



Testimony Before the U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce

Hearing: American Education in Crisis

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Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Scott, and members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to appear today.

My name is Virginia Gentles, and I am the mother of two school-age children and the director of the Education Freedom Center at Independent Women's Forum. IWF is a non-profit organization that advances policies that enhance people's freedom, opportunities, and well-being. The IWF Education Freedom Center¹ informs the public about education policies that harm students and disempower parents and encourages the creation of educational options that focus on academic achievement and create safe environments for students to learn and thrive.

I am here today to discuss the state of K-12 education in our country. Before I delve into the significant challenges our students, teachers, and families are facing, I want to highlight two positive developments. The first is the expansion of education freedom. Two states, Iowa and Utah, passed laws last month creating K-12 education savings account programs, and more states plan to follow their lead this year.² Last year, Arizona established the gold standard for education freedom by expanding eligibility for the state's existing empowerment scholarship account program to cover all 1.1 million Arizona students.

¹ IWF Education Freedom Center: <https://www.iwf.org/efc>.

² Ingraham, Keri. "Two States Now Have Universal School Choice — And Yours Could Be Next." The Federalist. January 27, 2023.
<https://www.iwf.org/2023/01/27/two-states-now-have-universal-school-choice-and-yours-could-be-next/>.

Second, policymakers are acknowledging the widespread failure of “balanced literacy” reading programs that were a lucrative marketing and contracting triumph for the instructional materials industry and an absolute failure for a generation of students.³ States are starting to require “phonics-based” reading instruction, and parents are beginning to understand *why* the nation’s literacy scores are abysmal, thanks in part to Emily Hanford’s powerful series, “Sold a Story: How Teaching Kids to Read Went So Wrong.”⁴

That’s about the extent of the good news. As legislators who regularly hear from distraught parents, you are all familiar with the bad news. After years of instruction disrupted by cruel COVID-era closures and masking policies and undermined by divisive ideologies, K-12 education in the United States is in crisis. We are faced with:

- Alarming learning loss fueled by the potent combination of COVID-era closures and the prioritization of indoctrination over academic instruction;⁵
- Pervasive discipline and mental health issues that are creating an unsafe environment for students and teachers;⁶
- School systems determined to view parents as the enemy; and
- Powerful teachers’ unions and education bureaucracies that reject transparency and accountability, yet relentlessly demand more funding.

We must acknowledge the pernicious influence of the teachers’ unions. These powerful organizations seek to expand their partisan political influence, raise funds, and control working conditions. They do not aspire to improve education. In fact, National Education Association (NEA) members voted against a business item in 2019 calling to “re-dedicate itself to the pursuit of increased student learning in every public school in America by

³ Gentles, Ginny. “Two Truths And A Lie: Literacy.” Independent Women’s Forum. April 12, 2022. <https://www.iwf.org/2022/04/12/two-truths-and-a-lie-literacy/>.

⁴ Hanford, Emily. “Sold a Story: How Teaching Kids to Read Went So Wrong.” American Public Media. <https://features.apmreports.org/sold-a-story/>.

⁵ Gentles, Ginny. “Policy Focus: Learning Loss.” IWF. May 4, 2022. <https://www.iwf.org/2022/05/04/policy-focus-learning-loss/>.

⁶ Morabito, Angela. “The Kids Aren’t Alright: Classroom Behavior Takes Nosedive Post-COVID.” IWF. August 4, 2022. <https://www.iwf.org/2022/08/04/the-kids-arent-alright-classroom-behavior-takes-nosedive-post-covid/>.

putting a renewed emphasis on quality education.”⁷ Union roadblocks appeared at the outset of the COVID-era school closures, with some local teachers’ unions instructing teachers to not teach new material. In the summer of 2020, unions encouraged members to send fake body bags, coffins, and obituaries to governors and local leaders and filled social media with warnings that teachers would die if schools opened.⁸ The resistance to opening schools continued into 2021, with union leaders colluding with the Biden administration’s Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to draft restrictive reopening guidance in order to strengthen their local bargaining positions.⁹

Academic Decline

Union leaders and union-supported school board members cannot and should not escape accountability for the learning loss crisis they exacerbated.¹⁰ Scores on the 2022 Nation’s Report Card, or National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), significantly dropped since students were last tested in 2019 in both math and reading for both fourth and eighth grade.

Only one-quarter of eighth graders met math proficiency standards. Math scores for eighth-graders declined in 51 out of 53 states and jurisdictions, with students in 90% of states losing at least a half year of learning and students in 18 states losing a full year.¹¹ Eighth-grade reading scores only rose in Catholic schools and the Department of Defense schools and declined in 33 states and jurisdictions.¹² One-quarter of fourth-grade students

⁷ Tapscott, Mark. “Bill To Repeal NEA’s Federal Charter Could Light Reform Match Within Teachers’ Union.” *The Epoch Times*. April 19, 2022.
<https://www.iwf.org/2022/04/bill-to-repeal-neas-federal-charter-could-light-reform-match-within-teachers-union/>.

⁸ Gentles, Ginny. “Two Truths And A Lie: Parents Taking Control Of Children’s Education.” IWF. July 19, 2022.
<https://www.iwf.org/2022/07/19/two-truths-and-a-lie-parents-taking-control-of-childrens-education/>.

⁹ “Interim Findings: Union Officials Wrote Key Portions of the Biden Administration’s School Reopening Guidance Staff Report.” Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, Minority. March 30, 2022.
<https://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/AFT-CDC-Interference-Interim-Report-3-30-2022.pdf>.

¹⁰ White, Kaylee McGhee. “Government Leaders, Not The Pandemic, Are Responsible For Abysmal Academic Performance.” *Washington Examiner*. October 26, 2022.

¹¹ Gentles, Ginny. “The K-12 Cartel Flunked The Nation’s Report Card.” IWF. October 24, 2022.
<https://www.iwf.org/2022/10/24/the-k-12-cartel-flunked-the-nations-report-card/>.

¹² Porter-Magee, Kathleen. “Amid the Pandemic, Progress in Catholic Schools.” *Wall Street Journal*. October 27, 2022.
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/amid-the-pandemic-progress-in-catholic-schools-partnership-naep-report-card-math-reading-public-charter-black-hispanic-11666902117>.

scored below basic in math, meaning they are not able to perform grade-level skills. Approximately one-third of fourth-grade students tested below basic in reading.

Student performance was already declining before teachers' unions and school district bureaucrats insisted on prolonged COVID-era school closures. The scores reflect "realized generational decline," and United States Education Secretary Miguel Cardona has observed that "the pandemic simply made it worse."¹³

Worsening School Climate

Chaotic classrooms are driving talented teachers to quit, according to surveys, likely accelerating learning loss.¹⁴ According to federal data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), schools are plagued with chronic absenteeism among students and teachers, a significant increase in behavioral issues, and rising incidents of verbal abuse and disrespect toward teachers.¹⁵ The majority of schools surveyed by the federal government reported increases in classroom disruptions and physical violence. Unions and district leaders shut students out of classrooms and canceled activities during the COVID era, leaving children without robust academic instruction or meaningful social interaction. The lengthy, isolating periods of languishing on screens harmed students academically, behaviorally, and emotionally. The nation's students returned to classrooms with deteriorated behavior and lagging social skills, and school districts' excessively lenient "discipline" policies left teachers without the tools to address the resulting chaos. In theory, mental health support could help children. But the parents I speak to are concerned about the consequences of funneling more money into school counselors that are represented by an association that embraces so-called "antiracism" and gender identity ideologies.¹⁶

¹³ Perez Jr., Juan. "American test scores prompt 'a moment of truth' for schools." Politico. October 24, 2022. <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/10/24/american-test-scores-schools-00063067>.

¹⁴ Ward, Micah. "Student behavior is the leading cause for teachers leaving." District Administration. July 22, 2022. <https://districtadministration.com/student-behavior-is-the-leading-cause-for-teachers-leaving/>.

¹⁵ "Report on Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2021." National Center for Education Statistics, Institute for Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. June 28, 2022. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2022092>.

¹⁶ "Doctor Sounds Alarm on 'Transgender Assembly Line.'" IWF Identity Crisis Series. October 20, 2022. <https://www.iwf.org/identity-crisis-dr-grossman/>.

Harmful Ideological Indoctrination in Schools

Unfortunately, too many forces within the education system insist on prioritizing the promotion of ideologies over academic instruction.¹⁷ Federal, state, and local policies that embrace and enforce gender and other divisive ideologies in the K-12 education system pressure students to define themselves by their racial, sexual, and gender identity. Polls consistently reveal that most people don't want children to be bombarded with activist-drafted materials, books, and lessons pushing radical gender ideology.¹⁸ The vast majority of parents certainly do not want teachers instructing young children that they can be born in the wrong body and that doctors guess a baby's gender at birth and sometimes get it wrong. We can hopefully all agree that schools should not tell girls with underlying mental health problems that adopting a new gender identity is the best, or only, way to relieve emotional distress.

In the course of this hearing, we likely will address multiple aspects of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, including the Biden administration's plans to mandate school policies that secretly socially transition children, hiding their new names, identities, and bathroom, locker room, and overnight trip accommodations from parents through so-called "Gender Support Plans."¹⁹ These plans are based on the radical assumption that the only acceptable response to children who express a desire for a new name and "gender identity" is immediate and unquestioning affirmation. This assumption flies in the face of the recommendations of comprehensive medical reviews conducted in countries such as the United Kingdom and Sweden.

School staff are pushing highly sensitive girls—regardless of their struggles with depression, anxiety, obsessive rumination, or eating disorders—down a one-way path to medical transition, which includes puberty blockers, cutting off their breasts ("top surgery"), sterilization, permanent loss of sexual function, and a lifetime of high-risk

¹⁷ Gentles, Ginny. "School Choice Can Save Children From Radical Gender Ideology." Washington Examiner. August 18, 2022. <https://www.iwf.org/2022/08/18/school-choice-can-save-children-from-radical-gender-ideology/>.

¹⁸ "Parents Defending Education Poll: 62% of voters think gender identity activists 'going too far.'" Parents Defending Education. July 27, 2022. <https://defendinged.org/press-releases/parents-defending-education-poll-62-percent-of-voters-think-gender-identity-activists-going-too-far/>.

¹⁹ IWF Title IX Resource Center: <https://www.iwf.org/title-ix-resource-center/>.

testosterone injections (“gender-affirming care”).²⁰ Public school policies punish school staff who do not adhere to this radical belief system. At a child's request, schools keep the Gender Support Plan and the student's new name and identity a secret from parents. To be clear, Title IX does not mandate these policies at this point, yet too many school districts are citing non-existent Title IX requirements as the pretext for hiding information from parents.

One specific Title IX-related policy area that can be addressed early in this Congress is the protection of women's sports.²¹ Forcing female athletes to compete against biological males is unfair and discriminatory. Congressman Greg Steube has introduced the Protection of Women and Girls in Sports Act²² which will end the practice of allowing biological males to take awards, roster spots, scholarships, or spots at a school from female athletes.

Unions and Bureaucrats Versus Parents and Students

Parents want and deserve power over their children's education, but education bureaucrats and unions hold all the power in areas without education freedom. Parents have a right to direct the upbringing, care, and education of their children, and they do not simply turn children over to government schools with the assumption that the school will make every decision—without parental input. Efforts to introduce the Parents Bill of Rights²³ legislation that couples the acknowledgment of parents' fundamental rights with curriculum, budget, and student record transparency requirements are a step in the right direction.

Rather than take responsibility for failing to educate students or acknowledge parents' requests for transparency, responsiveness, and respect, leaders of the public K-12 education system continue to demand funding increases. The federal government already provided more than \$190 billion in “emergency” supplemental education funding, however, primarily in the form of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief

²⁰ IWF “Identity Crisis” documentary series: <https://www.iwf.org/identity-crisis/>.

²¹ IWF Women's Sports Resource Center: <https://www.iwf.org/womens-sports-resource-center/>.

²² “Rep. Greg Steube Reintroduces Legislation to Save Women's Sports.” February 1, 2023.

<https://steube.house.gov/media/press-releases/rep-greg-steube-reintroduces-legislation-to-save-women-s-sports>.

²³ “Congresswoman Letlow Announces the Parents Bill of Rights Act.” November 17, 2021.

<https://letlow.house.gov/media/press-releases/congresswoman-letlow-announces-parents-bill-rights-act>.

(ESSER) funds.²⁴ The funding was quickly provided to states in three installments, including the massive American Rescue Plan (ARP) spending blowout. The money was largely not needed or used to facilitate school re-opening. Many districts have not spent the funds.²⁵ Please hold school districts and superintendents accountable for the massive infusion in COVID-era federal supplemental funding.

We must rethink the current education funding model that pours over \$750 billion annually in federal, state, and local education funding into a failed and bloated system. An entrenched, activist education bureaucracy continues to grow in size and strength. Over the last 20 years, public K-12 administrative staff has increased by 88%, while student enrollment only increased by 8%.²⁶ Inflation-adjusted public school funding has risen by 152% since 1970, but teacher salaries have only increased by 8%.²⁷ School districts have become contracting machines that enrich corporations peddling ideologically-infused professional development, questionable social-emotional learning materials, and highly-intrusive student surveys, rather than children's minds. It's time for funding to follow the child to the education option that best meets his or her needs.

Solutions to the Education Crisis

Students must be allowed to escape the residentially-assigned public schools that are not effectively educating them. Systems must be forced to pay a price for ignoring the needs of parents and students. The Educational Choice for Children Act (ECCA)²⁸ will create a

²⁴ "ESSER Expenditure Dashboard." Edunomics Lab. Georgetown University.

<https://edunomicslab.org/esser-spending/>.

²⁵ "Education Stabilization Fund Transparency Portal." U.S. Department of Education. Accessed February 2, 2023.

<https://covid-relief-data.ed.gov/>.

²⁶ Table 213.10. Staff employed in public elementary and secondary school systems, by type of assignment: Selected years, 1949-50 through fall 2019 (https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_213.10.asp) and Table 203.10. Enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by level and grade: Selected years, fall 1980 through fall 2030 (https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_203.10.asp). Digest of Education Statistics. National Center for Education Statistics. Institute for Education Sciences. U.S. Department of Education.

²⁷ Table 236.55. Total and current expenditures per pupil in public elementary and secondary schools: Selected years, 1919-20 through 2018-19 (https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_236.55.asp) and Table 211.50. Estimated average annual salary of teachers in public elementary and secondary schools: Selected years, 1959-60 through 2020-21 (https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_211.50.asp), Digest of Education Statistics. National Center for Education Statistics. Institute for Education Sciences. U.S. Department of Education.

²⁸ "Scott, Cassidy, Daines, Young Introduce Educational Choice for Children Act." June 16, 2022.

<https://www.scott.senate.gov/media-center/press-releases/scott-cassidy-daines-young-introduce-educational-choice-for-children-act>.

K-12 federal scholarship tax credit and give parents the purchasing power to choose the school or education service that works best for their child. Parents could access funding for tuition, tutoring to address learning loss, special needs services, or education technology. The proposal does not involve the U.S. Department of Education because scholarships are funded by individual and corporate donations to non-profit scholarship-granting organizations in the states. The donors receive a non-refundable federal tax credit.

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education submitted a report to the Secretary of Education that concluded that the nation was at risk due to the failures of the educational system.²⁹ The Commission was created in response to the “widespread public perception that something is seriously remiss in our educational system.” The report concluded, “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves.”

In a letter to the Secretary, the Commission’s chairman wrote, “the problems we have discerned in American education can be both understood and corrected if the people of our country, together with those who have public responsibility in the matter, care enough and are courageous enough to do what is required.” I was in elementary school when the report was written. I’m the mother of a sixth and ninth grader now, so I have a front-row seat to the current failures of our educational system. We were a nation at risk in 1983 and remain so in 2023.

Parents, students, and educators need legislators to be more than just caring and courageous. We need you to: hold the K-12 cartel accountable for the learning loss crisis exacerbated by COVID-era policies; determine how states and districts spent the \$190 billion in “emergency” federal funding; ensure that the new mental health funding truly helps students, rather than lines the pockets of activists; and pass legislation that provides families with educational transparency and freedom. Our country’s students deserve safe

²⁹ “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform.” The National Commission on Excellence in Education. U.S. Department of Education. April 1983.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20201029222248/https://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/index.html>.

classroom environments dedicated to academic instruction, a path out of the learning loss crisis created by the public school system, and the opportunity to thrive.

Thank you.