



**Testimony to the United States House of Representatives
Committee on Oversight and Accountability
Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic**

Hearing: The Consequences of School Closures: Intended and Unintended

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Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Ruiz, 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. IWF is a non-profit organization that advances policies that enhance people's freedom, opportunities, and well-being. My work focuses on informing and empowering parents and expanding education freedom.

We are here today to discuss the impact of school closures. Despite children being COVID's **lowest-risk demographic**, American elementary and secondary students were shut out of schools for lengthy periods and relegated to deplorable remote learning. Irresponsible school district leaders endangered children **academically, emotionally, and physically** by closing and refusing to open schools, decisions that led to devastating **learning loss, mental health issues, developmental delays**, and persistent **discipline challenges**.

Let's be clear: school closures were **not** a good or necessary response to the coronavirus, and closure decisions were not **grounded in data**. School district superintendents, school board members, and state leaders knew early on that children were extremely low risk, but many feared the **political consequences** of prioritizing open schools. They also knew that school

closures were an **ineffective strategy** for preventing the spread of the virus. Schools stayed closed primarily because the teachers' unions in our country have **enormous political power** and parents do not. As parents pleaded for open schools, services for our children with disabilities, and a response to the learning loss crisis created by prolonged closures, we found out just how little leverage we possess.

My community's school closure disaster unfolded similarly to many "blue" areas around the country. When my daughters' public schools closed in March 2020, I initially breathed a sigh of relief. Our hectic schedule could slow down, my older daughter could take a break from the chaotic middle school environment that regularly triggered her social and sensory issues, and I could assess my younger daughter's academic progress. I anticipated a few slow-paced, cozy weeks.

Instead, the school district leaders in Arlington, Virginia, where we live, refused to open schools fully for *a year and a half*. Unfortunately, Arlington Public Schools utterly abandoned its academic mission during the ludicrously lengthy school closures. Students received no instruction in the spring of 2020 and erratic, low-quality remote instruction for the 2020-21 school year. As Arlington initially planned to open two days a week in the fall of 2020, but reneged just before the school year began, teachers were not trained to teach remotely and instructional materials were not created in preparation for an additional year of online instruction. Some students were allowed to return for a shortened two days a week in the spring of 2021, but many parents soon discovered that their children were placed in front of screens with teachers remaining remote.

At the end of the utterly wasted 2020-21 school year, the Arlington Parents for Education, my community's "#openschools" advocates, **tweeted**, "Almost all APS kids went over 350 days without stepping foot into a building. When they finally did, it was - and still is - for only two days a week. The worst part: It didn't have to be like this." Arlington then reneged on plans to offer summer school to high-need students, including English language learners, young struggling readers, and students with disabilities.

When schools finally opened their doors for five-days-a-week, full-day instruction in the fall of 2021, onerous testing and quarantine policies further disrupted students' learning by requiring children considered potential "close contacts" with possibly COVID-positive students to stay home for **lengthy periods**.

The district's callous policies denied **students with disabilities** essential services and accommodations. The developmental damage to the young children who did not receive **early intervention services** is permanent. When district staff summoned me in the summer of 2020 to a virtual meeting to discuss abandoning my daughter's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), I knew it was time for us to leave our residentially-assigned public schools. My children currently attend faith-based private schools in our community, and my resolve to ensure that every student can access the education option that best meets his or her needs is stronger than ever.

Virginia schools stayed **closed longer** than 43 other states, resulting in devastating and widespread learning loss. The state's **13.6-point drop** since 2017 in average fourth-grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scores was the largest in the nation. District and state leaders knew the **harm** of closures all along. **Statewide testing** in 2021 revealed an "alarming" 20-year low in early reading skills with 34.5% of K-2 students at high risk for persistent reading difficulties, in contrast to only 21.3% in 2019. Just as community members who advocated for open school predicted, lower-income and **minority** students were hit the hardest and continue to struggle. Only 49% of Virginia's black students passed the Virginia state math assessment in 2022, in contrast to 70% passing in 2019. In the Arlington school district, the **majority** of the district's black and Hispanic students (and students with disabilities) tested "below basic" in the fall 2022 Math Inventory.

My community's COVID-era story mirrors parents' experiences in school districts across the country. The nationwide 2022 NAEP scores exposed the catastrophic failure of the nation's K-12 education system. Irresponsible pandemic-era policies resulted in the largest decline in fourth-grade reading since 1990 and the first-ever decline in fourth-grade math. Only 26% of eighth-graders are proficient in math and 31% in reading nationwide. Unlike the Arlington school district **superintendent** who wants to "get away from

that concept of learning loss,” U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona acknowledged that the NAEP scores are “appalling” and “unacceptable.”

An October 2022 analysis by Harvard and Stanford University **researchers** found that “The average U.S. public school student in grades 3–8 lost the equivalent of a half year of learning in math and a quarter of a year in reading.” Students in districts that remained closed for the majority of the 2020-2021 school year suffered greater learning loss than their peers who returned to in-person learning in the fall of 2020. Because schools with large numbers of low-income and minority students were closed the longest, school closures widened economic and racial achievement gaps. According to the **author** of a May 2022 Harvard **study**, “This will probably be the largest increase in educational inequity in a generation.”

The COVID-era closures and excessive quarantine policies also caused students to miss opportunities to develop age-appropriate social and behavioral skills. Students spent months or more isolated and staring at screens, shut out of extracurricular and athletic activities. As a direct result, pervasive discipline and mental health issues are creating an unsafe environment for students and teachers. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 56% of schools reported a rise in **classroom disruptions** because of student misconduct in 2021-2022. A 2021 American Psychological Association **survey** found that one-third of teachers had been verbally harassed or threatened with violence by a student. Teachers **reported** that violence in their schools is “on-going and pervasive,” and the isolation endured by students during school closures took “a severe toll, one that would follow them as schools began to open back up for in-person learning.”

School closures stunted students’ development. According to a **McKinsey and Company analysis**, students “are at risk of finishing school without the skills, behaviors, and mindsets to succeed in college or in the workforce.” In an **Education Week survey**, 80% of teachers reported that their current students’ social skills and emotional maturity are less advanced compared to students prior to the pandemic.

Too many students remain disengaged from learning with hundreds of thousands “missing,” according to a **Stanford University analysis**, and likely

no longer receiving an education. Districts across the country are reporting alarmingly high rates of chronic absenteeism, with students missing over 10% of instructional days. Half of **Chicago Public Schools** students were chronically absent last year, for example; double the pre-COVID rate. COVID-era policies condemned these children to low literacy skills, limited employment opportunities, higher rates of poverty and incarceration, and bleak futures.

In contrast, private schools reopened quickly and stayed open. In the fall of 2020, only 43% of **traditional public schools** opened their doors nationwide, while over 92% of **Catholic schools** welcomed students back to classrooms. By opening schools, private schools protected children from public school students' catastrophic learning loss. As Kathleen Porter-Magee, a Catholic school superintendent, wrote in the **Wall Street Journal**: "Catholic-school students now boast the nation's highest scale scores on all four NAEP tests. The average (reading) score among fourth-graders in Catholic schools was 233, 17 points higher than the national public-school average, or about 1½ grade levels ahead. In eighth-grade reading, the average score for Catholic school students was 279, 20 points higher than the national public-school average, or about two grade levels ahead."

State policymakers noticed the stark contrast between public and private school priorities during the COVID era, and began introducing and passing **universal education freedom programs**. These **popular** programs empower parents to leave public schools that do not prioritize academic instruction and enroll their children in educational options committed to educating students. In 2021, Arizona extended eligibility for the state's education savings account program to all 1.1 million K-12 students. In 2022, Iowa, Utah, Arkansas, and Florida created universal statewide education savings account programs that fund students directly. Allowing parents to access K-12 funding directly through such accounts enables them to escape the chaos caused by COVID-era district decisions and address their children's educational needs.

At the local level, unfortunately, most school district leaders are not taking the learning loss crisis that they created seriously. The federal government bequeathed \$190 billion of supplemental education **funding** to states and districts across three COVID-era emergency spending bills. Some Governors

invested their Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEER) funds in **student-centered approaches**; but, unfortunately, much of the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding remains unspent or was allocated **unwisely**.

Rather than addressing the learning loss crisis, school districts have wasted their ESSER funds on dubious expenses, including **athletic projects**—football fields, weight rooms, outdoor tracks and lighting, **bleachers and gym lockers**; **sound systems**; and even a **nature sanctuary**. Arlington Public School foolishly squandered over **\$10 million** in ESSER funds on a duplicative virtual education program that utterly flopped. Districts and states “checked the tutoring box” by contracting with unused **online platforms**, rather than investing in frequent, in-person tutoring for struggling students. Irresponsibly, many school districts, despite declining enrollment, are creating perilous **fiscal cliffs** by hiring and paying new staff members with temporary ESSER funds that must be obligated by September 2024.

Parents and policymakers must hold school districts accountable for school closure decisions and COVID-era federal supplemental funding choices. School districts that were closed for extended periods should be **investigated** so that students with disabilities can receive compensatory services. District, state, and federal leaders that **caved** to political pressure from teachers unions should be questioned in order to avoid a similar scenario unfolding in the future. Superintendents that chose to direct millions in COVID-era federal funding to **athletic fields** rather than academic recovery should be required to report regularly on the academic progress of their students.

In addition, education bureaucrats, superintendents, and local and state leaders must acknowledge their mistakes and take drastic measures to address the learning loss and discipline crisis they caused. Districts should prioritize the **students with the highest need** and invest in intensive high-dosage tutoring and summer school programs with proven track records. Supplemental federal funds should be invested in **phonics-based literacy instruction**. States and districts should provide learning recovery **microgrants** to families, similar to COVID-era programs created in Oklahoma, Texas, and Idaho, and recently launched in **Virginia**, so parents can direct funding to the tutoring or enrichment options that best meet their child’s

needs. School districts and state departments of education are awash in supplemental federal funding and must make student-focused and bold investments to redeem themselves as educators and put students' needs first.