

Date: April 27, 2023

RE: House Oversight & Accountability Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic: "The Consequences of School Closures, Part 2: The President of the American Federation of Teachers, Ms. Randi Weingarten"

Witness Panel

- **Randi Weingarten**, President, American Federation of Teachers (AFT)

Overview:

On Thursday, April 27, 2023, the Oversight & Accountability Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic held a hearing entitled "The Consequences of School Closures, Part 2: The President of the American Federation of Teachers, Ms. Randi Weingarten." Chairman Robert Wenstrup (R-OH) and Ranking Member Raul Ruiz (D-CA) presided. Rep. Maxwell Frost (D-FL) and Rep. Jimmy Gomez (D-CA) participated.

See full details of the hearing [here](#).

Opening Statements

Chairman Robert Wenstrup (R-OH)

- The hearing aims to examine procedures followed, decisions made, and motivations behind these decisions, aiming to produce a bipartisan guide for future generations to better prepare for and respond to pandemics.
- It was clear by the fall of 2020 that schools could remain safely open for in-person instruction of students. COVID-19 transmission and fatality rates for children were low; school closures exacerbated mental health issues and increased suicide rates, suggesting schools should have reopened.
- The Centers for Disease Control's (CDC's) 2021 Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools for school reopening's recommendations included community spread rates, routine screening testing, and six feet of distancing, but were not based on sound science.
- AFT's support for unscientific mitigation policies and influence on CDC decisions raise questions about the organization's scientific expertise and the nature of its access to the CDC.
- The hearing aims to examine procedures, decisions, motivations, and outcomes to better prepare for future pandemics and improve in-person education for all children in the U.S.

Ranking Member Raul Ruiz (D-CA)

- The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the loss of parents or primary caregivers for 230,000 children, resulting in mental health issues and academic decline.
- Nearly 45 percent of high school students experienced severe sadness and hopelessness, and 9 percent attempted suicide, highlighting the growing mental health crisis among youth.
- The prolonged suspension of in-person learning has set back two decades of progress in learning, with some students taking until 2050 to recover.
- The American Rescue Plan and the Biden administration's leadership helped double the number of schools open for full-time, in-person learning.
- The Republican budget plan proposes a 22% cut on critical education and healthcare programs, removing essential support for struggling students and their families.

- To address the challenges children face, it is necessary to prioritize their health and well-being rather than focusing on partisan allegations against teachers.
- Preparing schools for future pandemics is crucial to save lives, reduce transmissions, and maintain safe and responsible in-person learning.

Witness Testimony

Randi Weingarten, [Testimony](#)

- Teachers, bus drivers, and nurses worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic to ensure students were safe and well-cared for.
- The AFT released a science-backed plan for reopening schools safely in April 2020, emphasizing safety as the pathway to opening and maintaining schools.
- The previous administration's downplaying of the pandemic had unbearable costs, with over 1.1 million Americans dead and 245,000 children orphaned.
- The AFT purchased personal protective equipment (PPE), ran vaccination clinics, convened virtual town halls, and spent \$5 million on a back-to-school campaign to support safe reopening.
- School reopening rates increased from 46 percent in January 2021 to nearly 97 percent in May 2021, thanks to the American Rescue Plan, CDC guidance, and the collaborative efforts of educators, parents, and officials.
- Working together to expand community schools, increase experiential and career-connected learning, and address educator burnout to help students recover from the pandemic is essential.

Question and Answer

- **Chairman Robert Wenstrup (R-OH)** asked Weingarten if the AFT consulted with the CDC on its February 2021 operational strategy for school reopening.
 - Weingarten said yes.
 - Wenstrup asked Weingarten if the AFT engaged the CDC or if the CDC engaged the AFT first. Weingarten said the Biden Administration's transitional team contacted the AFT and scheduled a half-hour Zoom call on January 29.
 - Wenstrup asked Weingarten if, during conversations with the transitional team, she or any members of the AFT staff directly spoke with incoming CDC director Walensky. Weingarten said yes.
 - Wenstrup asked Weingarten to speak about the AFT's interactions with the CDC via Zoom, emails, and phone calls. Weingarten said there were several public letters to the CDC for transparency, including one on March 23, 2021, explaining AFT's alignment with a three-foot social distancing requirement.
 - Wenstrup asked if AFT ever provided suggested revisions to the CDC's operational strategy regarding school closures or reopening. Weingarten said they suggested ideas, and one edit was accepted.
 - Wenstrup asked about two specific proposals: work-from-home options for teachers with high-risk conditions and guidance changes if a new variant arose. Weingarten confirmed that the first proposal was accepted, while the second was not discussed on January 29.
 - Wenstrup asked if other proposals were not accepted. Weingarten said yes, several.
 - Wenstrup asked if the proposal about new variants was accepted. Weingarten said yes.
 - Wenstrup questioned why a statement in bold stating "The CDC is not mandating the reopening of schools" was emphasized. Weingarten said she had no idea.
 - Wenstrup pointed out that despite science showing schools were not a driver of community transmission, AFT still wanted to install a closure trigger. He asked if AFT

pushed for a trigger to open schools rather than close them in 2020. Weingarten said yes, and pointed toward the Cuomo Commission's triggers.

- Wenstrup asked Weingarten to present evidence of AFT advocating for triggers to open schools in communications with the CDC, as he found only metrics for closure in the documents. Weingarten said she would provide the requested information.
- **Ranking Member Raul Ruiz (D-CA)** praised AFT's request for accommodations for high-risk workers and flexibility for new virus variants as reasonable and scientific. Ruiz mentioned that CDC didn't include opening or closing triggers, questioning the purpose of discussing partisan allegations rather than focusing on policies to address learning loss and mental health. Ruiz asked Weingarten what steps AFT has taken to accelerate learning and support student mental health.
 - Weingarten said the AFT is acutely aware of the importance of addressing children's social and emotional needs and promoting experiential learning. Weingarten said students learn more quickly when their needs are met.
 - Ruiz asked Weingarten to speak about the impact of House Republicans' proposed budget cuts on mental health and academic programs, such as the 988 Suicide Lifeline and health center program. Weingarten said that cutting funds would hinder efforts to address the mental health crisis and that schools are community centers offering essential services.
- **Full Committee Chairman James Comer (R-KY)** expressed concerns about the close collaboration between the CDC and AFT during the drafting of the school reopening guidance and the uncommon access granted to AFT. Comer asked Weingarten when the AFT received the CDC's draft guidance.
 - Weingarten clarified that they received it after a conversation on January 29 with the CDC and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH).
 - Comer asked Weingarten if the AFT provided any draft language to the CDC. Weingarten confirmed they submitted language on immunocompromised workers when the CDC asked.
 - Comer asked Weingarten if it was common for outside groups to send draft language to the CDC. Weingarten was unsure but noted that the ATF had suggested concepts such as robust testing.
 - Comer asked Weingarten how many edits ATF suggested and how many were included. Weingarten replied the ATF suggested concepts rather than edits, and only one edit was included, which was the reasonable accommodation for immunocompromised individuals. She also noted that the ATF suggested a review if there was a new variant.
- **Full Committee Ranking Member Jamie Raskin (D-MD)** said COVID-19 was the deadliest public health crisis in over a century and criticized the plan to claw back money already appropriated for combating the pandemic. Raskin asked Weingarten about her role in advocating for safe school reopening during the pandemic.
 - Weingarten said the ATF worked on developing clear scientific guidance and collaborated with doctors and other experts to create reopening strategies without federal support.
 - Raskin highlighted the lack of support from the Trump administration and the absence of a school reopening plan from President Trump and Secretary DeVos. Raskin asked Weingarten how the chaos and recklessness in the Trump administration undermined her efforts to advocate for a safe, nationwide reopening of schools. Weingarten explained that the chaotic and conflicting information from the administration created fear. Still, they sought to develop tangible layered mitigation strategies to make schools safer and address the negative impacts of remote education on children.

- **Rep. Nicole Malliotakis (R-NY)** asked Weingarten what percentage of federal funding allocated toward school reopening was used.
 - Weingarten said she did not know exactly how much money was spent.
 - Malliotakis asked Weingarten if she was disappointed that money allocated for reopening schools was used for critical race theory education. Weingarten said she wanted schools to reopen safely. Weingarten said some of the funding given to states to reopen schools was meant for programmatic work and curriculum development.
- **Rep. Debbie Dingell (D-MI)** asked Weingarten if the Trump administration gave her guidance on how to safely return to in-person learning.
 - Weingarten said no.
- **Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks (R-IA)** asked Weingarten how many children of 1.8 million children died of COVID.
 - Weingarten said she did not know.
 - Miller Meeks asked Weingarten if she was aware that Swedish and Finnish public health agencies issued a public report concluding that the closure or not of schools has little if any impact on the number of laboratory-confirmed cases of COVID in school-age children. Weingarten said she was made aware of reports from Massachusetts and Wisconsin that show that there was much less transmission in schools with layered mitigation.
- **Rep. Kweisi Mfume (D-MD)** said many things went wrong throughout the pandemic, and nothing was done 100 percent correctly. Mfume said that the solution to the effects of losing out on classroom time is not in politically charged congressional hearings.
- **Rep. Debbie Lesko (R-AZ)** asked Weingarten why many states had open schools where teachers taught remotely, and other employees supervised the students in the classroom as they learned remotely.
 - Weingarten said she had not come across such a situation.
 - Lesko asked Weingarten why teachers could not return to teaching if they were grocery shopping in person. Weingarten said the U.S. prioritized the economy and left stores and gyms open.
 - Lesko asked Weingarten if she had Director Wilensky's direct phone number. Weingarten said yes.
- **Rep. Deborah Ross (D-NC)** gave Weingarten time to correct anything previously leveled against her.
 - Weingarten said the guidance released by the CDC continually recommended that schools reopen. Weingarten said schools had lower coronavirus transmission rates because there were layered levels of mitigation in place. Weingarten said the ATF knew kids had to return to school; they just wanted them to be safe.
 - Ross asked Weingarten what kind of services the Headstart program provides. Weingarten said the Headstart program creates confidence in kids, allowing them to make connections and apply knowledge to improve their well-being.
- **Rep. Michael Cloud (R-TX)** said children were unlikely to suffer serious illness or death due to COVID-19. Cloud asked Weingarten if she is a medical expert.
 - Weingarten said no.
 - Cloud asked Weingarten if she is a superdelegate to the Democratic Party. Weingarten said yes, she is a delegate to the Democratic National Convention.

- **Rep. Maxwell Frost (D-FL)** said the National Rifle Association is the real threat to children across America. Frost asked how a child living through mass shootings or other gun-related events impacts their development.
 - Weingarten said living through a mass shooting is terrible for a child's development. Weingarten said gun violence is the number one cause of death in children.
 - Frost asked Weingarten if it would be appropriate for the House Oversight Committee to hold a hearing on the effects of gun violence on schools. Weingarten said yes. Weingarten added that children and parents are scared about gun violence.
- **Rep. John Joyce (R-PA)** asked Weingarten if she agrees that remote learning may exacerbate educational inequities, harm educational attainment, and worsen a growing mental health crisis in children.
 - Weingarten said yes.
 - Joyce asked Weingarten if a pandemic is associated with learning loss. Weingarten said yes. Weingarten said equity and poverty are also associated with learning loss.
 - Joyce asked Weingarten if she supports adding additional time to the school day to help students get more in-person instruction time. Weingarten said yes.
 - Joyce asked Weingarten if ATF encourages its members to teach during expanded summer school. Weingarten said yes.
 - Joyce asked Weingarten if political activism is included in ATF's mission statement. Weingarten said there are many things in the ATF mission statement, including academic achievement, creating a welcoming and safe environment, and ensuring individuals have a voice.
 - Joyce asked Weingarten if the AFT employs epidemiologists. Weingarten said yes.
 - Joyce asked Weingarten if the AFT employs immunologists. Weingarten said yes.
 - Joyce asked Weingarten if the AFT employs infectious disease specialists. Weingarten said yes, the ATF has industrial hygienists.
 - Joyce asked Weingarten if the AFT has any board-certified pediatric infectious disease specialists on its payroll. Weingarten said ATF consults with board-certified pediatric infectious disease specialists but does not have any on payroll.
 - Joyce asked Weingarten if ATF has employed anyone with experience treating novel coronaviruses. Weingarten said only to the available extent.
- **Rep. Jill Tokuda (D-HI)** asked Weingarten how proposed budget cuts to childcare funding, educator supports, nutrition feeding programs, and other critical safety net programs will contribute to a whole new generation of children experiencing devastating learning loss.
 - Weingarten said children in schools need to be fed nutritious meals to curb obesity, and schools need more funding, not less.
 - Tokuda asked Weingarten how budget cuts would disproportionately impact the ability to overcome learning loss, address mental health issues, and impact academic achievement in rural communities. Weingarten said less funding would lead to fewer guidance counselors, which would be detrimental.
- **Rep. Ronny Jackson (R-TX)** emphasized that data showed children were unlikely to become infected, spread infection, or be negatively affected by COVID-19 and that school closures were detrimental to their well-being. Jackson criticized the AFT for editing the CDC's guidance on school reopening, suggesting that the Biden administration and CDC should not have entertained their suggestions. Jackson accused the AFT of being politically motivated and focused on exerting influence, using relief funds for leftist programs, and increasing teacher salaries while they stayed

home. Jackson expressed disbelief that Weingarten still had her job, calling her actions disgraceful and urging her to take responsibility for the impact on children.

- **Rep. Rich McCormick (R-GA)** expressed his respect for teachers and shared his experience as a parent and a healthcare worker during the pandemic. He agreed with Weingarten's previous statement that remote education didn't work and emphasized its negative impact on students. McCormick asked whether she would admit that, in retrospect, teachers should have returned to in-person schooling earlier to avoid leaving students behind.
 - Weingarten said she regretted the fear surrounding the situation and acknowledged that various things could have been done better.
- **Rep. Mike Garcia (D-CA)** expressed gratitude for the work of teachers and acknowledged the difficult circumstances they faced during the pandemic. Garcia asked Weingarten about the lessons learned from the pandemic and what Congress should do to ensure schools can reopen faster in the future.
 - Weingarten said several things were crucial: clear information, clear guidance, and trusting the scientists. She highlighted the importance of vaccination, testing, and good ventilation.
 - Garcia mentioned the success of Long Beach Unified School District's early vaccination of teachers, which led to faster reopening of schools. Garcia asked Weingarten if vaccine hesitancy among some members of Congress hurt the reopening of schools or caused concerns for teachers. Weingarten responded that in January 2021, she co-authored an op-ed stating that schools could reopen even without vaccination if proper testing were in place.
- **Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA)** asked Weingarten about her qualifications, including whether she is a medical doctor, a mother, or a teacher.
 - Weingarten confirmed she is not a medical doctor, is a mother by marriage, and is currently on leave from her teaching position.
 - Greene criticized Weingarten's recommendations to the CDC regarding remote work options for teachers during the pandemic and argued that none of the advice had to do with stopping the spread of COVID-19. Greene asserted that children suffered from school closures, with increased rates of suicide, anxiety, depression, and diagnoses of gender dysphoria. Greene concluded that Weingarten should admit she is a political activist rather than a teacher, mother, or medical doctor.

Rep. Mike Garcia (D-CA) said that Greene's attacks on the witness were unacceptable and her remarks should be removed from the record, taking a specific issue with Greene's jab at Weingarten's motherhood. Chairman Robert Wenstrup (R-OH) recognized Garcia's point of order but noted that it did not violate House rules.

- **Rep. Jim Jordan (R-OH)** asked Weingarten whether parents or teachers care more about a child's education.
 - Weingarten stated that parents and teachers care about children's education and should work together as partners.
 - Jordan asked Weingarten about an op-ed she reposted and praised, which claimed that parents do not have the right to shape their children's school curriculum. Weingarten clarified that she disagreed with the headline of the op-ed.
 - Jordan asked whether parents have a right to shape their children's curriculum. Weingarten agreed that parents have a right to play a role in their children's education.

- Jordan asked Weingarten to speak about her statement that "extremist politicians" have undermined teachers and schools, and Weingarten implied that Greene was one such politician.
- Jordan asked Weingarten if she knew of a statement made by Terry McAuliffe, a candidate for governor in Virginia, saying that parents should not be telling schools what to teach. Weingarten confirmed that she disagreed with the statement and had called McAuliffe to express her disagreement. Jordan pointed out that Weingarten's organization still endorsed McAuliffe and made a significant ad buy for his campaign.
- Jordan asked Weingarten who started culture wars in education. Weingarten said her references to culture wars were about book banning and preventing teachers from teaching rather than being specifically about social issues.
- **Rep. Jimmy Gomez (D-CA)** asked how adequately funding American childcare benefits children's development and growth.
 - Weingarten responded that COVID affected adults who provide essential services for children's development. When community schools or guidance services are cut, kids suffer. The AFT wanted to be in school; they just also needed teachers to be safe.

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