



**Testimony to the United States House of Representatives  
Committee on the Judiciary  
Subcommittee on the Constitution and Limited Government**

**Hearing: “Liberty, Tyranny, and Accountability: Covid-19 and the  
Constitution”**

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If I were to summarize the effect school closures had on my youngest son, Colin, in a word, I would say it delegitimized school for him. I will give you a bit of background information so you can better understand why I say this. I am a former public and private school teacher. I left the classroom full-time after my second son was born and enjoyed using my teaching skills at home during the preschool years of all four of my children.

Colin joined me when I volunteered in his brothers' classrooms and often made himself right at home with a book or puzzle while I was helping students. He thrived once he was old enough to join his brothers on the daily bus ride. Colin participated in activities and sports, was well-liked by his peers and teachers, and was even told by his fourth-grade math teacher that he would probably be president someday. This was not a kid who harbored any ill feelings toward school.

As a mother and teacher, I recognized the unfortunate but all-too-common progression of all my boys losing a bit of enthusiasm for the school routine as they moved into middle and high school. They were observant enough to know when assignments were just busy work and lessons were irrelevant to their education. Still, we were a household that placed education as a top priority; consequently, my husband and I accepted no excuses for being lackadaisical or apathetic about schoolwork.

All three of my boys attended the same high school where my husband and I met and graduated. We thoroughly enjoyed reliving a bit of our youth as we attended

sporting events and supported traditions our alma mater continued to carry on through the decades. As Colin watched his older brothers participate in various events, he anxiously awaited the time when it would be his turn. Unfortunately, school closures brought what is arguably the most fun time in high school to an abrupt halt for him.

March 13, 2020, was a defining day in our home. My two oldest were home from college on an “extended spring break” that would last until August. As word spread that school was being canceled for two weeks to “slow the spread,” our family could not have imagined it would be the last day my two youngest children would see the inside of a public school classroom.

Two weeks to slow the spread turned into **18 months** to stunt my son’s academic growth and delegitimize school for him. Virtual learning usually equated to briefly logging on to get credit for attendance, listening to a teacher talk for a few minutes to give an assignment, and then watching movies or YouTube videos for the rest of the day. To make matters worse, instead of capitalizing on all of the free time students had to read great books in his English class, his teacher focused on intersectionality and identity.

Meanwhile, I was working locally with other parents trying to get our school board to reopen schools so our children could return to normal. One of my emails to board members in October of 2020 referred to the attendance campaign, “**Every Day Counts**,” our district launched in previous years. The response I received from one board member was, “Each of your emails is more absurd than the last.” When I emailed in December to inform them that **Chicago public schools** had found a way to reopen, another board member replied, “Feel free to move to Chicago.” My almost 17-year-old son was privy to all of this, getting more frustrated and indifferent toward school. While he was prevented from experiencing a typical senior year surrounded by friends, he saw liquor stores permitted to open as “essential” businesses.

On March 17, 2021, students were given the option to **return** to in-person classes two days per week. My son declined because he saw little value in sitting in a classroom at that point, and none of his friends were returning. The in-person days would have amounted to approximately two weeks total for students. That seemed insignificant to most seniors at that point, who were just ready to be done and move on from their high school nightmare.

Colin graduated in May of 2021 in a cold, rainy outdoor “socially distanced” ceremony on the football field. A few months later, we moved him into his college dorm with his lifelong best friend and great aspirations of a new beginning. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, the bad habits and negative attitudes about school he had

developed during “virtual learning” didn’t translate into success at college. After three very discouraging semesters, his father and I decided he needed to move back home and think about the path he wanted to take before we invested any more money into his college career. To our surprise, he agreed with our decision and even seemed a bit relieved that we had made it for him. He is a hardworking, industrious young man and quickly found a job to keep him busy and earn money while he thought about his future.

Rather than being embarrassed about our situation, I talked to his friends' parents and found that many of their sons and daughters were struggling with similar issues. We weren’t concerned for their mental health or physical safety; we were concerned that they seemed to be unmoored from a sense of direction or purpose. One parent described it as “lost.” The worst part was that we didn’t know how to help them discover that purpose.

Currently, I volunteer at a small urban **school** that was created in response to school closures. Most of the students who came to us from public school in 2021 were at least two years behind academically, and some were even further behind than that. I recently asked my older students (13-17) how the school closures impacted their attitudes or thoughts about school. They said they no longer saw school as a necessity. By closing schools while keeping liquor stores open, the adults in charge of making the decisions taught these students that school wasn’t essential. In a word, they said it seemed optional. One student now looks back on the work he was asked to do and knows that the schools weren’t challenging him. He was just going through the motions. If these students were making progress before the pandemic, school closures brought that to a grinding halt and even set them back.

A friend’s daughter, who is the same age as Colin, was part of a **nursing program** in the public high school she attended when schools closed. The program was designed to give students a jumpstart on career training so they could enter the workforce faster upon graduation. Instead, she found herself unable to pass the anatomy and math classes required in her first semester at the community college. She doesn’t understand why the institutions responsible for the learning loss and setback received **billions** of dollars. At the same time, families and students like herself incurred a greater financial burden because they had to pay for remedial college courses. She believes at least some of those funds should have been distributed to families.

In 2020 and 2021, **Congress** approved \$190 billion in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) stimulus money to be allotted to schools to help mitigate the effects of COVID-19. These funds were supposed to address learning loss and support extra learning time outside of the normal school day. Unfortunately, for

students like this young lady, my son, and **others**, many school districts **squandered** the money meant for bolstering learning on things like turf football fields, **ice cream trucks**, city nature centers, pool passes, and ineffective “learning platforms.” Those responsible for the lack of learning received a windfall while the families and students were left with added financial burdens.

To add salt to the wounds of many students, the leaders in my district boasted about the “all-time **high graduation rates**” in the years following the school closures. At the same time, according to state assessments, 23% of students were proficient in reading, and 21% performed at the proficient level in math. The **National Assessment of Educational Progress** (NAEP) results show that 17% of 8th graders performed proficient in math, and 26% were proficient in reading. A high graduation rate with student achievement at these levels means that public schools sent functionally illiterate and innumerate young people out into the workforce or world of higher education woefully unprepared to thrive or flourish.

Unfortunately, too many young people are still wandering, indifferent about school, and searching for purpose. **Chronic absenteeism** has become a reality for millions since the pandemic. As one of my students stated, students and families have begun considering school as optional. **More than half** of young adults in the 18-24 age group say they have struggled with anxiety or depression at some point in the past few years. The loneliness and isolation during school closures, combined with entirely too much **screen time**, created the perfect storm in the lives of some young people. Sadly, for too many, their struggles led them to the devastating end of their lives. During this time, **suicide rates** increased significantly among an age group that should be optimistically planning for a bright future.

Even members of Congress admit that this age group is suffering the after-effects of school closures in a very real way. Congressman Morgan McGarvey recently filed the **Young Adult Tax Credit Act** to combat the high percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds who are living in poverty. A \$500 tax credit is a temporary fix for a permanent problem. These young people needed a high school diploma that was more than just a piece of paper. They needed the education that was supposed to come with it so they could go to college or join the workforce and take care of themselves rather than relying on the government to do that.

Too many young people, especially young men, do not feel prepared to take on the adult responsibilities that typically come during this season in life. In 2022, about **one million fewer young men are in college** than there were in 2011. Overall, college enrollment has dropped 8% from 2019. Approximately **one-third** of the students who have enrolled in college have dropped out. When **surveyed**, 45% of young people said they didn't believe they would get a good return on their investment by

pursuing a college degree. While not everyone needs to attain a college degree, and plenty of noble careers out there do not require one, fewer people with college degrees will negatively **impact** the nation's economy.

This is not going to be fixed by increasing funding to the very institutions that shut their doors to millions of students nationwide and left the parents to pick up the broken pieces of their children. The solution to this problem was and is to allow families, not the government, to choose the best learning environment for their children. The families who had that choice during COVID-19 are mostly free from this fallout because their schools stayed open or reopened much more quickly than public schools.

Fortunately for my son and most of his friends, **opportunities** presented themselves that otherwise would have gone unnoticed. Colin was recently accepted into an Aircraft Maintenance program at our local community college. He works all day and is in class until 10:30 PM each night. I haven't seen him this excited about school since his elementary years.

Since this is my son's story, I want to conclude with his words. When I asked him if he would be okay with my sharing his journey here, he said, "Sure, I think it should be brought up in Congress." **When I asked him what he thought needed to be done, he said there needed to be a better process to prevent something like this. He and his peers knew what was going on and thought their families should have had a vote in the matter of school closures rather than the government deciding without their input. They felt hopeless about their future, and they witnessed their families' helplessness to direct the education of their children.** Essentially, my son and so many in his generation want to be self-governing individuals who are free to make their own decisions in life.