U.S. Senate
Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

Full Committee Hearing
The State of K–12 Education
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Written Statement of:
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Chairman Cassidy, Ranking Member Sanders, members of the Committee:

It's an honor to testify before you on what the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, tells us about the state of K–12 education.

As you know, Congress created the National Assessment of Educational Progress, often referred to as The Nation's Report Card, to show how U.S. students are doing academically; how this generation is faring compared to previous ones; and how different groups of students are progressing.

I serve as Vice Chair of the National Assessment Governing Board, which sets policy for NAEP. The Governing Board is bipartisan in our make-up and non-partisan in our work. Our members include governors, state legislators, principals, teachers, parents, assessment experts, and others as prescribed in statute. Our job is to ensure that this federal program meets the needs of state and local decision makers.

NAEP tests students in grades 4, 8, and 12 in math and reading, and in additional subjects determined by the Governing Board, such as civics, U.S. history, and science. Often referred to as the gold standard in large-scale assessment, it provides the only measures of K–12 student learning that are nationally representative and comparable over time. States and participating districts rely on NAEP to track their progress and compare their education systems with one another and the nation.

Last week, the NAEP program released the full complement of results from the 2024 Nation's Report Card, sharing national scores for 12th grade math and reading and 8th grade science. These scores follow the 4th and 8th grade math and reading scores released in January for the nation, states, and 26 of our largest urban school districts.

Together, these assessments show how student achievement has changed from 2019—shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted American education—to 2024.

Nationally, achievement fell significantly across every grade and subject assessed, and for nearly every student group, over this stretch. The 12th grade math and reading scores are now at the lowest levels ever reported, with only one third of students on track to graduate prepared for college-level work.

The declines are geographically pervasive: achievement in each state lags 2019 levels on at least one test. Just two states, Louisiana and Alabama, exceed their pre-pandemic scores in even a single grade and subject: Louisiana in 4th grade reading, and Alabama in 4th grade math.

And they are intensifying inequality: The declines have been greatest for our lowest-performing students—those in the bottom quarter of the achievement distribution. Meanwhile, despite the pandemic, our highest performing students are scoring nearly as well as ever.

Yet a singular focus on pandemic learning loss obscures as much as it reveals. Achievement was already falling before 2019 across all subjects NAEP assesses. In math, pandemic-era disruptions accelerated this downward trend. But the story for reading and U.S. history is one of steady deterioration since the early 2010s. There's no reason to expect a return to pre-pandemic learning conditions will stop or reverse the declines.

If the pandemic accelerated declines, but did not start them, researchers and policymakers should seek to understand what is at the root of the problem.

NAEP, in general, measures what's happening to student achievement—not why. But the patterns it documents can guide our search for explanations and solutions.

One area to investigate is the rise of smartphones and social media platforms targeting youth. We lack direct evidence of a causal link between smartphones and learning, but I am convinced that this technology is a key driver of youth mental health challenges; a distraction from learning both inside and outside of schools; and a deterrent to reading at a time when NAEP surveys reveal that many fewer students read on their own for fun.

Additional factors to look into include chronic absenteeism, which continues to be a severe challenge, particularly in high schools; changes to grading policies and state standards that make it hard for parents to know if their child is on track; and whether schools are providing students with access to a well-rounded, knowledge-rich curriculum that includes science, civics, and history.

We should also keep in mind that, while recent trends documented by NAEP are discouraging, this has not always been the case. From the early 1990's through the 2000's, we saw consistent progress in 4th and 8th grade. In reading, the gains were steady but modest. In math, they were substantial. In both subjects, they were driven by faster progress for our lowest-performing students—precisely the opposite of the troubling pattern over the past decade.

This was an era when elected officials from both political parties came together around a reform agenda grounded in articulating clear standards for student learning and holding schools accountable for ensuring kids met those standards on state tests. That approach had plenty of critics and, as implemented, some real flaws, but it produced results. There's often a temptation in education to focus on new ideas and strategies for improvement, but leaders at all levels of government would do well at this moment to learn from our past.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these insights, and I welcome any questions you may have.