

## **TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SENATE HELP COMMITTEE**

Hearing on Educational Choice

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Chairman Cassidy, Ranking Member Sanders, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today. I want to thank Senator Husted for the introduction, and for being a tireless champion of school choice, first in Ohio, and now on the national stage.

My name is Cris Gulacy-Worrel. I'm a founding team member and Vice President of Oakmont Education. My mother fled Communist Cuba with nothing but the clothes on her back and my father spent his career as an electrician at General Motors. They taught me that in America, where you start doesn't have to be where you end.

At Oakmont Education, we serve over 5,500 students across Ohio, Iowa, and Michigan, young people who are over-age, under-credited, and written off. Through our career technical education model, students earn industry-recognized credentials and engage in work-based learning that connects them directly to employers in their communities. Last year we graduated 1,309 students, and we have placed over 4,500 young people directly into the workforce over the last three years alone.

But Oakmont doesn't exist in isolation. We are one part of an education landscape that is rewriting what's possible for students and families across this country. And that's what I'm here to talk about, what school choice really is.

For too long, we've been told school choice is about ESAs or public charter schools and it's not, at least not exclusively. What we're really talking about is educational plurality, a system with room for many models, many approaches, and many pathways to success. Schools, of course, but also ed-tech platforms, curriculum providers, workforce partners, micro-schools, hybrid programs, and advocacy organizations fighting for families who have been ignored for too long. This space is far more diverse and dynamic than most people realize and it's growing everyday thanks to innovative people across America.

As a Center for Education Reform Fellow and Yass Prize awardee, I've had the privilege of seeing this national landscape up close, meeting the founders, visiting the schools, watching students transform. When states empower people and organizations to meet kids where they are, everyone wins. The innovative leaders in this space are sector-agnostic and student-centered. They don't ask what type of school a child needs. They ask what that child needs, and then they build it.

Look at SailFuture in Florida, putting foster youth, young people failed by every system that was supposed to protect them, on international sailing expeditions where they earn diplomas, Coast Guard credentials, and something harder to measure, hope.

Consider Arizona Autism Charter Schools, proving that neurodiverse learners don't just cope but thrive when someone finally builds a school designed specifically for them.

There's the Chesterton Schools Network, nearly 70 classical Catholic high schools across the country, affordable, parent-led, rooted in faith, offering families an option that simply didn't exist fifteen years ago.

Then there is the Rural Schools Innovation Zone, where five Texas public districts, rivals on the football field, came together to share career academies so rural students have the same access to welding certifications, healthcare pathways, and real opportunity as students in Houston or Dallas.

And it's not just schools. STEMuli Studios uses AI-powered gaming to connect students to career pathways, meeting young people exactly where they already are. This is what's possible when we let people build what students actually need, and these examples are just the tip of the iceberg.

I'm also honored to serve as Board Chair of Freedom to Choose Schools, a Black and brown-led advocacy organization co-founded by Dr. Howard Fuller and Dr. Steve Perry. We support families navigating their options and stand with the people building what their communities need. Because at the end of the day, it's not about which schools families choose, it's about having the option to choose at all.

What ties all of us together, across sectors, across states, across models, is one thing, students matter more than systems.

The opportunity we have is rare. We have the chance to help support an education marketplace that truly serves every child in America, not just the ones who fit the box. But that will never happen if we stay in our silos. No single sector can do this alone. No single organization. No single person. No single political party. But the good news is we don't have to start from scratch. Incredible people have been building solutions for decades. It's time we join them in making sure every child in America has access to a world-class education. This moment demands all of us.

Thank you. I welcome your questions.