

**Testimony Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, &
Pensions, Subcommittee on Education & the American Family
Hearing on “Choice and Literacy: Empowering Families for Better
Educational Results”**

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Chairman Tuberville and Ranking Member Blunt Rochester, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Virginia Gentles, and I am the parent of two school-aged children who have attended both public and private schools. I have worked in education policy at the state, provincial, and federal levels, and I currently serve as the director of Education Freedom and Parental Rights at the Defense of Freedom Institute (DFI). I also host the [Freedom to Learn](#) podcast.

I applaud the HELP Committee’s focus on how our nation can achieve better educational results. You are well aware of our abysmal academic results. Too often, it seems that the K-12 education system conspires against hard-working teachers’ and students’ success. Today’s hearing recognizes the glimmers of hope: States across the country are improving results by empowering their families with education freedom and fully implementing robust literacy initiatives.

The severity of the nation’s academic crisis raises the question of what the appropriate role for the federal government should be. For the last 45 years, the U.S. Department of Education and its federal strings have shaped what states and districts can do. President Trump and Education Secretary Linda McMahon are pursuing the right path as they reduce the Department’s dominant role and move power over education back to states, local communities, and families.

DFI commends the administration’s plans to work with Congress to disperse the Department’s programs and core funding to other federal agencies, and we strongly support the new federal K-12 scholarship tax credit signed into law by President Trump earlier this month. Expanding education freedom nationwide



will incentivize schools to improve and empower parents to choose the educational setting that best suits their child's needs and learning style.

Our nation's poor results raise an issue we do not talk about enough: the pernicious influence of school unions. These politically powerful organizations strive to expand their partisan influence, raise funds, and control working conditions. They seem uninterested in improving student educational outcomes and often advocate for harmful policies. Schools stayed closed during the Covid era primarily because the unions have enormous political power while parents and students do not. The power imbalance must be rectified.

Abysmal Academic Outcomes

There is a popular misconception that the United States was the top education system in the world in 1979, the year President Jimmy Carter signed the law that created the U.S. Department of Education. As the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) began in 1995 and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) started in 2000, the source of this claim is murky. The United States [ranked 11th](#) out of the 12 participating countries in the First International Math Study (FIMS), which was conducted in 1964. And in 1983, the American K-12 system's "rising tide of mediocrity" was painfully detailed in the oft-cited [A Nation at Risk](#) report.

While there is no evidence that our K-12 education system was number one in the world decades ago, there is ample proof that we're far from it now.

The performance of students in the United States falls short in international academic comparisons. For example, America ranked 22nd out of 63 participating education systems for 4th-grade math, and 20th out of 45 countries for 8th-grade math, according to the latest [TIMSS results](#). (The U.S. ranked 12th in science for both grades.) Our TIMSS average math scores declined significantly after the Covid-era school closures, falling to 1995 levels, with widening gaps between scores for top and bottom-performing students. As Stanford economist Thomas Dee [observed](#), "This evidence that we are falling behind other nations over this period further underscores that the U.S. is failing to meet the challenges of academic recovery."



We ranked 26th out of 81 education systems in math in the most recent [PISA results](#). Our 2022 math score was the lowest recorded in PISA's history for the United States and below the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average. The U.S. ranked 6th in reading and 10th in science on the 2022 PISA.

Our international rankings are embarrassing, and our scores on the [National Assessment of Educational Progress \(NAEP\)](#), or Nation's Report Card, are heartbreaking. Despite the [vast sums](#) poured into the K-12 system (an average of \$18,614 per pupil in 2020-21), 70% of students aren't reading or doing math proficiently. Alarming, **40% of 8th graders lack basic math skills**. Eighth graders who score below basic on NAEP can't find the midpoint on a number line. Regrettably, **40% of 4th graders test below basic in reading**, meaning they can't recognize the main idea in a story or comprehend simple vocabulary.

Magical Thinking

A common refrain, and one that I've heard since my days as an appropriations L.A. in the 1990s, is that increased federal funding will solve the nation's academic woes. But it hasn't, and it won't. Until now, every association's, union's, and federal grantee's federal appropriations dreams have become reality. A steady stream of ever-increasing federal funding has flowed into the education system, including \$190 billion in Covid-era [supplemental emergency funds](#). While funding soared, American students continued to flail and fail.

Glimmers of Hope

Today's hearing provides an opportunity to tune out the lamentations of the unions and the federal funding addicts and focus on what can and should be done: **Empower parents with education options, embrace the science of reading, and free states from crushing federal administrative burdens.**

Resources and power must be returned to families and those closest to students, equipping them to make the best decisions for children. Expanding education freedom does just that.

After my school district closed schools for a year and a half, abandoned my daughter's Individualized Education Program (IEP), and fully embraced gender



ideology's harmful lies, my resolve to ensure that every student can access the education option that best meets his or her needs was strengthened. I'm not alone. Prolonged Covid-era closures and the cultural rot in too many schools awakened parents across the country. Legislators responded to parents' anger with the K-12 system by expanding educational options, introducing competitive pressure, and encouraging innovation.

States continue to lead the way in expanding education freedom. Just this year, Texas, Tennessee, Idaho, New Hampshire, and Wyoming have created or significantly expanded existing school choice programs. Sixteen states have so far created universal education freedom programs, close to 20 states offer parents education savings accounts (ESAs), and 35 states offer some type of education freedom option. Enrollment in these programs [doubled](#) from 2020 to 2025. Public school options are expanding, as well, with 47 states allowing charter schools and 16 states offering strong cross-district [open enrollment](#) opportunities.

Louisiana is the bright spot amidst the alarming 2024 NAEP scores, and the only state where 4th-grade reading scores exceeded pre-Covid results. The state implemented sensible, collaboratively-crafted literacy policies, such as banning debunked practices like three-cueing and requiring teachers and school leaders to be trained in the science of reading. As a result, Louisiana “led the country in 4th-grade literacy growth for two consecutive NAEP cycles... Our students with disabilities outpaced the national average. Our students from low-income homes outpaced the national average,” Louisiana State Superintendent of Education Cade Brumley [shared](#) on the *Freedom to Learn* podcast.

When I asked Tennessee education commissioner Lizzette Reynolds about her highest priorities for improving student outcomes, she [responded](#):

“[O]ur priorities are doing what parents expect of the system, right? They expect all our kids to learn the basics, to gain that foundational academic knowledge... It's also elevating choices and their voices so that they feel empowered to be able to decide where it is that their children are going to be served the best, whether it is in their traditional public school, a charter school, a private school, home school, and then maybe in the future in micro schools.”



These state-driven initiatives don't rely on the U.S. Department of Education. Freeing states from onerous federal regulatory and administrative burdens could fuel further innovations. As Commissioner Reynolds told me, "I would like to see the strings detached... I'm excited about the opportunities that can be afforded to us through really giving and devolving education back to the states."

One Big Beautiful Education Freedom Opportunity

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act, signed into law earlier this month, established a federal tax credit for donations to scholarships for K-12 students, a potentially transformative education freedom development. A 100% non-refundable scholarship tax credit is now part of the federal tax code. Individual taxpayers can receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for contributions up to \$1,700 to scholarship granting organizations (SGOs). In states that opt in to participate, SGOs can award scholarships to eligible students for a variety of K-12 education expenses, including tuition, tutoring, transportation, and therapies for students with disabilities. This is a significant step in the right direction and could open up educational opportunities and improve achievement for millions of students.

The Pernicious Influence of School Unions

School unions, including the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers' (AFT's) Public Education bargaining unit, and their state and local affiliates, undermine efforts to improve student outcomes. Unions prioritize dues-paying adults over children. Unions block student-centered priorities like expanding school choice and [implementing phonics-based literacy instruction](#). And unions push an extreme cultural agenda while funneling teachers' dues into the campaign coffers of political candidates, almost exclusively Democrats, who will do union leaders' bidding.

Union bosses refused to allow schools to open during the Covid era and sent fake coffins, obituaries, and funeral bills to policymakers who dared to cross them. In stark contrast to states like Florida that ignored union-fueled hysteria and opened schools, heavily-unionized states like New Jersey and California kept schools closed for over a year. Students' academic achievement, social development, and future



economic prospects were irreparably harmed. After schools reopened, chronic absenteeism rates doubled and classroom discipline deteriorated.

Other than being summoned before a House Oversight Committee [hearing](#) and lampooned on social media, AFT president Randi Weingarten has eluded responsibility and consequences for derailing the futures of a generation of students. Despite clips of NEA President Becky Pringle's boisterous annual representative assembly [speech](#) appearing each summer, she remains a largely unknown and wholly unaccountable figure. State and local union leaders fly under the radar, even though they have exacerbated the nation's academic crisis by [closing schools with strikes](#) across the country, eliminating afterschool tutoring programs in [Ohio](#), opposing science of reading training in [Indiana](#), defending three-cueing in [Minnesota](#), skipping school in [California](#), and demanding a shorter school year in [New Mexico](#).

The Defense of Freedom Institute's [Catching the Trash report](#) details how unions protect sexual predators in schools, a deeply disturbing subject worthy of its own congressional hearing.

Union leaders have remained unchecked for far too long. Feisty tweets and op-eds haven't stopped unions from blocking student-centered policies, convincing districts to hire *permanent* (unionized) staff with the \$190 billion *temporary* ESSER federal funds, pocketing dues, and amassing power. It is time for an aggressive policy strategy designed to strip the unions' harmful grip on K-12 education. Classroom teachers need to understand that they are no longer required to fund NEA and AFT political activities. Unions should be removed from the new teacher orientation process. Teachers should be able to easily opt out of the union. Policies must be put in place that limit unions' ability to disrupt learning with prolonged strikes, and politicians who quietly accept teacher union political support and then undermine reform efforts should be exposed.

Conclusion

The state of American K-12 education should be considered a national emergency. In too many places, our union-controlled and broken K-12 education system is robbing children of the future they deserve. Our country has seen enough academic failure and shameful results. To address the nation's academic



emergency, Congress should hold unions accountable, free up sensible states and districts to direct resources in a student-centered manner, and provide state leaders with flexibility to support students over bureaucratic systems.