

Written Testimony of Mr. Richard Barrera
For hearing titled “Choice and Literacy: Empowering Families for Better Educational Results”

U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
Subcommittee on Education and the American Family

July 23, 2025

Good afternoon, my name is Richard Barrera, and I am a Trustee on the San Diego Unified School Board, where I have served for the past seventeen years. I am honored to have been elected five times by the voters in my district, representing a portion of the City of San Diego made up of diverse, hard working families, many of whom are immigrants to this country. San Diego Unified, with over 96,000 students served by district schools and another 17,000 students attending district authorized charter schools, is the second largest school district in California, and among the largest school districts in the nation.

The question before this committee today is a fundamental one for the future of American education. ***In order to improve student outcomes, should we increase investment in our public, neighborhood schools, or should we abandon them in order to subsidize private schools?*** Our experience in San Diego, backed by decades of research nationally, offers a clear answer. ***When we prioritize investment in our public neighborhood schools, students perform better and rise to meet their potential.*** When we take precious resources away from our public neighborhood schools and shift them to private schools, students perform worse across the board, and we end up wasting taxpayer dollars in a way that benefits wealthy families at the expense of all other students.

San Diego Unified offers a compelling case for investment in our public, neighborhood schools. On the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress, commonly known as the "Nation's Report Card," ***our District ranked first in literacy among both fourth and eighth grade students compared to all large districts*** across the nation participating in the Trial Urban District Assessment.

This follows a consistent period in the decade leading up to the pandemic, where San Diego Unified was named the fastest-improving urban district in the nation by the Council of Great City Schools, which represents 69 of the country's largest urban public school districts. San Diego Unified “blew the socks off” the NAEP exam, according to Great City Schools. “No other city in the country saw gains in both grades in reading and math like San Diego.”

A study by the Learning Policy Institute found students of color in San Diego Unified schools academically outperformed their peers statewide. At a time of widening

achievement gaps in the country as a whole, and the State of California, African American students in San Diego Unified were able to beat the odds thanks to their own hard work, the high standards set by school leaders and the resources provided by a school system that is committed to equity. These gains are reflected in better test scores, rising graduation rates and college readiness, and ultimately, we hope they will be reflected in better life outcomes.

The UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools found the gains at San Diego Unified were directly attributable to the added investments San Diego Unified made in high-needs communities. At the same time, San Diego Unified balanced its budget every year and improved its standing in the bond market due to a sound fiscal policy.

Coming out of the pandemic, we have been nationally recognized for quickly getting our students back to pre-pandemic achievement levels.

“The district’s strong performance on NAEP is a testament to the board, administration, and staff remaining steadfast in the pursuit of their goals for improving outcomes for all students in the district,” according to Executive Director of the Council of the Great City Schools, Raymond C. Hart. Preliminary data from the just completed academic year points to record high growth in literacy for our students on the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, our state's version of the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments, with particularly strong growth among our Latino and socio economically disadvantaged students.

The success of San Diego Unified's students over the past decade and a half extends beyond literacy rates. We also rank at or near the top nationally on the NAEP in math, and among large urban districts in California, we rank number one in literacy, math, science, graduation and college readiness rates. Our students achieve these outcomes despite significant challenges. 60% of our students are socio economically disadvantaged, 17% are learning English as a new language, and 15% of our students have special needs.

How did we get here, and how will we continue to improve? ***We have consistently set high expectations for our students, prioritized investment in our neighborhood schools with the highest needs, invested in our classroom educators, and successfully implemented evidence based instructional strategies.*** Key efforts have included:

* In 2009, we established completion of the course sequence necessary for admission to the University of California as the default graduation requirement for all students. Despite predictions by some that we were setting the bar too high, the overall graduation rate for the class of 2025 will exceed 90%. We have seen college eligibility rates rise by over 50% for all students, while nearly doubling for Latino and Black students;

- * We have prioritized resource allocation to our neighborhood schools most in need, allowing these schools to lower class sizes, improve nursing and counseling ratios, and invest in evidence-based practices including literacy resource teachers, time for educators to engage in meaningful professional learning communities, and real time data collection on student progress;
- * We have invested directly in our classroom educators. Analysis by the California Teachers Association identifies San Diego Unified as a model district when it comes to spending money in the classroom, rather than on district administration, outside consultants and expensive panaceas marketed by Big Tech. Coming out of the recession in 2009 to 2012, educator salaries in our district have risen by nearly 40%, while we have maintained fully paid family health care for our employees. A teacher in our district who began their career two decades ago with a salary under \$40,000 per year now earns nearly \$130,000 year. The result is that 96% of our teachers return to our district each year, as compared to national data showing more than 50% of teachers leaving the profession within the first five years. That means that when we invest in evidence based professional development strategies that build the capacity of our educators to teach literacy, our students benefit from teachers who get better every year;
- * Taxpayers in our community have invested heavily in our neighborhood schools. Since 2008, we have passed four local bond measures, each receiving well over 60% voter approval, for a total of \$11.5 billion dollars. The result is that our neighborhood schools are equipped with state-of-the-art facilities and technology that send a clear message to our students - we care about you and believe in what you can achieve.

While San Diego Unified's results are exceptional, they are hardly unexpected. [Research consistently shows](#) that when more money is spent on education, especially for students from low-income families, achievement and graduation rates improve, along with life outcomes such as employment and wages. [Studies](#) demonstrate that infusions of additional money into schools lead to improved student academic achievement and outcomes later in life and validate that funding cuts lead to a decline in student outcomes.

Contrast this investment strategy in neighborhood public schools with the scheme to siphon off public dollars to private schools. Under the recently passed Reconciliation package, private school subsidies are set to increase by 700%, to \$58 billion. The 90% of American children who attend public schools - including 95% of Special Education students - will receive no benefit from this giveaway.

The real winners under privatization schemes are wealthy families, who were already paying for their students to attend an elite school. Early data from states like Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, New Hampshire, and Wisconsin show that the majority of students – [65 percent to 95 percent](#) – who participate in private school voucher programs never attended a public school in the first place. Between [70-80%](#) of the students benefitting from voucher programs in Arizona, Missouri, and Wisconsin are already in private schools. A 2023 analysis of Arizona's universal private school voucher data shows that 52 percent of participating students live in the state's [highest income zip codes](#), and students in the highest income zip codes benefit ten times more than students in the lowest income zip codes. Analysis of data from Arizona, Louisiana, and Virginia found more than half of the state voucher tax credits are claimed by [families with incomes over \\$200,000](#), including 60 percent of families claiming the credit in Arizona, 87 percent of families in Virginia, and 99 percent of families in Louisiana. Taxpayers in these states are subsidizing the students of wealthy families to attend unaccountable private schools, which can - [and often do](#) - raise tuition, making it further out of reach for working class families.

The Reconciliation package created the first ever national, private school voucher program, providing a dollar-for-dollar tax credit worth up to \$1,700 for individual taxpayers or \$3,400 for those filing jointly for donations to scholarship granting organizations (SGOs).

Private schools in my hometown, San Diego, charge between \$20,000 and \$50,000 per year in tuition. If you give working families in my community a \$1,700 private school tax credit, you aren't giving them a choice. You're creating a crisis.

Private school voucher programs hurt, rather than improve student outcomes. A study on [the Louisiana Scholarship Program](#), a voucher program, demonstrated a reduction in achievement in reading, social studies among participants. Recent, experimental studies of private school vouchers in [Louisiana](#), [Indiana](#), [Ohio](#), and [Washington, D.C.](#) show students experienced significant declines in their academic performance. In one study, the impacts of vouchers on learning loss proved to be [worse than the harms](#) to academic outcomes caused by Hurricane Katrina and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Inflicting this level of damage to students also turns out to be expensive. The voucher program in Arizona contributed to a [\\$1.4 Billion budget shortfall](#). It is hard to imagine a less fiscally responsible decision than putting public funds into largely unregulated private entities. Research into the Milwaukee privatization program, for example, found that 40% of private voucher schools [failed or closed down](#) within the program's first 25 years.

It is worth noting that even when parents want to attend an elite private school, those schools are the ones with the real power to choose - not the parents. Private schools are under no obligation to follow federal civil rights laws or admit students with disabilities. They get to pick and choose which students to educate, which often leaves out students with disabilities and the lowest-income students who cannot afford private schools even with vouchers.

Fortunately, voters understand implicitly the unfairness of privatization programs. In contrast to the four bond measures that voters overwhelmingly approved in San Diego over the last seventeen years, since 1967 [state ballot initiatives](#) on private school vouchers and school choice have been consistently rejected by voters. Kentucky's amendment to the state constitution to allow for public dollars to go to private schools was defeated in all [120 counties](#). According to a 2024 poll, over [two-thirds of voters](#) prefer increasing public school funding over increasing funding for private vouchers, including Republicans voters.

The idea that public schools are afraid of competition is false. In San Diego, we have a robust choice system that allows students to find an academic program that fits their individual needs. We have magnet schools, charter schools, community schools, and traditional neighborhood schools. San Diego also has its fair share of elite private schools, but they are forced to compete against a high-quality public system.

In my community, I've seen that the real choice parents want is the choice to attend a high-quality public school in their own neighborhood. Cindy Marten, our former Superintendent, is now leading school reform efforts in Delaware, so I congratulate Sen. Blunt Rochester and the people of her state on their judgment. As an elementary school principal at an inner-city school in the City Heights neighborhood I represent on the school board, where 100 percent of the students qualify for free and reduced meals, Secretary Marten recognized the importance of investing in the whole child. She concerned herself with whether a child had a home, had enough to eat and access to healthcare, so that every child arrived at school ready to learn. These lessons have a particular relevance to our topic today - literacy—because it turns out that literacy is highly impacted by home life, in things like time spent reading out of school.

This is the kind of caring, compassionate - and high achieving - public school system that I am proud to represent, but we are hardly alone. Thomas Jefferson public high school in Alexandria has the highest SAT scores in the nation; Davidson public school in Reno is the top-scoring high school for the ACTs, and the Bronx High School of Science has produced numerous Nobel Laureates.

Key to our success in San Diego is democratic accountability. I don't have to tell any of the members of this committee who have served on a school board that we are very close to our community. Voters can elect and unelect us depending on the results we achieve for our students. Privatizing public education would make schools less democratic and less responsive to parents.

I am not here representing a well-heeled, ivory tower think tank, free to pontificate about ideological or political theories unsupported by or even contradicted by real world evidence. I am an elected school board member, responsible for the education of over 100,000 students in my community. Representing my community, I respectfully now hold you, the members of this Committee and your colleagues in Congress, accountable. To improve literacy outcomes for students, you need to do the following.

- Fully fund the IDEA to give our students with disabilities, and all of our students, the future they deserve. Fully fund the IDEA - don't turn it into a block grant for states to use as a piggy bank the way President Trump has proposed in next year's budget. Since the inception of the IDEA over 50 years ago, you have consistently failed to meet your responsibility to fund 40% of the costs of special education. Today you are funding less than 10%, which means for states and districts across the nation, we are picking up the costs of your irresponsibility out of our general fund. In my district, that means we are spending hundreds of millions of dollars each year that could otherwise provide not only more support for students with special needs, but more support for the strategies that have proven to increase literacy outcomes for all students. A first step towards fully funding IDEA would be to redirect the \$58 billion now targeted for the private voucher giveaway to students with disabilities.
- Join the 32 Senate Democrats and 10 Senate Republicans who have called on the Administration to release \$5.48 Billion dollars illegally impounded in direct defiance of Congress. We should be robustly funding, not removing existing literacy tools like Title II which support professional development for teachers and help improve instruction.
- Release the \$2.19 billion appropriated by Congress and signed by the President to improve the effectiveness of teachers and school leaders and reduce class size.
- Release the \$1.38 billion appropriated by Congress and signed by the President to fund STEM education, accelerated learning courses, college and career

counseling, school-based mental health services, and improved school technology.

- Release the \$890 million appropriated by Congress and signed by the President to help English language learners become proficient in English. I remember a time when wanting new Americans to speak English was a bipartisan goal. It should be again.
- Release the \$715 million appropriated by Congress and signed by the President to help prepare adults and out-of-school youth for success in the workforce.
- Release the \$376 million appropriated by Congress and signed by the President to educate migrant children, many of whom work alongside their parents in our fields picking the foods that fill our plates at every meal.

These are concrete steps you can take to improve literacy outcomes across the country. There are others.

- Keep the culture wars out of our schools. Quit trying to divide us and censor us.
- Tell the President to stop making students, and their families, too afraid to come to school. Removing key enforcement guardrails in our immigration system will not make us safer and it won't improve student outcomes. Can you imagine being a second grade student, trying to learn how to read and at the same time wondering whether your best friend will be in school tomorrow, or whether you will see your parents when you get home? These fear tactics are increasingly stripping parents of their rights to attend school in person, pushing students back into cramped bedrooms where they take classes on laptops. None of us want that.
- One last thing to improve our schools - as our young people cry out again and again - do something about gun violence on campus. Do something. I come from the district that was the site of what many consider the first school shooting - the Cleveland Elementary / "I don't like Mondays" attack in 1979. I walk into every Board meeting past the memorial to the public school workers who gave their lives that day protecting students.

This is what you can do for our public schools, for our children and for our future. You can do your jobs, because the women and men who teach our children every day are doing theirs.

Thank you.