

Denise Ladson Johnson
Testimony before the
House Select Committee on Economic Disparity and Fairness in Growth
United States House of Representatives

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Chairman Himes, Ranking Member Steil and other committee members, thank you for inviting me to speak with you today.

My name is Denise Ladson Johnson. I am the mother of three children and the founder of the Opportunity Calls Everyone Family Development Center in James Island, South Carolina. We provide mentoring, tutoring and summer programs for children and teens in our community, so that they can embrace opportunities and reach their full potential.

The children in my community are not okay. I recently asked the teenagers in my weekly mentoring program how COVID-era school closures impacted them. Here's how they responded:

- While schools were virtual, my grades were dropping. I ended up having a 2.7 GPA. I slept more than doing anything.
- Before COVID closed schools, I had good behavior, good friends and OK grades. Since COVID, I started getting into trouble a lot, making bad choices, and getting bad grades.
- When the pandemic started, I lost some friends and was not able to see them.
- Before the pandemic, I felt really good being around my friends. But the pandemic came, and I couldn't see them. I was so sad. I couldn't go to school, so I had to do it on Zoom. I didn't like it!
- During COVID, I drifted away from friends and basically lost all connections.

Kids are our future. We have failed them by neglecting to educate them during school closures and isolating them from their friends. And now we have a whole generation that is not equipped with the education they deserve and the tools they need to thrive. What does their future look like?

When the pandemic hit, my husband and I created a plan to fit each one of our children accordingly. My oldest son, AJ, was in college on an academic and football scholarship. When his school reopened in August 2020, AJ went back to school. My daughter, Mone, is in high school, and tried to learn through Zoom during the school closures. Because my youngest son, Moses, was in prekindergarten, which is a prime time of development, I decided to homeschool him rather than do school virtually.

During the school closures, I struggled to keep my children inspired to learn and stay motivated. And I learned the importance of tailoring each individual child's education to his or her learning needs.

I was grateful to the women of Independent Women's Forum for sharing my story on a national level as part of their [Pandemic Learning storytelling](#) effort earlier this year. I know I'm not alone,

nor are my children or the children that come through my center. There are thousands - maybe millions - of parents and children with a similar story to mine.

Even though schools are open again, I am still homeschooling Moses. I remain concerned that the masking and social distancing requirements, and the school's overuse of iPads, would be unhealthy for his young developmental stage. There are too many regulations and rules for young children right now.

My teenage daughter and her peers have struggled with their return to school. During remote learning, my daughter's school did not provide lessons; they just gave a bunch of assignments online. As a result, the high school kids did not learn. Unfortunately, even though schools are open now, the kids are still primarily on iPads.

My daughter thinks that our local school system has taken the traditional school experience away from kids, and just expects them to adjust. Mone says, "Throwing Chromebooks at kids should not be a thing. Why give students electronics when parents and the schools feel like they are on social media too much? We don't have books or use paper anymore, and that's not helping our learning or studying skills. The teachers don't help with lessons because everything is online even when we are going to school physically. Why not use the funding for schools to add more classrooms, maybe add more teachers in the classrooms, buy updated books, or make the effort to bring back traditional teaching and schools?"

I understand that initially no one knew how to navigate this pandemic. But they've had enough time to learn how to provide consistent instruction, to communicate with parents, and to put initiatives into schools to help equip kids with coping skills. Instead, nothing seems to be working now. Teachers are burned out and aren't giving their 100%. Even the school lunches are horrible and the school transportation system doesn't work.

Funding and partnerships with small community organizations like mine are not materializing. I'm trying to help kids and give them life skills. Kids want someone to be concerned about them and help them learn how to navigate. Even though South Carolina had a hub for after school programs and summer camps to address learning loss and provide tutoring, my organization received no response to our application.

Where is the money for education going? I'm not seeing it.

I feel that schools are just worried about having bodies in their buildings for funding. They are not concerned about how their negligence is impacting our children's learning, development and social skills. That's why my community is not prospering. The education system is not doing what they should be doing with the funding.

The majority of students in Charleston County and across South Carolina are not meeting grade-level standards in math and reading. The children in my community are smart and capable, but the adults responsible for their education are failing them. This must change.

Rather than feeling trapped in failing schools, parents should be empowered to choose a learning environment that works for their child. I support funding students instead of large systems, and enabling parents to find an educational option that works for their child's individualized needs.

I know that it is customary for Members of Congress to ask congressional hearing witnesses questions. I also have questions for you:

- (1) Do you share my concern that our kids are in crisis after losing over a year of learning and socialization?
- (2) Are you also angry that the billions in “emergency” federal funding are not providing the tutoring and support kids desperately need?, and
- (3) Will you speak up for parents and students, so that families have educational opportunities that meet their needs?

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today.