

Opening Statement of Catherine Lhamon
Nominee for Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights,
U.S. Department of Education
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
July 13, 2021

Chair Murray, Ranking Member Burr, and distinguished Members of this Committee:

Thank you for the honor of appearing before you today. I am humbled by and grateful to the President for nominating me to this crucial position. I was deeply honored that the Senate confirmed me for this same position by unanimous consent in 2013 and am delighted that you are now considering me for returning to the work I love at the Office for Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Education.

I know from my prior experience there that the work is hard and critically important. I also know that if I am privileged to be confirmed for this role that I will work with you and continue the conversation. I would be so pleased to engage with you and your offices on ways to advance the civil rights guarantees Congress has enacted and protected for more than six decades.

I have been privileged to work in federal government roles for one month shy of 8 years protecting civil rights, and I worked for two years advising California's Governor on legal affairs, including during this once-in-a-century pandemic. I am familiar with the work necessary to honor the public's trust, and I love and respect it.

I learned that reverence for public service from my mother. We had no lawyers in our family, but I chose to become one after hearing my mother's stories of growing up in racially segregated Virginia, and the profound difference effective public interest lawyering made in her life.

National civil rights heroes, including Oliver Hill who, among others, litigated *Brown v. Board of Education*, were family friends and neighbors. My mother passed Mr. Hill's house every day on the way to school and Mr. Hill often drove her to school along with his son. Oliver Hill's child's experience, and my mother's, in segregated schools informed his passion to help this country live up to our constitutional ideals. My mother attended racially segregated schools before and after *Brown* – she was not yet ten years old when the case was decided – but the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* – that the circumstances of my mother's schooling violated our constitution – shaped her understanding of justice and of the American promise. Her experiences ultimately informed my own expectations for what it means to serve and for why I wanted, and still want, to serve.

I will bring those lessons with me back to OCR if I have the privilege to return. People across America come to OCR with their deepest hurts, asking the office to evaluate whether their rights have been violated and if so how to correct it. I love the challenge of applying law to specific facts, working with the expert staff in OCR's 12 regional offices to do as much justice as we can,

because those students and school communities who come to OCR need us to make real in their lives the laws this body enacts.

OCR does its job best when it efficiently, fairly, and thoroughly resolves investigations to protect student rights; shares its expertise about how to apply the law to facts to prevent discrimination from occurring in the first instance; and works with school districts and colleges and universities around the country to satisfy the law before students are hurt.

That work is and has been bipartisan. OCR in Republican as well as Democratic Presidential Administrations has achieved breathtaking results for students and schools, serving as stewards against harms Congress promised the country no person should live. In Republican as well as Democratic Administrations, OCR has ended segregated schooling, protected students with disabilities from exclusion and from bullying, and stopped sexual harassment from recurring.

Now, as this nation recovers from the global pandemic, and our students and educators return to schools together, the beautiful civil rights promises Congress has long made for us have particular importance. OCR's work now is as urgent as it ever has been. If confirmed, I would be so pleased to rejoin OCR's staff as they bring their talent, expertise, and dedication to do right by people who turn to them.

I look forward to today's hearing and I thank you for this opportunity.