their education revenue was supplied by ESSER funds and they have a growth rate of incoming revenue slowing by 6 percent, making it particularly challenging to avoid destructive cuts.

School boards and superintendents are deciding school closures and teacher layoffs right now, and I mean right now. Without additional Federal and state investment, district budgets could be slashed by an average of \$1,200 per student.

In real terms, this means students lose. States should spend remaining dollars on evidence-based approaches to academic recovery, including increasing funding for Title I, Title II, to ensure that schools serving the highest number of students from low-income backgrounds have the resources they need. Schools have been essential to every community in this country. The risks are too high for students and for the future of this country.

Failure is not an option, but working with the support of communities and families, Federal, state, and district leaders can take steps to ensure that all students, especially those who need the most support can obtain an education that equips them to excel.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. And I welcome questions.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. Thank you, Ms. Forte.

The Chair now recognizes Mr. Grothman for his 5 minutes.

Mr. GROTHMAN. I hope I have the right one here—good. A couple of questions, we will start with Ms. Gentles or Dr. Malkus, whoever wants to jump in here, what has been going on with math scores in this country over the last 40 years or say?

Dr. MALKUS. Over the long trajectory, math scores have been going up. Depending on the test you are looking at, the long-term trend from NAEP is a great measure of basic skills. They have been trending up until about 2012. And at that point we sort of hit the zenith, you can see this in a number of scores. In the aftermath, they started to decline a little bit. When the pandemic hit, they fall dramatically.

I think it is important to note how they fell, they fell on average, but the students that were scoring, sort of, at the higher end of the spectrum, the 90th percentile and the 70th, 75th percentile, those students did not suffer dramatically over the pandemic, their scores came down.

The students in the lower end of spectrum, 10th percentile, 25th percentile the floor fell out on their scores. If this was more even, what we would have is achievement gaps fixed but everyone losing math progress, lower achievement than previous years. What we have is both lower achievement and larger achievement gaps.

Mr. GROTHMAN. So, people are not doing as well in certain groups.

In Wisconsin, which is the state I know best, probably the district with the largest share of people of color, students of color is the city of Milwaukee. And we spend substantially more per pupil in the city of Milwaukee than almost every other school district in the state. Nevertheless, we get people running down the city of Milwaukee schools saying that you cannot succeed, they are somehow inferior to other schools.

Do you think it has a negative impact on students if they are constantly told that their schools—particularly when it is not true—that their schools are unfunded or implying that they are less funded than other schools?

Ms. GENTLES. I think that there is a problem with constantly denigrating education. And I am sure we can all agree that we do not want to be here to denigrate K–12.

Mr. GROTHMAN. I guess what I am trying to get at here, are there people that imply that it is expected, I guess, or this is the reason why people of certain demographics do not do as well. Now it is irritating enough that we actually spend more on those schools, but do you think when we talk about how we are down on people of certain demographics that it causes any defeatism in those students?

Ms. GENTLES. We certainly do not want to have the bigotry of low expectations, something that we heard a lot during the Bush Administration, that there were efforts underway to put that in the past, but certainly we have that again now that we are using the pandemic as an excuse for low performance among low-income students in particular.

So, we do not want to tell families from particular areas or particular backgrounds that they cannot achieve, that their students should not be expected to achieve.

Mr. GROTHMAN. OK. Next question, I think part of this DEI stuff, and insofar as we insert it in younger children, implies that if you are not of European ancestry, you are not going to do as well in this country. Now from what I read, at least economically, people from Asia, the India subcontinent, Chinese, Filipino, Cuban, even Nigerian, I think at least, I believe, I am not sure about Nigerian, but I think, are doing better than Americans of European ancestry.

Do you—is this part of the diversity equity and inclusion curriculum? Are young people being taught how well people from non-European backgrounds from China or Philippines, or India are doing? Are you aware? Is that part of the curriculum.

Ms. GENTLES. That does not sound like something that would be part of curriculum, but we should be clear that even relatively affluent U.S. students do not score as high on math as average performing students in places like Japan or South Korea or Hong Kong, so all of our students are struggling.

Mr. GROTHMAN. OK, I guess the point I am trying to get to, are students from backgrounds, non-European backgrounds, doing better than average Americans? And are young people being taught that or are they being taught how we are being too unfairly good to Americans whose ancestry around here goes back decades?

Dr. MALKUS. Quite honestly, I am not sure about the curriculum and contents in DEI indications. There is quite a number of differences between different groups and my fear is, is that most of the curriculum is insufficiently demanding of students of European ancestry, or whatever other group that we have of them, to deal with the particulars of those arguments.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Thank you.

Mrs. McCLAIN. Thank you.

The Chair now recognizes Ms. Ocasio-Cortez for 5 minutes.

Ms. OCASIO-CORTEZ. Thank you. I do not know what I just heard right now, but I think—I think when we talk about students of a certain demographic, you know, as a woman of a certain demographic, I would be happy to illuminate some of the disparities, the discrepancies that we are talking about here. In fact, I wonder if any of my colleagues, anyone here can articulate in this discussion of absenteeism we say, you know, people are not showing up to school anymore, it is because they do not—there is an insinuation that is because people do not want to go or there is a different attitude. But do we actually know what one of leading causes of school absenteeism is? Asthma, asthma.

I represent the Bronx. I represent kids whose only meal that they will eat in an entire day will be from school. I represent kids whose—the cleanest air that they will breathe in their entire day, maybe if they are lucky, will be from their school, that the safest place that they will be in a day will be their school. And so, when we come here, we talk about schools, but if you close your eyes and put yourself in a classroom of someone else's district you will see that the challenges are different here.

So, this is not about what we are teaching about European versus non-European descent. This is about the fact that the Bronx has one of the highest childhood asthma rates in the country. And climate curriculum. And when we talk about the importance of having clean air and clean water, it has a direct outcome on people's scholastic performance.

So, as we transition in this time of a pandemic, a respiratory disease, and we wonder why one of the highest childhood asthma rate geographic zones in the country is struggling with absenteeism, knowing that respiratory disease is a major factor in that, maybe we try to solve that problem. Maybe we take a look at some of the environmental and some of the economic factors in getting to a school.

Ms. Forte, you have extensive experience in this issue, can you speak a little bit toward some of those economic and environmental factors that you see and how they affect communities and their ability to navigate educational outcomes.

Ms. FORTE. Thank you for that question. At the Education Trust, particularly when you think about the pandemic, the research is clearly there that what impacted our students was healthcare, loss of employment of their families, the lack of technology accessibility. And this really had an impact on their livelihood, which of course had an impact on their school day.

And as Representative Ocasio-Cortez pointed out, for many of these students where they are actually are supported best, where they are being able to take advantage of services and the supports that they need to actually succeed in school is at school, which we believe is the right place for many of these services.

In addition, we know that lack of mental health support that they faced during the pandemic needed to be supplemented while at school. And so, we are happy to see from this recent investment of American Rescue Plan, the significant investment in schools that helps schools reopen, that made sure teachers had the support that they needed, and most of all made sure that more children had support for mental health services.

Ms. OCASIO-CORTEZ. Thank you so much, Ms. Forte. And this just correlates with what we have seen, not just the Bronx, but across the country. We saw admissions, mental health admissions, of children that were highly disruptive, their ability to be healthy is what can determine whether they show up to school and how well they do in school.

On top of that, when we talk about social issues and when people want to critique social inclusion in schools, housing, as you mentioned, is a core underlying factor in how well someone does in school. If you do not have a home or a bed to lay your head on, how are you going to perform well in school? And when we talk about inclusion in those issues, one of the highest rates of childhood homelessness, one of the highest contributors and factors is if they are LGBT, because if they go home to a place that will kick them out of their house because they are gay or trans or queer, how can we imagine them doing well in school?

And so, if school is not safe for them, if home is not safe for them and if we allow a culture that continues to marginalize LGBT people to the point their existence cannot even be affirmed in school, how can we expect them to do well?

And with that I yield back.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. Thank you. The Chair now recognizes Mr. Burlison for 5 minutes.

Mr. BURLISON. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Right now, public schools are really, in my opinion, failing to do their most basic duty—educating our children. We saw widespread closures during the COVID pandemic which led to students falling behind in core subjects like reading and math, which, by the way, I opposed the closures and the lockdowns because it was an absolute scam and the impact to our children, I think, we will see for an entire generation.

But during that time, under the guise of COVID, Congress appropriated billions, \$189 billion to the ESSER fund to restore educational services after COVID-19. Of course, like everything else, the government throws taxpayer dollars at, the money was often used inappropriately. While there were some school districts that appropriately spent the funds, there were many, unfortunately far too many, that used it for nonsense like DEI programs, critical race theory, gender ideology, and other woke programming.

And before anyone questions whether or not it actually happened, I will point to my very own school district that I graduated from, which spent money implementing these programs.

First and foremost, Congress has a responsibility to question how the schools are spending taxpayer dollars and how they are being effective in the use of those dollars.

My first question is to—is it Ms. Gentles, Gentles?

Ms. GENTLES. Gentle with an “s”, so Gentles.

Mr. BURLISON. Gentles. Ms. Gentles, will expanding school choice, which is a popular topic in many states, including Missouri, will that improve the student outcomes?

Ms. GENTLES. Yes, there have been close to 200 studies of existing School Choice programs and the vast majority of those do indicate that there are improvements in not just the participating students, but in the public-school students in the surrounding area,

those competitive pressures improve the district services to the nearby students. So, rising tides lifts all boats.

Mr. BURLISON. Yes, it is amazing how powerful competition can be.

My other question, often whenever I am discussing this topic there are teachers that we—that I think we all love teachers, but there is often a fear of how this might impact their livelihood, impact their opportunities. In your opinion, does expanding school choice help teachers?

Ms. GENTLES. Well, the fear comes from the unions who are concerned about losing the dues paying members from the public system. There is absolutely no need for fear on the part of educators or those who care about them because, of course, education alternatives to that traditional public school need teachers.

So, teachers are teaching in these private schools and other education options. And again, when we talk about those studies its revealed that the teachers' salaries in surrounding areas where you have school choice programs, those increase, so everybody benefits.

Mr. BURLISON. You know, the sad part is that would you agree that sometimes what the unions would be advocating for, in direct conflict with what benefits the students, and what benefits the teachers?

Ms. GENTLES. Well, the teachers' unions are focused on increasing their dues paying members and so the AFT represents a Planned Parenthood staff members in some states, for example. They are not necessarily representing educators and they are in contrast to the needs of educators when they are advocating for policies that do not enforce discipline, that creates unsafe environments for teachers, for example.

Mr. BURLISON. Now there are a number of types of different of School Choice endeavors within different states. Could you lay out or explain for those who are watching the difference—the different school choice opportunities and which ones work better in states that have experimented with this?

Ms. GENTLES. Well, according to EdChoice, 75 percent of students attend traditional public schools and then you have 25 percent of students attending private schools, charter schools, magnet programs and home education. So that is a quarter of the Nation's students benefiting from alternative to the traditional public school. There are studies of the charter schools that show that they serve low-income students in urban areas better than the residentially assigned public schools. And I have mentioned the private school studies.

Within private school choice, you have a newer development called education savings accounts and a growing number of states have these flexible spending accounts that allocate the state portion of the student's funding to an account for the parent to draw down from to use for tutoring, for tuition, for transportation, for technology and therapies when you are talking about special needs children.

And so, these ESA programs are very popular among families of students with special needs.

Mr. BURLISON. Thank you. My time has expired.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. Thank you. The Chair now recognizes Ms. Crockett for 5 minutes.

Ms. CROCKETT. OK. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Whew, OK, critical race theory, I just want to be clear, I am going to go to the end real quick because I know that that was brought up. Critical race theory, is that typically taught K through 12? Yes or no?

Ms. FORTE. No.

Ms. CROCKETT. OK, all right. So, we can stop with the nonsense because K through 12 was not teaching critical race theory at least in this country. I cannot talk about what happens in other countries, but in our country, K through 12 is not learning critical race theory just for those that are unfamiliar.

In addition to that we just heard about AFT and what they are advocating for. And I noted that there was a comment that you made as it relates to discipline and how that is something AFT should be advocating for so that teachers can be safer. Is that correct? Am I characterizing what you say correctly?

Ms. GENTLES. I believe that both NEA and the AFT should endorse policies that keep educators safe.

Ms. CROCKETT. OK. Let me ask you a quick question, actually, I would like for all three of you to answer this question. It is just a yes or no, we will start at this end, when you were growing up and going through school, did you ever have to go through an active shooter drill? Yes or no?

Ms. FORTE. No.

Dr. MALKUS. No.

Ms. GENTLES. No.

Ms. CROCKETT. Oh, OK, all right. So, can we agree that guns being kept out of schools may be one of those things that could keep not only teachers safe but also students safe? Yes or no.

Ms. FORTE. Yes.

Dr. MALKUS. Yes.

Ms. GENTLES. Yes.

Ms. CROCKETT. OK, thank you.

So, I do want to touch on a few things that Ms. Ocasio-Cortez talked about, because I do not really know the breadth of your understanding or experiences, but to give a little clarity to the district that I come from, 20 percent of my district live at or below poverty. And I do come from an urban district.

I do have a majority minority district. I know that we have talked about DEI and diversity. And I find that when I am here, I am constantly fighting to make sure that I can break through the noise and the stereotypes that exist around not only my kiddos in my district, but just my constituents.

And one of things that maybe some of you have never experienced, I do not know, is the fact that one of leading reasons that students in my district do not show up to school is because they are poor, because some of them are homeless. We found that there were children that did not go to school because they did not have clean clothes.

That is something that certain people do not have to worry about. And they found that if they brought in washing machines, so the kids would not make fun of them because they had clean

clothes that they would show up. These are things that maybe in a more affluent district they may not need money for so while one of my colleagues talked about how much investment has to go into some of these school districts in the inner city, I do want to make it clear that there are different obstacles that my kiddos deal with, in addition to the fact that I practiced criminal defense work prior to coming into the legislative realm.

And in my district, I have the highest incarcerated ZIP Codes in the entire state. What that means, is that sometimes I have children that go home and they do not have parents to go home to or if they are going to parents, their parents may be involved in things that are not necessarily the best things for kids to be around.

And so, as has already been stated, sometimes the safest space is at school for some of these children. And what is so annoying to me is that we debate whether or not we will invest in our futures.

As far as I am concerned, there is no better investment than in our children. Because if we are going to make sure that this country continues on, it is not going to start by investing in people that look like me or are my age. It starts with making sure that there is a foundation.

And I just want to say that I am thankful for those teachers that decided to go in even when they were under resourced, even giving their own resources to make it happen. I lost teachers in my district during the pandemic because they literally risked their lives in the midst of a pandemic to show up because they loved those kids that much because I can tell you the pay is not there.

Teachers are not getting rich, maybe professors, but not teachers. And so, the fact is I have talked to my school districts, they were able to take advantage of the extra money that was given to them, but guess what? They still had gaps that they needed to fill.

And the reason that I brought up gun violence is No. 1, it is a safety issue, but also as it relates to the mental health. Children nowadays know where they need to go in case somebody comes in. They are looking for the closet. That is no way for kids in America to live. So, we need to make sure that we put kids first.

Thank you so much. And with that, I will yield.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. Thank you. I now recognize myself for 5 minutes.

One, I think my question is during the pandemic—I am not here to say it is right or wrong, but I am looking at during the pandemic, we used ESSER funds to the tune of \$190 billion, correct? My question is where were they spent? What programs were they used for, right? And did they help? Do we have a measurable outcome? And did that \$190 billion of taxpayer money, did it do what we intended it to do?

Because I am sure one of the questions that is going to be coming up at some point in time is do with reauthorize those funds? Do we continue them, or do we stop them? That is going to be the question.

And I think if we took a look at some facts and some data, which is a little concerning to me since everyone on the panel has talked about our math and reading scores have gone down, OK, I think we all want to fix them, right? Both sides want to fix them.

We want to reinvest in our children. So, with that question, what I would like to know is where were those ESSER funds used? Were they used for—that we all agree on tutoring this is something both sides agree on, I heard it tutoring and expanded learning time.

Any disagreement on that? I think that is what I heard, correct? Wonderful. We have got some agreement. That is a bonus, that is a good thing.

All right. So, where were they spent? Were they spent? Was the bulk of the \$190 billion spent on tutoring and expanded learning time? And if so, what are the results? So, I will Ms. Gentles start.

Ms. GENTLES. So, Marguerite Roza of Georgetown University has an edonomics lab and has done her best to go into the reports that are available from states and districts to assess how the money has been spent. Unfortunately, 20 states share no detail beyond how much money each district spent.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. Wait a second. So, we gave—and this is our fault because we did it in a hurry, we did not put guardrails on it, and they will not share the data with us, or they just have not gotten around to sharing it with us?

Ms. GENTLES. They were not asked to share the data. That is something that is important to note. They were given flexibility with this funding and broad guidelines on how to spend it. And 20 percent was required to be used for learning loss.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. And I do not mean to be rude, but I have a limited amount of time. Do you know where the money was spent? Was it spent on tutoring and extended learning?

Ms. GENTLES. No, most of it was spent on labor—so, increasing that permanent staff and on pay raises and a very small percentage was spent on tutoring, summer school extended day.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. And do you have data to back that up?

Ms. GENTLES. Pardon me?

Mrs. MCCLAIN. Do you have data to back that up?

Ms. GENTLES. Marguerite Roza and the edonomics lab has that. She did say that we see a higher number of districts investing in social emotional learning, about half. And she gave an example of Wisconsin and California, just five percent of ESSER III expenditures have gone to lengthening the school day or year or adding time in the summer.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. Well, that is not real good.

Dr. Malkus, could you comment, please.

Dr. MALKUS. Yes, the answer is we do not know, and we will not know because there was not guardrails for these funds. I would say that there were three bills when ESSER funds came out. And the \$13 billion that came out initially went right out the door on an emergency basis in March 2020, and that made sense.

Fifty-four billion went out in the second bill that December. That probably could have had some more guardrails on it. There was \$123 billion that went out in the American Rescue Plan. That did have some guardrails on it, 20 percent to some sort of recovery.

But late in the pandemic, after almost all schools in the country were already open, that last tranche of money really needed to have more guardrails, more directions and certainly reporting requirements. I would say that if you wanted to design a law that would jeopardize arguments about whether the Federal Govern-

ment can spend education dollars well, ESSER—you could not do much better than ESSER.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. Thank you.

Ms. FORTE.

Ms. FORTE. I would agree with Dr. Malkus, but one problem we still have is not all the money has been spent. So, we do not know.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. So whoa, whoa, whoa. \$190 billion has gone out and some of that 190 has not even been spent yet. I just want everyone to hear that, so when we come back and we petition for more funds, more funds that is a big concern that we have not spent what we had. No. 2, we do not even know what we spent the money on. And No. 3, do we have any data that shows that the money is being used for tutoring and lengthening of—

Ms. FORTE. Well, I think we need to remember that in order to have a tutor that is a labor cost, summer learning that as a labor cost, extending your day is also a labor cost.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. So, in your opinion we do have data on that.

Ms. FORTE. We have some data. And we also—just pointing out to Ms. Gentles that even though the dollars were spent on labor, in order to run tutoring and after school programs during the summer at the end of day you need labor and people to do that.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. Do you have data because that would be super helpful? Do you have that data? Could you share it?

Ms. GENTLES. I can get it for you.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. Wonderful. Thank you. I am sorry, I am over.

So, the Chair now recognizes Ms. Porter, the Ranking Member. I am so sorry, Ms. Porter.

Ms. PORTER. Thank you very much.

I wanted to talk about chronic absenteeism and share a couple of things and ask some questions. First, I want to share with you that as a parent of three kids, in California, as you may know, has very aggressive absenteeism laws. I have seen that persistent, frank communication that you call for, Dr. Malkus, coming from my kids' school.

When they have been sick and I have not gotten them called in until the next day, they have been in touch. When my daughter missed 4 days because she was sick, her teacher called to check in on her and find out if he needed to send home a learning packet.

So, I do think we are seeing schools start to really own this issue and I think we should encourage that. But I wanted to share with you that I think some of that is happening and I do think this is something, particularly for lower achieving districts, that we want to be encouraging.

One of the things I really appreciated about your testimony, Dr. Malkus, and I think it goes to the point that Ms. Forte just made, is you say things like some of the most resource intensive and most expensive strategies work the best. And I think Ms. Forte points to targeted intensive tutoring, these kinds of high dosage tutoring programs and expended learning time. And so, I just want to ask you, those things take money, right?

Dr. MALKUS. They do.

Ms. PORTER. And some of that money will, as she points out, goes to labor costs. You would agree with her?

Dr. MALKUS. I would.

Ms. PORTER. So, do we have enough resources pointed toward addressing closing the pandemic learning gap and toward addressing the learning loss that comes from absenteeism?

Dr. MALKUS. You know, it is going to depend. Those funds are district to district. We really do not know how much each district has spent. It looks at last estimate—and there is some time lag in this reporting, but \$50 billion unspent. Pretty late in the game.

We will need to have funds to do these things, there is no doubt about it. But I do want to make the distinction here, that we should be careful to look at the chronic absenteeism problem as if it is a problem that we can quick—not quick—but fix with simple narrow policies.

What we are seeing is every demographic group is 75 to 80 percent up, I mean, across the board. It is a widespread cultural change, and you do not have to be a social scientist to figure out why, right? We missed a lot of school; there was a lot of disruptions, and people are out of the rhythms of going back to school.

So, I really think it is important for us to recognize this as we need to fight this as, yes, bring the policy game, but this is a cultural fight. And, if we cannot reset school cultures—and it is not just poor schools. I mean, it is there, but high-achieving, relatively well-off schools, they are up 80 percent too.

So, I really think that this is a cultural problem, and I want to encourage leadership, up and down the board, to approach it as such.

Ms. PORTER. Yes. So, I mean, I want to share with you, I think my school has done exactly that, and I have noticed a marked—so one of the things that, I will be honest with you, that has caused my kids to miss a frustrating amount of school for me as a parent this year is they have been sick a lot. And I think that we have had a rough kind of flu, winter, cold season, and so I have called them in. They have just been sick.

And one of the things that I, you know, I think is hard to balance when you are pushing kids and parents to come and turning up that kind of heat, which is important to have that standard, is I have to argue to keep my sick kids home because they say I will get in trouble if I am not there. And so, they are—I think you have to walk that line.

In terms of these programs, Ms. Forte, I wondered if you can talk a little bit about a few of these that are working, like the Virginia High-Dosage Tutoring Program, particularly the Colorado AmeriCorps Program, on encouraging partnering with families whose kids are not coming to school, to get them more engaged.

And then, I think, you know, I just posed it to the Chairwoman, with the remaining ESSER dollars and if we do reauthorize it, I think you all have given us some programs to focus it on.

And I think it is appropriate that we—if we reauthorize any money, we focus it on these programs that are working and are being deployed in states. So, I wonder if you could say a little more about them.

Ms. FORTE. Yes. There are many shining examples that I did have in my written testimony that, either from having small tutoring groups of three to four students with one teacher three to four times a week like they are doing in Tennessee to the program that

you mentioned in Colorado, and people are finding different ways to provide these small learning groups, whether it is with the teachers, the certified teachers, or whether it is with AmeriCorps or a college student or whether it is with grandparents.

And I think that is the way that people should be looking at it, just making sure that there is a responsible adult involved in the learning process and that the actual curriculum is aligned with what the child is learning in school.

Other funds are being used for after-school programs that are done with a community-based program. Other programs are about professional learning opportunities, but I will say that, when we are talking about accelerating learning, the intensive tutoring and the extended day is where the research points us.

Ms. PORTER. Yes. Thank you very much. I hope we can work on really focusing some—if there is additional funding—focusing on these proven interventions.

I do think—and I want to thank the Chairwoman for pointing to this issue—we need to treat this like the real educational crisis it is. The learning recovery is—the lack of learning recovery from the pandemic is real, and we do not get anywhere by pretending otherwise.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. Thank you.

The Chair now recognizes Ms. Lee for 5 minutes.

Ms. LEE. Thank you, Madam Chair.

I am—as a Black woman who grew up in a working-class community and went to a public school in what we would call divested public school system, I have sat through many hearings that kind of descend into the disappointing.

I think the ones around public education are often the most insulting because they are the most dangerously disingenuous. I just want to say that, you know, my colleagues want to blame everything but what it is when it comes to public education.

But the reality is, is that we know it is not CRT; it is not wokeness, whatever that is; it is not gay books. Right? It is racist and inequitable funding schemes that keep Black and Brown and working-class students out of the most high-performing schools.

When you add that, of course, to redline policy—redlining and predatory lending, right, these are children who have been in locked into school systems that our government, our systems, have purposefully kept under-invested.

We know that, and even when we think about COVID and the necessities that we had to—or rather the adjustments that we had to make, I think often about, you know, private schools that were able to open faster because these were not school systems in buildings that they had to worry about HVAC issues or open lead and asbestos as many in the Commonwealth in Pennsylvania have to deal with.

Some of the facilities at our schools that our children, our educators, have to learn in, are facilities that we would never allow our government to learn in. They would be shut down.

But we still somehow cannot fully fund public education. So, I just wanted to point that out, that we recognize what we are dealing with before we bring in arguments around whether children of certain races are performing differently than others.

But the reality is, is that our Republican colleagues—my Republican colleagues do not want the parents in their district to know that they have denied their children resources. They do not want folks to know that they are diverting your hard-earned tax dollars away from our schools and into the pockets of their donors.

They are so desperate for distractions as they defund our classrooms and deprive our teachers that they are banning books and censoring teachers and bullying LGBTQ+ kids, and they are erasing Black histories in an attempt to turn us against our schools.

If Republicans do not like what you have to say, they will do everything in their power to prevent you from saying it. If they do not like what you are reading, they will do everything in their power to keep you from reading it, even if it is literally just talking about the history of this country or exercising your free speech, because heaven forbid someone gets uncomfortable during a lesson about our history of chattel enslavement in America, or someone feels seen by reading about themselves or someone like them, or learns about White supremacy by reading “The 1619 Project” or “The Diary of Anne Frank.”

I do ask for unanimous consent to enter this article from the NPR entitled “The Education Culture Wars Waging, But for Most Parents It’s Background Noise” into the record.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. Without objection.

Ms. LEE. Republicans are claiming it is about parents’ rights to be involved in their children’s classes. Which parents? In this national poll, NPR found that by wide margins and regardless of their politics, 76 percent of parents were happy with their kids’ schools and what they are taught.

Just 18 percent of parents were not happy with the way gender and sexuality was taught; 19 percent say the same thing about race and racism; and 14 feel that way about U.S. history.

These numbers show what is really happening. Teachers are being forced to bow to a very vocal minority at the expense of the overwhelming majority of parents and teachers and, most importantly, all of our students.

And, while we are so focused on a small group, we are ignoring real barriers for marginalized students, including language barriers, access to technology and tutoring, and a lack of funding for underserved schools.

It is much easier to make teachers a political punching bag than to invest in our communities, even though that investment works. I have seen it firsthand in school districts like mine. For instance, Pittsburgh public schools, during the pandemic when it was necessary to adjust and do school from home, many kids were left without reliable internet.

In Pittsburgh, our local universities—Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh—partnered with nonprofits and used Federal grant money to connect over 600 families to the internet.

CMU also set up dedicated servers with free courses and classes for students to access, including virtual labs and coding courses.

Ms. Forte, do you think having internet access or not using gender-neutral pronouns is more important to a kid’s education?

Ms. FORTE. I think that having access to technology is more important.

Ms. LEE. Thank you.

This learning gap is really more about a practice gap. Our young people need more tools to get excited about learning. In Pittsburgh, CMU has started programs that use phone apps and augmented reality to better engage young students.

They also expanded tutoring for low-income families, backed by AI, to make the tutoring more effective, all funded through Federal grants.

Ms. Forte, what do you think is better for students, creating new technology for them to learn with or removing books from their classrooms and libraries unless they have been approved by every single parent?

Ms. FORTE. Certainly, creating new technology to learn.

Ms. LEE. Thank you.

Without investing in our marginalized community, we are never going to see improvement. We have got this huge gap in STEM when it comes to Black and Brown people and women. This hearing could have focused on how to get young people excited about science and math and how to better reach underserved schools.

But, instead, we are stuck listening to the same broken record. Cutting funding, banning books, and censoring curriculum is not the answer.

With that, I yield back.

Mrs. McCLAIN. Thank you. And I think you just made a very great argument for school of choice.

With that, I recognize Dr. Foxx for 5 minutes.

Ms. FOXX. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman.

Ms. Gentles, in the last 4 months, we have seen a stunning wave of anti-Semitism sweep our education institutions. While many of these incidents have occurred in higher education, there have also been several in K–12 schools. I think that is simply abhorrent.

Can you talk more about how much anti-Semitism is in K–12 schools?

Ms. GENTLES. I think we are just getting familiar with this concerning issue with K–12 education, but we do have examples of families in both coasts—I believe New Jersey and then also California—going to the school district and saying that “my child is experiencing intolerable anti-Semitism,” and those school districts then pay for the private school tuition for the students to leave and go to a safe environment where they will not be bullied. And that is something that Jewish families may have to consider throughout the country if this continues.

Ms. FOXX. Thank you very much.

Dr. Malkus, we have heard about how serious learning loss and chronic absenteeism are, but the Department of Education does not seem to be focusing on this.

Instead, it seems to be spending all its time pursuing radical, far-left agenda items, such as college loan forgiveness.

Can you talk about how much work the Department is doing on learning loss compared to Democrat political priorities?

Dr. MALKUS. I have been tracking a number of things, probably too many, over this pandemic, but one of them that came up was

student loan forgiveness. So, I do actually have yet another tracker at—on student debt.

When you include all forms of that, including the pause, things legislated by Congress, PSLF funding, and the new IDR reforms, we have exceeded \$370 billion in forgiven student loans, I might add, without—much of that, rather, without consent of Congress.

That is where a great deal of the Administration's focus has gone. There was an agenda that came out, I think it was 10 days, perhaps 2 weeks ago, where the Administration and members of the Domestic Policy Council pushed for high-dosage tutoring and extended learning time and talked about chronic absenteeism to some degree.

While those things are worthwhile and I am glad that they are paying attention to it, I do not think those priorities are as focused on the K–12 challenges that we are facing and particularly showing the leadership that we need from the Administration on chronic absenteeism, that we need right now.

Ms. FOXX. You used a term that I want to ask if we can agree that we might want to change the word “forgiveness” in terms of loans. Actually, isn't it a transfer of debt from the people who took it out to people who did not take out the debt?

Dr. MALKUS. The Federal student loan portfolio comes directly out of the Federal Treasury, and so, when loans are forgiven, then the balance of the loan is—that was set to be received by the Treasury, plus whatever interest the borrower agreed to, will no longer be received.

And I just might add, because I am concerned about these issues as well, that the SAVE program is an enormous student loan entitlement that will keep on giving without congressional action.

Ms. FOXX. Thank you.

Mr. Malkus, again—or Dr. Malkus, it is a fact that test scores and proficiency levels have declined across the country since before the COVID pandemic. Realistically, what percentage of students should be meeting grade-level proficiency standards, and what role do teachers and school administrators have in helping students get back on track?

Dr. MALKUS. That seemingly simple question is a very difficult one. There was a while, in the no-child-left-behind era, that we thought a 100 percent of students should be proficient or what we would think of as on-grade level. That was aspirational for sure.

Look, I think the important thing to note is that is a very difficult question to answer: What is the percentage? Higher is better, and it is going lower. That is what we need to know.

It is not only going lower on average; it is going lower for our lowest performers. That means that whatever opportunity education gives to students, the kids who are achieving at the lower end are getting less of it. I am alarmed by this.

What can teachers and administrators do? The list goes on a long way, but I am very concerned, not only from the chronic absenteeism but from other pandemic effects in schools, that we have a culture problem in schools.

The culture in schools has shifted, and we need to do aggressive maintenance with all hands on deck. I think we need leadership from government leaders to give cover to lower-level folks to push

hard on teachers but also on parents and on students to get back to the baseline, which was no great shakes, before the pandemic.

Ms. FOXX. Thank you. Thank you. I thank the witnesses.

I thank you, Madam Chairwoman. I yield back.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. Thank you. The Chair now recognizes Ms. Norton for 5 minutes.

Ms. NORTON. Thank you, Madam Chair.

As a life-long First Amendment champion who argued and won a free-speech case in front of the U.S. Supreme Court and the daughter of a public schoolteacher, I am deeply concerned by the rise of book bans and increase in efforts to diminish free speech, especially in the classroom.

I am acutely aware of the fact that you do not have to agree with what someone has to say to fight tooth and nail for their right to say it. I know that because I have defended people in court who I know would not defend me if the roles were reversed.

Right now, Republicans across the country are advancing dangerous bills that would bar virtually all discussion about race and gender differences in American history and society.

Ms. Forte, how have Republican-led book bans and anti-free speech initiatives affected students' ability to learn?

Ms. FORTE. Thank you for that question. I am sad to report that it has been a real distraction from the hard issues at hand that students are facing in the classroom.

These book bans mean that fewer children have exposure to the things they really do want to learn. We hear from students that they want more engaging curriculum.

We hear from students that they want to be able to see themselves in their curriculum, and the fact that a small number of folks have been able to enact these book bans is really disheartening and does a disservice to the librarians and the teachers across this country who work really hard to make sure that the curriculum put in front of young people today is engaging.

And, by the way, more engaging curriculum actually helps with absenteeism. So, we could actually be using more robust curriculum in the classroom to bring our kids back into the classroom.

Ms. NORTON. Thank you, Ms. Forte.

While it is incredibly important that students learn from developmentally appropriate materials, these book bans and anti-free speech efforts are designed to be intentionally vague to target teachers.

Because of these Republican-led efforts, teachers do not know what they can and cannot say. These teachers are forced to do their jobs in constant fear of being fired, fined, or having angry parents turn on them.

I ask unanimous consent to enter this study from RAND entitled "Walking a Fine Line: Educators' View of Politicized Topics in Schooling" in the record.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. Without objection.

Ms. NORTON. This national survey of teachers and principals found that roughly one in four teachers have been directed by school or district leaders to limit conversations on political or social issues.

The survey also found that 48 percent of principals and 40 percent of teachers reported that the intrusion of political issues and opinions into their professions are a job-related stressor.

These bills that politicize the conversations teachers can have with their students are harmful. They aim to terrify teachers into avoiding any meaningful discussion about important topics like racial discrimination. Even when not passing at all, these bills have chilling effects across the country that negatively impact teachers and students.

When a new Iowa law barred educators from teaching, quote, “that the United States of America and the state of Iowa are fundamentally or systemically racist or sexist,” end quote, a teacher in Iowa was told by the superintendent that she was unsure if he was able to teach his class that slavery was wrong.

All of this is a distinction that prevents teachers from doing their job, which is to help students learn. This is shameful, especially given how urgent it is that we help students get up to speed after pandemic-related disruptions.

I yield the rest of my time to the Ranking Member.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. Thank you, Ms. Norton.

In closing, I want to thank our witnesses once again today for your testimony. What I was really amazed at is we do agree on some really key, important things, which was tutoring and extended learning.

I mean, that is—I did not hear any disagreement on that and that dollars, if we decide to spend more dollars or the dollars that we have not spent, I mean, they should go there first and foremost. So, cats and dogs living together, look at, we all agree on something.

But thank you very much for your statement and your testimony and taking your time today.

I now recognize Ms. Norton for her closing remarks.

Ms. NORTON. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman.

I want to reiterate the importance of getting our students back on track. This is an opportunity to invest in our schools and allocate the resources needed to address longstanding inequities in education exacerbated by the pandemic.

Democrats invested in students’ safety in the classroom during the pandemic, and we are investing in recovery efforts in the aftermath. House Democrats are working to empower teachers, families, and students and address longstanding inequities in education.

In contrast, House Republicans are focused on cutting education funding, banning books, and censoring curriculum, things I fought for and won in the Supreme Court and won more than five decades ago. Let us not go backward.

Before I gavel out, I ask unanimous consent to insert into the record a statement of the National Education Association.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. Without objection.

Ms. NORTON. I want to end with a quote from them that I think should resonate across the hearing room: “Instead of supporting students and the educators who match and nurture them, some in Congress are looking for scapegoats and distractions. Students and families are desperate for lawmakers’ attention, commitment, and creativity. Parents are demanding more from Congress. They want

students to have the resources they deserve and the opportunities to pursue their dreams. They want their children's schools to be safe from gun violence, places where students are free to learn, and experienced educators are free to teach. If you are serious about educating and uplifting American students, please focus on what they truly need."

I yield back.

Mrs. McCLAIN. Thank you.

And we are going to go a little bit out of order, but the Chair now recognizes Mr. Moskowitz for 5 minutes.

Mr. MOSKOWITZ. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman. I apologize for my tardiness.

I want to thank the Committee and the Members who are—who have looked at, you know, the anti-Semitism that we have seen in our universities and the hearing that we saw many weeks ago and the fact that there is discussion to have a staff member specifically on the education committees to focus on the prevalence of anti-Semitism in our universities.

I also want to point out that I was the emergency management director for the state of Florida during COVID for Governor DeSantis. And we did reopen our schools, and that was an evidence-based decision at that time because, remember, we were dealing with Alpha, right? That was the COVID strain that we had. There was no Delta. There was no Omicron. It was Alpha.

And the data was clear, if you looked at countries in Europe, who were ahead of us, that it was not affecting kids.

And now, in hindsight, it is super clear that the states that stayed closed on their schools has dramatically hurt kids, minority kids and kids from poverty-stricken neighborhoods. No doubt that it has hurt them more by the schools being closed.

And so, you know, I think, on a go-forward basis, these are the things that have to be balanced, and I think Florida got it right when it came to handling schools and what to do there.

But, Madam Chairwoman, I would be remiss if I did not bring up something that has not made any sense to me in the 118th Congress.

I am from the city of Parkland. I am a graduate of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. I just walked the Secretary of Education through the freshman building that is a time capsule to the shooting of February 14 that happened now 6 years ago.

The building is exactly as it was the day of the shooting, minus the victims. Every backpack, every shoe that fell off, the homework that is on the desk that day for that student, what is on the dry-erase board, the computers that are on the desk, and of course the evidence of the shooting, the bullet holes, the blood, the DNA, that—the horrors within those walls of what took place there on February 14th.

And look, I was in the state legislature that worked on the Marjory Stoneman Douglas School Safety Act, the bipartisan bill that dealt with gun violence, mental health, and safety.

In Florida, we raised the age to buying a gun to 21, instituted red-flag laws which have now been used 12,000 times in the state of Florida since we put that in place—12,000 times law enforcement has deemed someone a danger to themselves or a danger to

others and has taken their weapons and given them a hearing, a due process hearing, to show that they can have them back—being used by Republican sheriffs all over the state, saving lives; 3-day waiting periods and hundreds of millions of dollars for mental health and school safety.

I know we have disagreements on stopping the gun from getting to the school, but I implore my colleagues to look at school safety.

If you—and I have brought my Republican colleagues, some of them, through the building—if you look at the failures of that building and how the failures of how that school was built contributed to the deaths, there is so much we can do on a bipartisan basis on school safety: how the doors get locked, what the windows are made of, making sure our teachers are trained, making sure the students, God forbid something comes to school, know where to hide, what corners to go to.

They did not know that at Douglas. They ran right into the site of the shooter. The shooter never entered a classroom. He killed either people in the hallway, or he shot through the window, you know, the little window that these class doors have. All these classrooms had steel doors. The bullets went right through them. They were hollow.

And so, there are lots of things we can do on school safety, which is why I started the Bipartisan School Safety Caucus with Representative Gonzalez from Uvalde, right? Both of us have seen what the failures look like.

Even if you do everything you can and the gun still gets to the school, we have to figure out how we can work on school safety, and, you know, I pleaded with my Republican colleagues, in the next year, we are focused on all these distractions, but there is a lot of bipartisan work we can do to mitigate and save kids and teachers and faculty who work in these schools.

Thank you, Madam Chairwoman.

Mrs. McCLAIN. Thank you, Mr. Moskowitz.

I now recognize myself for my closing arguments.

Thank you, again, very much for taking the time. This issue is critically important and how we spend the taxpayers' money, how we spend your money, our money, is critically important.

And I think we need to really focus on, if we really want to make the investment, which we do, into our children, that we are getting the return on our dollars, right?

Because one thing I have learned up here is everybody always asks for money, and I think it goes back to the old Ronald Reagan quote, is we got to make sure that we are getting value for our dollars.

And I am interested—you know, I learned a lot today that we do not have a lot of data on how we spent this money, and we need to do a better job of getting that data, because maybe we are doing it right; I do not know.

It would not appear—let me put it in a positive note—it would appear that we could do a lot better with the declining reading and math scores and absenteeism.

I mean, today's hearing, I think, was a necessary step forward to raising awareness of the troubling state of our Nation's schools.

Children are struggling academically, emotionally, and developmentally. The poor test scores, chronic absenteeism, I mean, it was just interesting, before I came here, I had a group of administrators and teachers from my district, and that was their No. 1 issue, was chronic absenteeism, right? And I am like, “You got to be kidding me.” No, chron—and I think you are right, Mr. Malkus, is we are out of shape; we have lost that muscle memory, right, in the pandemic.

We have got to get that muscle memory back, and how do we do that? How do we do that to make that investment in the children, in their future, to really get that return on investment?

I mean, we have a duty as Members of Congress, not only to represent our constituents but also to conduct oversight of Federal spending programs. It is clear that the Federal Government failed. We failed to adequately monitor nearly \$190 billion that Congress allocated to help schools reopen and students recover from the pandemic.

I mean, that just blows my mind. \$190 billion and we do not have any idea where that money was, and we got 50—50-some that we do not even know—that is not even spent yet.

But I bet we are going to ask for more. You guys want to take me up on that bet? I bet.

There is a lot to learn from the whole-of-government’s response to the pandemic including lessons on snap decision-making. In the height of an emergency, Congress quickly passed relief bills to help American people and to buoy the economy, but this emergency legislation failed to impose necessary guardrails to prevent waste, fraud, and abuse despite our Republican warnings.

This Committee has done extensive work to expose the massive level of waste, fraud, and abuse of COVID-relief programs.

The School Relief Fund, known as the Elementary and Secondary School Relief, ESSER, Fund, was implemented without sufficient reporting requirements—shame on us—nor parameters for appropriate uses.

We have got to fix that. We have got to get some answers before we spend one more dollar of taxpayer money, because I think that will also help us know where to spend it on that is giving us the best value for our money. Right?

As a result, we have seen state and local education agencies spending taxpayer dollars on programs that are not helping students recover from the pandemic learning loss.

Test scores are down across the country, and schools are pursuing political agendas instead of teaching students the fundamentals of reading, writing, arithmetic. I mean, we used—when the focus was that simple and we kept it simple, we did a lot better.

They should not be keeping parents in the dark about what their children are learning. What is the harm in telling parents what their kids are learning? I got to be honest; I do not see that. I mean, they are children, right?

They should not be using taxpayer dollars to fund political pet projects. It is clear that the status quo is not working, in my humble opinion. Something needs to change.

Today we have discussed some ways in which the state and local governments can productively and proactively invest in students’

achievements that will work. And we agree on it. Crazy, right? We agree on it. It is tutoring and extended classroom learning.

We know that expanded school of choice works. We know that parents engaging with schools and taking their children's school attendance seriously works.

And we know that teaching evidence-based math and reading curriculum works, right? At the end of the day, this crazy thing of accountability actually works.

We have also discussed what does not work. We know that installing racial division is damaging to the children. Why are we introducing children to problems they do not even know they have?

I do not understand why we are doing that. That seems very counterproductive. We know that not grading students fairly is damaging to the children because we are distorting their reality.

Some of the best learnings that we get—or that I have gotten is from failures, right, not somebody distorting my reality. We know that failing to discipline children just leads to more disruptive behavior.

All we have to do is look at what happened last night in the city of—in our city here in D.C., two carjackings. When there is no consequence to your action, bad things happen. And they do not stop happening. They do not get better. They get worse.

Because if your child has a curfew of 11 and they come home at 11:30 and there is no consequence to that action, guess what behavior that incentivizes? More bad behavior.

It is not that tough. We have rules. We have regulations, and we need to begin to discipline and enforce those rules. And the sooner we enforce those rules, the sooner children understand right from wrong, and maybe we can nip some of this in the bud as they get older.

As parents, we must advocate for our children, and as elected representatives and as Members of this Committee, we must take these issues seriously. Our Nation's children, or the so-called pandemic cohort, do not deserve to be left behind.

In closing, I do want to thank our panelists once again for your important testimony today. I cannot thank you enough for the work you do for the investment of our future, and that is with our children.

And I thank you for the fact-based evidence.

Ms. Forte, I look forward to your evidence, I really do, because this is an important—these are important issues.

And, without objection, all Members have 5 legislative days within which to submit materials and additional written questions for the witnesses which will be forwarded to the witnesses.

If there is no further business, without objection, the Subcommittee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:57 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]