

**Prepared Statement of Ranking Member Richard Burr**

**COVID-19 Response and Recovery: Supporting the Needs of Students in Higher Education & Lessons on Safely Returning to Campus**

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June 17, 2021

Chair Murray, thank you for holding this hearing.

The full reopening of our higher education system this fall is important. But, I'm very disappointed that we aren't focusing on reopening K-12 schools for every student first.

During the pandemic, many higher education institutions reopened by fall 2020, or converted to online education and hybrid models with relative ease.

And we know that distance learning in higher education works because we've seen it around the country for years.

So, I'm not really sure this is the right focus at this time.

Congress gave \$76 billion directly to higher education institutions through three laws passed during the pandemic, so they have plenty of money.

Yet as of the first week of June, \$53 billion allocated to institutions remains unspent. That's 70 percent of the money still sitting, waiting to go out the door.

This makes me question if such institutions truly needed all of this money.

As former Harvard president Derek Bok noted almost two decades ago, ‘universities share one characteristic with compulsive gamblers and exiled royalty: there is never enough money to satisfy their desires.’

With all of this free money, I’m really concerned about the lack of accountability in higher education.

The four-year graduation rate for a four-year degree is just 52 percent according to the National Center for Education Statistics. We kid ourselves and have decided to talk about the 6-year graduation rate instead, but that’s just a 62 percent completion rate.

So, we lie to moms and dads and potential grads about our expectations for completion and then lower those expectations so that 62 percent is somehow comforting.

Where I’m from 62 percent is a ‘D.’ I guess ‘D’ stands for diploma.

Yet tuitions keep rising.

Tuition and fees at four-year privates jumped 44 percent over the past decade and 55 percent at four-year public schools.

In sum: Graduation rates are terrible. Tuition is up. And debt is soaring.

Democrats have refused to engage in serious conversations about steps to change these trends. Instead, they just want to throw more money at the same problem. As if a new government program will somehow solve the problems the last 30 government programs created.

“Make college free” and “cancel debt” may be good liberal talking points, but back home in North Carolina we’ve already made community college very affordable, and in West Virginia and Arizona they’ve made community college tuition less than the average Pell Grant.

I’m not sure these so-called solutions make a lot of sense. And I don’t think we should reward states like New York and Massachusetts with their sky-high community college tuitions and give them a bunch of new taxpayer money.

On top of that, colleges and universities are themselves becoming more and more isolated from reality with regular assaults on free speech and returning to segregated programming, such as race specific graduation ceremonies and woke counseling sessions.

Plus institutions are harming society with near-communist style indoctrination that any idea that offends you must be banned from the classroom. Or at least any idea that offends you if you’re a liberal I should say.

Then there's the threat from China. Too many institutions of higher education rely on students from China paying full tuition to pad their books. But then these same institutions don't understand the concern about efforts by China's government to steal our intellectual property and subvert our research base.

That business model needs to change, and universities need to take the threat from China much more seriously.

Some Democrats are still toying with a student debt forgiveness scheme that is breathtaking in its embrace of reckless financial irresponsibility and has zero regard for the deep moral hazard they are creating for borrowers and institutions and taxpayers.

And the Biden administration still hasn't released any plans for returning to loan repayment this October, despite the fact that each year of the loan pause costs taxpayers more than the annual Pell Grant budget. All adults have had the chance to get vaccinated and get back to work. There's no reason to extend the non-payment at this point.

I agree that there should be a discussion about helping people who don't earn enough to make a full payment, there's a bipartisan solution that I worked on with Angus King called the REPAY Act. We're ready to get to work if only

someone from the White House would pick up the phone and call us. You should have my number or go to [burr.senate.gov](http://burr.senate.gov) if you need it.

But, back to the elephant in the room. Why aren't we having a discussion on K-12 reopening?

Are we concerned what the teachers' unions will say if we demand that schools fully reopen this fall? Last year Republicans were blocked in our efforts to demand school reopening, will we be blocked again when unions say they don't want to go back to school this fall?

Science tells us that children are much less likely than adults to experience severe illness as a result of COVID-19.

Science tells us that teachers can be safely vaccinated. Thanks to Operation Warp Speed and BARDA and FDA we got safe and effective vaccines approved in record time. And every adult in this country, including every teacher, has had plenty of time to get vaccinated at this point.

Science tells us that children over the age of 12 can be vaccinated, and hopefully this fall and winter the vaccines will be approved for younger children as well. And until then we know the steps to take to keep everyone safe for in person learning. So there's no excuse for schools not to be fully open this fall.

Today, we will hear about the very troubling mental health consequences of the pandemic on college students, who had more opportunity to get back to the classrooms than America's school children.

So, what do we know about younger students who saw massive surges of anxiety and depression because of unnecessary school closures?

As of April, less than half of all fourth grade Black, Hispanic, Asian, Economically Disadvantaged, and English Learning students were in fully in-person learning.

As of April, less than half of all 8th grade students nationwide were enrolled in fully in-person learning and less than a third of all Black, Hispanic, and Asian students eighth graders were in fully in-person learning.

Emergency department visits for suspected suicide attempts were up 22 percent in summer 2020 and 39 percent in winter 2021 for children aged 12-17.

Since the science shows us that schools can safely reopen, it's on the adults: the unions, the school boards, the superintendents that kept them closed. Most of our country's private schools stayed open. They made plans, they followed the science, and they served their children far better.

I'd strongly encourage every member of this Committee to read a powerful op-ed in yesterday's New York Times by Ms. Lelac Almagor about her experience teaching this last year in a charter school in Washington, D.C.

She speaks powerfully about the harm done by school closures to children. She speaks about the power of education.

It is as eloquent an essay as I've ever read and I hope you all will read it and reflect on it as well.

I yield back.