

Date: July 26, 2023

RE: House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Hearing: “Generational Learning Loss: How Pandemic School Closures Hurt Students”

Overview:

On Wednesday, July 26, 2023, the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education held a hearing titled “Generational Learning Loss: How Pandemic School Closures Hurt Students”.

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

Witness Panel

- [Dr. Nat Malkus](#), Senior Fellow and Deputy Director, Education Policy Studies, American Enterprise Institute
- [Ms. Mary-Patricia Wray](#), Parent
- [Mr. Derrell Bradford](#), President, 50CAN: the 50-State Campaign for Achievement Now
- [Ms. Catherine Truitt](#), Superintendent, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

Opening Statements

Chairman Aaron Bean (R-FL)

- The American education system has gone back in time and the nation’s children are behind following the pandemic.
- Math, reading, history, and civics scores for 8th graders are at their lowest levels in two decades.
- When examining performance data along demographic/class lines, minority and low-income students suffered the most.
- For some, school closures did not mean online classes, rather closures meant babysitting, childcare, or no school.
- Spikes in negative health consequences in children have been associated with the pandemic and school closures.
- Mass school closures during the pandemic should be considered one of the greatest education failures in U.S. history.
- Research shows school unions disproportionately prolonged school closures.
- The data shows pandemic severity did not dictate school closures.
- Power in the education system needs to be decentralized.

Ranking Member Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR)

- Republicans’ legislative priorities do not back up their claim that they want to put the education system back on track.
- Uncertainty surrounding the pandemic and a lack of data at the onset of the pandemic served as basis for school closures across the country.
- President Trump politicized the pandemic response.
- The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) helped bridge the digital divide and get students safely back in schools.
- The Republican approach has been to fund unaccountable private schools and leave public schools out to dry. Democrats are concerned with Republicans’ proposals to eliminate funding for public schools.

- During this discussion, it is important to keep in mind all of the negative outcomes and statistics from the pandemic, specifically in the area of health/hospitalizations/deaths.

Witness Testimony

Dr. Nat Malkus, Senior Fellow and Deputy Director, Education Policy Studies, American Enterprise Institute

- The pandemic was the largest shock to student learning, with effects greatly surpassing the metrics of Hurricane Katrina.
- Achievement gaps widened during the pandemic, exacerbated by school closures which policymakers had control over.
- Schools reopening was statistically unrelated to pandemic data but more aligned with political affiliation.
- In April 2021, 1/3 of school districts that voted for Biden had reopened while 60% of school districts that voted for Trump had reopened.
- The connection between closures and learning loss is clear. The third of districts that were most open during 2020-2021 experienced about 44% learning loss while the third of districts least open during 2020-2021 experienced about 60% learning loss.
- Extended school closures were not the only factor affecting learning loss. Inconsistent quarantines, spikes in absenteeism, and disruptions in hybrid learning all affected learning loss.
- The pace of student learning/progress is too slow and is way behind pre-pandemic rates.
- Parents will not be aware of their child's learning loss if teachers reflect business as usual. Grades are not great indicators.
- Learning loss cannot be treated as a past event.

Ms. Mary-Patricia Wray, Parent

- Her school district quickly adapted to set forth a plan for her child with a disability. Remote learning shielded her child from COVID which could have threatened his health as an immunocompromised individual.
- Children's lives were on the line during the pandemic.
- Achievement gaps existed before the pandemic and Congress has not addressed the systematic nature of the problem.
- The pandemic exacerbated educational issues that existed before the pandemic.
- Cutting public school funding would be detrimental to America's students.

Mr. Derrell Bradford, President, 50CAN: the 50-State Campaign for Achievement Now

- Teacher union strikes during the pandemic denied learning to students.
- Teacher unions saw the pandemic as an opportunity to exploit a disrupted education system to advance their priorities during a Presidential election year. Teacher strikes were not about COVID, they were about pay.
- Learning loss is a generational tragedy.
- Money given during pandemic relief was not properly used to address student educational challenges. Instead, many schools decided to update facilities instead of funding initiatives to get students back on track. There was no oversight or accountability.
- Catholic schools should be examined and commemorated for their role in safely keeping schools open.

Ms. Catherine Truitt, Superintendent, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

- In preparation for an influx of funds, North Carolina launched the Office of Learning Recovery and Acceleration (OLRA).
- The OLRA executed a student-level analysis on learning loss and levels which enabled the state to adequately direct funds to programs, initiatives, and areas of need.
- The OLRA has produced reports updating state and local leaders on areas of strengths and weaknesses in the recovery process.
- North Carolina has followed the data in their targeted recovery efforts and has already seen performance levels increase in every subject area, particularly in middle school math.

Question and Answer

Chairman Aaron Bean (R-FL)

- Chairman Bean asked Malkus what the data collected showed about school closures during the summer of 2020.
 - Malkus said the very early positions the district took stood the test of time, even as COVID levels fluctuated. Levels of masking laws during the 2020 summer at the county level predicted the length of school closures in the same counties. This shows position taking occurred early on and did not waiver throughout the pandemic.
- Bean asked Bradford if it is a true statement that teachers' unions fought the hardest for schools to reopen during the pandemic.
 - Bradford said he believes the evidence is clear that in many areas, teachers' unions denied students education for a long period. He believes the statement is not true.
- Bean asked Truitt if she believes that students can make up for pandemic learning loss.
 - Truitt said that it is going to take years for recovery and some students may never recover. She noted that this is partially because many students were already behind before the pandemic. The good news is that recovery is possible.

Ranking Member Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR)

- Ranking Member Bonamici asked Wray how Congressional budget cuts to several education initiatives would affect her students and their peers in their educational recovery.
 - Wray said community family engagement is one of the most important educational initiatives to fund and cutting it would be detrimental. Most families cannot turn to private catholic schools as an alternative, so Congress needs to better fund public options.
- Bonamici asked Wray how as a parent, she responds to the argument that school closings were too long or unnecessary.
 - Wray said that causing educators and students to choose between their life or education is not American.
- Bonamici asked Wray how a well-prepared and effective teacher makes a difference for her children academically, socially, and emotionally.
 - Wray noted the teacher mentioned in her testimony was let go because she was villainized for asking for more resources, funding, and pay. Because this teacher was let go, she will not know the effects of a well-prepared and effective teacher on her children.

Rep. Mary E. Miller (R-IL)

- Rep. Miller asked Malkus why it was the case that more Democrat-led counties had prolonged school closures and how can prolonged closures be prevented in the future.

- Malkus said he believes this was the outcome because many had a fear to lead. He noted that public opinion drove decisions from public leaders. It was found that public opinion changed when schools were reopened. Malkus said that going forward it is necessary to properly balance the weight of health guidance and child/student benefit, given data following the pandemic.
- Miller asked Malkus why he thinks Democrats pushed for policies that they knew would increase learning loss.
 - Malkus said there was a second pandemic, a fear to open schools. Schools could have been opened safely much earlier, as noted by the CDC and its guidance, however, fear prevented action.

Rep. Jamaal Bowman (D-NY)

- Rep. Bowman discussed his view on the hearing subject. He said that “learning loss” is an inaccurate term and the view towards learning gaps from the pandemic should be called “learning disruptions”. Bowman asked Wray to respond to his commentary in writing.

Rep. Nathaniel Moran (R-TX)

- Rep. Moran asked Malkus if the statement from Rep. Bowman, “If schools were open then more people would have died from COVID”, is backed by data.
 - Malkus said the evidence shows that open schools were not spreading COVID because they had measures in place to protect students and teachers. He noted a few exceptions but argued they did not have proper mitigation measures.
- Moran asked Malkus if he generally saw school districts provide exemptions and resources for students who were at higher risk for COVID.
 - Malkus said yes.
- Moran asked Malkus if he generally agrees that schools were able to accommodate the generic student and the minority of students who were unable to attend because they were high-risk.
 - Malkus said yes.
- Moran asked the panel if anyone disagrees with the notion that the pandemic will increase the learning gap between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students. (No panelist responded.) Moran followed up, asking the panel if anyone disagrees with the statement that school closures and increased learning gaps will likely lead to increased poverty in the future.
 - Wray said the description of the variables as a correlation is incorrect and the use of the word correlation has been improperly used throughout the hearing.
- Moran asked Wray if she believes that there is a correlation between education and poverty.
 - Wray said yes.

Rep. Jahana Hayes (D-CT)

- Rep. Hayes discussed her frustration with Republicans on the panel and committee. She said she does not understand why Republicans want to cut education funding while also trying to help students recover. She said she does not understand the argument that teachers’ unions are to blame while simultaneously desiring for them to be back in classrooms. Hayes rhetorically asked the panel if schools should not shut down if another pandemic occurs.

Rep. Burgess Owens (R-UT)

- Rep. Owens discussed his appreciation for underserved communities in education now being highlighted. He said he hopes that children and their education will never be pawns again in a fight

between teachers' unions and governments. Owens asked Malkus to discuss the learning loss data for minority and poor students.

- Malkus said there are three factors to examine.
 - First, there was a notable downturn in student achievement around 2013.
 - Second, closures were particularly difficult for poor and minority students.
 - Third, school closures were prolonged for poor and minority students.

Rep. Mark DeSaulnier (D-CA)

- Rep. DeSaulnier asked Wray to speak about how families need to connect with superintendents, teachers, and counselors following the pandemic.
 - Wray said it is difficult for parents to navigate the complex opportunities available. She said family engagement centers are essential points for parents to find resources.
- DeSaulnier asked Wray what cutting funding to family engagement centers would mean for parents of disabled students.
 - Wray said it would mean that legislators do not care about her child's learning.

Rep. Virginia Foxx (R-NC)

- Rep. Foxx asked Truitt what she would say to blue states that argue they cannot address pandemic learning loss without additional money from the Federal government.
 - Truitt said the OLRA assisted rural school districts, with limited professional staff, in their planning and spending of federal money to address learning loss.
- Foxx asked Malkus how local leaders can ensure resources are accessible to students/families.
 - Malkus said teachers are best equipped but political leaders need to use the bully pulpit to inform citizens about the issue and how it should be addressed with existing funds from pandemic relief. He noted his understanding of the hesitancy to spend more money after outcomes from pandemic relief.
- Foxx asked Bradford how public school choice can aid student education recovery post-pandemic.
 - Bradford said that no school is going to work for every child and a school choice system should be desired to address the learning loss issue.

Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA)

- Rep. Scott asked Truitt to explain why student-level data was important to collect during their analysis.
 - Truitt said North Carolina collected this data to give lawmakers the best possible data to make decisions. She said it also helped give administrators data to help guide their approach to addressing learning loss in specific subject areas.
- Scott asked Truitt what kind of interventions she recommended for students most in need.
 - Truitt said she recommended summer bridge academies for students transitioning from elementary to middle school and middle to high school, math boot camps, tutoring, and teacher professional development.
- Scott asked Truitt if these programs cost money.
 - Truitt said yes and that she wanted to let the committee know that her districts are still sitting on 447 million of their SR3 funds.
- Scott asked Truitt if North Carolina is continuing testing to see where students are.
 - She said yes.
- Scott asked Truitt for recommendations to improve education outside of the pandemic.

- Truitt said education systems do not need to run away from accountability and that it is important to know via standardized testing where students have gaps. Districts need to be held accountable if their students are not being prepared for college, career, and technical education.
- Scott asked Truitt if she saw that many schools needed to update/fix their ventilation systems during the pandemic.
 - Truitt said yes.

Rep. Kevin Riley (R-CA)

- Rep. Riley asked Malkus if learning losses were the result of the pandemic or the responses to it.
 - Malkus said some of the learning loss was the result of the pandemic, but another chunk of the learning loss was the result of school closure policies.
- Riley asked Malkus which state did the worst in terms of reopening schools.
 - Malkus said he did not know. (Riley interjected and said it was California).
- Riley asked Malkus what the state of the evidence was surrounding the pandemic school opening decision-making in the Fall of 2020.
 - Malkus said there was a pandemic fog, but some states were blazing ahead without issue.
- Riley asked Malkus what the evidence/data said about the harms of keeping students out of school by March 2021.
 - Malkus said by March 2021, the CDC had said that it was safe to reopen schools with mitigation strategies.
- Riley asked Malkus his thoughts on the Governor of California sending his kids to a private school in person while denying in-person learning to state public schools.
 - Malkus said he will not comment on the Governor of California's decision-making but will note that he moved his kids to private school because public schools would not reopen.
- Riley asked Malkus to summarize the harm states like California did to students by keeping schools shut down going into 2021.
 - Malkus said he believes prolonged shutdowns will dramatically change the trajectory of kids within those schools/districts.