

**TESTIMONY OF
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Chair Murray, Ranking Member Burr and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on such an important topic today. My name is Kurt Russell. I have been a high school history teacher at Oberlin High School in Oberlin, Ohio for 25 years and am proud to represent teachers nationwide as the 2022 National Teacher of the Year.

As an Oberlin native who teaches at the school that both I and my children attended, I have the unique perspective of having been a student, parent and teacher at Oberlin High School (OHS). Throughout my career, I have been proud to support students outside the classroom and am passionate about my work as an advisor to our Black Student Union, junior class, student council and prom committee and my role as head coach of the varsity boys' basketball team. For those who don't know about Oberlin, it is a small town located about a half an hour outside of Cleveland and is home to Oberlin College. OHS enrolls about 300 students. About half are white and half are students of color, and approximately three-quarters are from economically disadvantaged families.

In the spring of 2020, as with schools nationwide, OHS had to quickly pivot to online learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This online environment was different and difficult for our students. Many students didn't have the necessary equipment or strong enough internet connections to fully engage with and participate in online learning. Students who had previously been active participants in class discussions were now quiet and unwilling to speak up. Some were frustrated by technological challenges, and others were embarrassed by their families' economic circumstances and didn't want classmates to see into their homes. A wide disconnect developed between me and my students.

These challenges forced my colleagues and me to recognize the importance of checking in on our students' well-being. When we were completely virtual, I capitalized on this by having one-on-one conversations with my students who logged into class early, and I began spending the first few minutes of each class checking in with students to see how they were feeling, even if it was asking for a simple virtual thumbs up or down.

In spring 2021, OHS began offering students hybrid learning options, though less than a quarter of students chose to attend in person. With some students in-person and others virtual, teachers had to split their time and attention in an effort to keep two classrooms engaged at once. This proved to be a very difficult task, particularly as the challenges of virtual learning didn't go away for the majority of students — they had trouble hearing lectures, participating in class discussions, and connecting with teachers and peers.

We were thrilled to finally return to full in-person learning in the fall of the 2021-2022 school year. As a result of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Oberlin City School District has been allocated slightly over \$3 million among the different COVID relief bills. Our school was quick to begin spending on academic and social-emotional supports for students.

The rest of my testimony will walk through how COVID-19 has impacted my students, how my colleagues and I have worked to combat any negative impacts, how federal COVID-19 funds have been used to help support those students succeed, and the need for more teachers to support this work going forward. I hope that these examples successfully highlight how critical this federal funding for schools is, as teachers like me work daily to combat the learning disruption and emotional trauma caused by the pandemic.

The students I welcomed back after two years of virtual and then hybrid learning were not the same students I said goodbye to in March 2020. Prior to the pandemic, I was able to use primary sources to teach history first-hand. Since the pandemic, I feel that I've had to "water down" my curriculum because students can no longer dissect or comprehend the same complex concepts and ideas as before. This literacy loss has impacted all my students from 9th grade general education classes to advanced 12th grade courses. Student writing has suffered as well, as I find that students are not as able to fluidly communicate in writing as they used to and they now rely heavily on internet sources. Their oral communication skills have also declined.

An example that particularly illustrates these changes is a lesson I use every year debating Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's role in the Falklands War. After the pandemic, I found the majority of students' responses missed the mark — they didn't have a factual backing for arguments or based their arguments on emotions rather than facts. These were students I had previously taught in 9th grade, and who I knew had the skills to be successful in this assignment. When they returned in person in 11th grade, they had lost those skills. I noticed that students with learning disabilities in particular lost confidence in public speaking when presenting their arguments, on top of facing the same challenges with formulating arguments. Again, these were students who had thrived with this type of assignment before the pandemic.

While I have observed deficits in student achievement, the shared experience of the pandemic has also led to student growth in other areas. For example, having been the varsity basketball coach for 15 years, I can clearly see that my players are friendlier with their competition than in prior years — they are just happy to be playing! I've also noticed students are mixing up the groups they're eating lunch with and making a more conscious effort to socialize with different people. It seems as if the shared trauma of the pandemic has pushed students not to take things for granted and to gain a stronger sense of community and take better care of one another.

This type of empathy and kindness can be seen clearly throughout the school. The pandemic reminded our school — both students and teachers — that we provide much more than academic learning, and we are working hard to support students in healing from the trauma caused by the pandemic, whether they are experiencing a new sense of social anxiety or grief over the loss of a loved one.

The need to consider both academic achievement and mental health needs of my students has shifted my perspective as a teacher. I no longer jump right into my lesson plan at the beginning of each class. Instead, I continue the practice I started when we were learning virtually, and now spend a few minutes checking in with students to make sure they are mentally and socially present. There have also been times when our quick check-in lasts a half hour or more when students need the time and space. When students are able to share their concerns about their own lives, or to discuss broader events happening in our country or across the globe, they're better able to focus on their lesson and are more willing to participate in discussions.

I have always seen basketball as an extension of the classroom and adopted a similar practice with my team. We have "baseline talks" before and after practice, where the only rule is that we don't discuss basketball. This gives students another outlet to express their concerns and get any resources they might need — because practice ends at 5:30 p.m., this often means ensuring my players have enough food for dinner.

In responding to the pandemic, I also engaged families in consistent and new ways. When we were fully virtual, our school decided to hold "Asynchronous Fridays," where we assigned students independent lessons for the day and spent the time we would have been teaching reaching out to and engaging with parents. Even when we returned to the classroom in person, maintaining strong relationships has been a priority — OHS has given us two prep periods rather than just one, which gives us additional time to make sure families are engaged and involved in their student's learning.

While I am trying to make my classroom and the extracurricular activities I lead safe and nurturing environments for students, my school needs additional assistance as it tries to navigate post-pandemic learning.

We appreciate the resources provided to our school from the CARES Act, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, and the American Rescue Plan. They have been critical in getting much-needed support to our schools, teachers, and students. Our school has implemented many new initiatives and policies with this funding. These initiatives include the hiring of a new social worker — the first school social worker I've had in my building in my 25-year career — who works with about 10% of students, those who are struggling the most in school. Having a social worker in our school makes me more confident as a teacher, as I know that there is somebody who is committed to supporting student mental health. I have also seen the confidence of my students grow after working with the social worker. Our social worker also created the school's first food and clothing bank for students in need.

Additionally, OHS used federal COVID-19 relief funds to hire both a reading coach and a math coach to provide targeted support to struggling students. Collectively, these coaches work with roughly 60% of students, and I have seen how their support increase students' engagement with, and comprehension of, lessons. These coaches work at all levels across the district. Additionally, the funding has allowed us to provide after-school tutoring for students at the secondary level, and, for younger students, an eight-week summer enrichment program that combines academic lessons in math, science and reading with fun summer recreation activities.

Our school has also invested in student morale, as we now have quarterly “fun days” where we recognize student work and celebrate with a fun activity — whether it’s an ice cream sundae bar or a field day. Additionally, we have hired an individual to help lead a girls program called “Girls Rock” to help empower young women in our school.

The funding has also helped hire additional custodians to help make sure our schools are clean and healthy environments for students and staff.

Collectively, these programs are strengthening our school’s academic and social success and giving us hope for a full recovery in the future. We will continue to invest in our kids to make sure we can get our students back on track with learning and engaged in school, while also paying attention to their non-academic needs. I do have concerns that, while we have the resources now for these new staff and programs, once COVID-19 relief funding runs out we may not be able to continue these critical supports. Having Oberlin College in our school district is a great asset academically, but has, in the past, limited the funding the district can raise locally because the College’s properties are non-taxable. We ask for continued help and support from Congress to be able to sustain these important and impactful efforts into the future.

While we are doing a lot of positive things in our school, we have a long way to go. Continuing all of this essential work to help students will require excellent teachers at OHS and across the country, just as we are facing a massive teacher shortage.

As one example, OHS has recently had trouble filling a job for a math teacher. We usually had a wide pool of qualified applicants and found excellent teachers, even in harder-to-fill subjects like math and science. Now, there are maybe one or two people applying for these jobs. Although our district’s pay is around the median for our area, and our district is considered relatively high-need, we simply didn’t have this problem before the pandemic.

There are several reasons why teachers are leaving the profession, including low pay and increasing demands. Additionally, there is a lack of respect for the profession. Teachers are truly the experts in the classroom, but in many places aren’t treated as such. Instead, they’re being told what to teach without having a say in setting education policy.

As we look to stop the exodus of current teachers, we also must look at how we can attract new teachers to the profession. Along with a focus on higher pay and student loan forgiveness, we should also support grassroots programs like Educators Rising that seek to identify students who want to pursue jobs as teachers early in their academic careers. Throughout all of this work, we should commit to diversifying the teaching profession, so that teachers look more like the students in our schools.

Though the pandemic presented huge challenges for our students, academically and emotionally, they are resilient and have the support of communities and teachers behind them. Like my colleagues in Oberlin and I, teachers across the country are committed to doing everything in our power to help students recover from the pandemic.

Resources provided through the federal COVID relief bills have made a huge difference to our ability to help students accelerate their learning and work through trauma brought about by the pandemic. We need more excellent educators to help us continue this essential work over the long run. I urge you to look at the great work going on in your states and across the country to help students' recovery and to continue funding these programs.

Thank you for your time and consideration, and I look forward to answering your questions.