

**Opening Statement of Dr. Penny Schwinn
Nominee for Deputy Secretary of Education
Senate HELP Committee**

Thank you, Chairman Cassidy, Ranking Member Sanders, and members of the committee. It's an honor to appear before you as a nominee for Deputy Secretary of Education. I am grateful for the support of my family, friends and former colleagues. And I am grateful to President Donald J. Trump and Secretary McMahon for the confidence they've placed in me and for the ambitious vision they are casting for the future of America's education system.

Education is foundational to our nation's success—economically, socially, and strategically. It is also deeply personal. I come from a family of teachers, and for us, education isn't just a profession—it's a calling. I began as a high school teacher and have served as a charter school founder, assistant superintendent, elected board member, and state chief across five very different states - and I'm also a mom. And it's through that lens that I feel the most urgency and responsibility to deliver better outcomes for every child in this country.

After twenty plus years in education, I've learned that the most significant difference between policies that work and policies that do not work is that those that work elevate the needs of students over the needs of systems.

We are in a moment of crisis. According to the Nation's Report Card, just 31% of fourth graders and 30% of eighth graders are proficient in reading. In math, only 40% of fourth graders and 28% of eighth graders are proficient. Reading scores have dropped **five points since 2019**, and math remains below pre-pandemic levels. These numbers are not just statistics—they represent millions of students who are falling behind in a global economy that can't afford it. The U.S. already faces a shortage of 1.7 million workers. Education is not a side issue—it's a national imperative.

What works is what delivers results. When states are empowered, we see progress. In Tennessee, we achieved real outcomes because we had the flexibility to tailor solutions. Rather than being bound by rigid funding categories, we prioritized what mattered most for our students.

And it worked. Tennessee became one of only two states to rank in the top 25 on all 16 NAEP indicators. Our statewide literacy gains—fueled by training 30,000 educators, supporting 178,000 families, and aligning teacher prep with the science of reading—led to the highest growth in English Language Arts since the adoption of new standards.

We didn't stop there: 100,000 students gained access to industry credentials, dual credit, and apprenticeships. Dual enrollment in technical colleges rose 71%. We tripled STEM school designations, mandated K–12 computer science, and closed key gaps in AP outcomes.

We also made smart use of ESSER funds. Georgetown University's Edunomics Lab found Tennessee was one of just four states with a measurable return on investment. That didn't happen by accident. It was the result of prioritizing students, trusting local leadership, and focusing relentlessly on results.

If we want to change these numbers, we must be willing to measure them. That starts with strong assessments and honest accountability. We must continue to raise the bar and give families clear, accurate information about how their children are doing—where they are excelling and where we, as adults, must do better. If we're serious about outcomes, we must be serious about measuring them. Assessment is not about bureaucracy—it's about truth. And families deserve the truth.

None of that would have been possible without Tennessee's incredible parents, teachers, school leaders, elected officials, and community partners. This legacy belongs to them. I was honored to serve, but the results came from local action, shared responsibility, and accountability. They made the work real. And that spirit of shared ownership and local excellence is the path forward.

The President and Secretary have made clear: we must empower states, expand choice, and raise reading outcomes. I am honored to support that mission—not just as a policymaker, but as a mom, a teacher, and a lifelong believer in what's possible for our children.

I will never forget the students I met in my mother's classroom—still learning to read in the fourth and fifth grades. That was nearly 35 years ago. Too little has changed. We owe it to them to finally keep our promise.

I pledge to work tirelessly—for them, and for every student in this country.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to your questions.