PREVENTING A LOST GENERATION:

A VISION FOR K-12 REFORMS TO ENSURE STUDENT SUCCESS

Senate Committee on
Health Education Labor & Pensions
Senator Bill Cassidy, M.D., Chair

The time is now to reform our K-12 education system to make it pro-family and pro-student. HELP Republicans' February 2024 report, *Preventing a Lost Generation: Facing a Critical Moment for Students' Literacy* called attention to an alarming decline for the nation's youth – two thirds of America's fourth and eighth graders are not proficient in reading. Our request for information in the February 2024 report received 71 thoughtful responses, showing that there is energy to improve current trends and chart a better path forward to ensure that kids can read. Without urgent intervention, we risk raising a generation unequipped to lead, compete, and thrive in the workplace.

The Broken Public Education System

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Teaching students how to read effectively should be the top priority of America's K-12 education system. The challenges in achieving this points to a deeper problem: an education system that for too long has accepted a status quo that fails our children. Federal funds typically account for on average 7.5 percent of a school's budget.[1] Despite being a small proportion of the budget, these funds come with many strings attached and a confusing host of rules and regulations from Congress and the Department of Education (the Department). States, districts, and schools argue it is too difficult to use these funds for innovation and criticize federal funds thrown towards the same ineffective practices and programs that schools have been trying unsuccessfully for years. It is clear that our education system needs realignment around meeting individual students' needs.

Past Reform Efforts

The *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015* (ESSA) aimed to improve the status quo. The law was enacted so that states would have more control and leadership over their K-12 education system and provided flexibility that the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) lacked. However, many states have failed to or have been unable to leverage this flexibility for students' benefit.

When asked how ESSA implementation is going, many stakeholders have lamented that many districts and schools are still operating as though NCLB is the law of the land. Educators are incredibly risk averse and do not believe that they have the opportunity to steer education in a new, better direction.

This is in large part because the Department has historically been negligent in providing clear, timely guidance to states and districts on how federal funds can be spent. When guidance is offered, it often leaves education leaders with more questions than answers. The Department had also failed to highlight what new, creative efforts can be attempted or funded under ESSA.

Congress must do more to bolster states' capacity to innovate, including supporting President Trump's initiative to return education decision-making to the states. The first action item in reforming a failing system is to dramatically improve literacy.

Current State of Student Literacy

As referenced in the Committee's February 2024 report, nine out of ten high school dropouts were struggling readers in third grade.[2] [3] Not only does this set individuals up to struggle financially, but it also presents a significant cost to taxpayers and our society. In 1999, when reading scores were higher than they are today, the National Reading Panel's interim report found that illiteracy cost taxpayers $224 billion per year and U.S. companies nearly $40 billion annually due to increased likelihood of incarceration, dependence on welfare programs, lost taxes, and a need for adult education. In today's dollars, that amounts to $409 billion and $73 billion annually, respectively.[4]

The 2024 NAEP results showed that scores have only sunk further since then. In 2022, the average reading score for the bottom ten percent of eighth-grade students was the lowest score ever recorded since the test began in 1992. Furthermore, the percent of students performing below basic in reading is at its highest point ever for eighth grade and highest point since 2000 for fourth grade.

Looking across the country, there are very few bright spots in this bleak picture. Only three states posted fourth-grade reading scores that met or exceeded their 2019 performance: Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi. For eighth graders, only Louisiana and the District of Columbia recovered to their pre-pandemic reading levels. This is evidence of a system that is neither pro-family nor pro-student. As Fredrick Hess, Director of Education Policy

Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, has noted, "Pretty much the only good-news story in education through the first half of 2025 has been the "Southern Surge"—the impressive National Assessment of Educational Progress gains posted by Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, and Tennessee amidst an otherwise dreary landscape."[5]

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Policy Goal #1: Improving Student Literacy

The Science of Reading

The driving force of targeted improvement has been the adoption of the "science of reading," a framework that takes teaching students to read from an art to a literal science. This interdisciplinary body of evidence-based research identifies the key components students need to learn how to read and write, and how teachers can best implement these components into reading instruction. This model shows that students best learn how to read when they have explicit, systematic, and cumulative instruction in the five key pillars of literacy: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.[6]

The science of reading framework is not what teachers have historically used to instruct students. The cornerstone of reading instruction in America's schools for decades has been the disproven "three-cueing" method. Three-cueing is a core component of what was thought to be a "whole-language" or "balanced literacy" approach to reading instruction, but instead encourages educators to teach students to guess words they do not know rather than teach them how to decode them.

Research shows that three-cueing promotes strategies that are used by poor readers, undermines sound-spelling relationships, obscures phonemic awareness, and hinders students' progress. Put simply, these methods are insufficient to ensure that students learn how to read well and sets them up for failure in the long run.[7]

States Reform Efforts

Many responses to the February literacy report celebrated states that have acted to implement a proven framework based on the science of reading for curbing student illiteracy. For example, Indiana enacted several literacy reforms over the past three years and passed a comprehensive literacy policy in 2023 requiring schools to use evidence-based literacy instruction and materials and that teachers be trained in the science of reading. As a result, Indiana saw the largest single-year increase in literacy with 82.5 percent of third-graders proficient in 2024.

Surprisingly, not everyone was on board with these successful efforts. The state's teachers union tried to inhibit the very training that made the difference for students. The Indiana State Teachers Association's secretary protested to the state board of education that the science of reading training requirements "increased stress and compounded existing challenges" for teachers.[8]

In California, only 31 percent of fourth graders read proficiently. To address this, state legislators tried to pass a comprehensive literacy policy in 2024 that would have required schools to use proven literacy instruction and materials.[9] [10] This bill was in line with successful effort passed in other states but it did not even receive a hearing because of pressure from teachers' unions. Similar literacy focused initiatives in Massachusetts, Georgia, and Ohio have run into efforts to undermine evidence-based instruction through loopholes, court cases, and regulatory subterfuge.[11]

Problems with Existing Law

Responses to the February literacy report raised concerns about the difficulties implementing weak provisions in federal education law. Take, for example, the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy program (SRCL). Congress invested more than $1 billion in SRCL to support states' literacy efforts and encourage schools to adopt evidence-based literacy instruction.

The National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE) recently completed a review to assess how well SRCL's implementation met the goals established for the program. NCEE found that "literacy programs supported by rigorous research evidence were not a focus... Few districts used SRCL funds to purchase such programs and few teachers in SRCL schools reported using such programs."[12]

The program's primary goal was to encourage schools to use evidence-based literacy instruction, and require them to use programs supported by strong or moderate evidence. And yet, funded literacy programs were often not evidence-based. In fact, 88 percent of programs purchased with SRCL funds did not have strong or moderate evidence ratings.[13] Even worse, 47 percent of programs purchased with SRCL funds did not have any published research to support them whatsoever.[14]

ESSA made strides towards ensuring that federal funds were used on programs, materials, or practices backed by research by replacing SRCL with the Comprehensive Literacy State Development program (CLSD). However, these requirements are easily skirted because they are couched with clauses like "to the greatest extent practical." And even when they are not couched, any form of evidence – promising, moderate, or strong – is usually acceptable, even when strong evidence-based practices abound.

Screening for Learning Barriers

In addition to improving student literacy through the broad adoption of the science of reading, there is also a significant unmet need in empowering students who have specific learning barriers. Every student is unique and has different learning needs. In medicine, we used to treat all people with cancer in the same manner with limited results. Now, we have specialized care for each type of cancer, dramatically improving patient outcomes. We need the same approach with improving literacy.

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Many students in public schools are struggling with literacy because they have unidentified and undiagnosed learning needs, such as dyslexia, ADHD, autism, etc. In many cases, they are not being screened for these specific learning needs at all or not until they are significantly behind their peers. Even after screening they are then not being given the support and tools that they need to catch-up. Students acquire key reading skills in kindergarten, first, and second grade. Waiting to identify barriers and intervening in later elementary school or even middle school guarantees that students will not recieve the individual instruction needed.

For example, according to the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity, an estimated 1 in 5 students have dyslexia. Children with dyslexia who are not properly diagnosed or who do not receive an education tailored to dyslexia often drop out of school. They have lower high school and college graduation rates, and an increased risk of incarceration. A blanket approach to literacy that doesn't differentiate the individual needs will limit growth opportunities for these students.

Society, families, and individuals are stronger when students with learning needs are helped early and continuously on an individual basis..[15]

Early identification and intervention through increased awareness, improved screening, and specialized teaching is critical to helping more students achieve literacy in a faster and more comprehensive manner.

Recommendations

To guarantee that federal funds for literacy are spent on proven, evidence-based instruction and materials, Congress should consider updating the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) to raise evidence-based requirements and remove unnecessary phrases that create loopholes for disproven programs to creep through.

Congress should also explore refocusing the CLSD program to better support states' literacy efforts. This could include prioritizing funding based on students' literacy rates, rather than their income so that resources are targeted at those who data shows are struggling to read. Priority for the program should also be given to states and districts that embrace the science of reading and curriculum transparency.

The program could also be expanded to empower states who have already built a comprehensive literacy plan to blaze the next frontier of improving reading. For instance, Indiana has launched a program that provides parents, who have a demonstrated financial and academic need, $1,000 to put towards high-dosage tutoring and approved out-of-school academic programs in literacy and math. Once spent, parents can request an additional $1,000 to continue services.

This education savings account style program empowers parents to find evidence-based instructional supports that best meet their child's learning needs. The CLSD program could be retooled to provide start-up costs for establishing such a program – building a list of approved providers, creating the accounts and a dashboard for parents to navigate the program, etc. – that states would then fund. Doing so would empower parents to directly confront the gaps that their student might have because their school used disproven literacy instruction.

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Congress and the Administration should also consider increased support of the What Works Clearinghouse to ensure states and schools have access to evidence about what innovations work.

Finally, resources should also be made available to screen for learning needs, like dyslexia, earlier and more often. Schools should be made aware of how learning needs impact literacy efforts and specialized tools should be made available to students, families, and teachers to bridge the learning gaps.

Policy Goal #2: Strengthening the Teacher Workforce

In expedited efforts to improve student literacy, it is vital to also enhance the education workforce. Currently, there is a lot of energy in the field to do just that. For example, BEST NC, a North Carolina education non-profit, has pioneered new teacher career ladders to support teacher retention and student outcomes by giving teachers a way to take on more responsibility and compensation without leaving the classroom.[16] The strong results prompted the state legislature to work towards expanding the program statewide.

Despite state efforts, there is a key barrier to strengthening the education workforce. A common theme of responses to the Committee's report was a concern around the role of higher education in perpetuating disproven instructional methods and not preparing aspiring teachers well for the classroom. Colleges of education are failing to train pre-service teachers in effective instructional methods. Instead, they are doubling down on disproven methods or dragging their feet to adopt what research and practice has shown to be the correct way of teaching reading.

Respondents also lamented that teachers are not set up for success in the classroom and stressed the need to bolster the teaching profession. As AEI's Robert Pondiscio chronicled and shared with the Committee, "teaching has been made too difficult for mere mortals."[17] Teachers are continually burdened with roles and responsibilities that take their time and attention away from educating students.

Overhauling Teacher Preparation Programs

Just as a parent should not worry whether their child's school will teach them how to read, school leaders should not worry whether their teachers' college will train teachers how to teach.

When colleges of education do not adequately prepare teachers, districts have to pick up the tab. A district superintendent shared in their response that they need to retrain every teacher who graduated in the past 30 years on how to teach reading effectively. Indeed, thirty-eight states now require teachers to undergo professional

development in evidence-based reading instruction and/or institutes a program of instructional coaching. [18]

The cost of such training can be staggering. Typical literacy training sessions cost around $978 per participant, which puts the cost to retrain America's two million elementary school teachers at nearly $2 billion dollars. However, when you factor in the staff cost of paying teachers' salaries for these hours as well as paying substitutes to cover classes during trainings and the cost of materials to accompany the trainings, the cost is closer to $3,000 per student. So the sum total cost of retraining all elementary school teachers is closer to $6 billion. This number continues to climb every year that colleges of education hesitate to align their courses with evidence-based instruction.

It is not just literacy instruction where colleges of education are falling short. School leaders are also concerned that teacher prep programs are not spending enough time on classroom management skills, lesson delivery, or curriculum development. As Robert Pondiscio shared at the HELP Committee's June 2024 hearing on K-12 education, colleges of education do not view it as their job to train teachers and are distracted from this primary function.[19] They are more concerned with theory than the practical means of running a classroom. Teacher preparation programs should be about just that – preparing teachers. Instead, a recent report found that radical left-wing ideologies run rampant in the syllabi and course descriptions at colleges of education.[20]

For instance, the University of Michigan's "How People Learn" course, does not focus on explaining what the field has learned about how brains work and grow to inform teachers' practice. Instead, it examines "learning from the perspective of educational justice and equity, always seeking to understand how power, privilege, oppression, and resistance impact learners, learning outcomes, and pedagogies." The University of Pennsylvania offers a course called "Activism Beyond the Classroom," spending future educators' precious time in school teaching them how to advance ideology rather than how to teach kids. This is unacceptable, especially while school districts are pouring out money to retrain an entire generation of these programs' graduates just for them to be able to teach reading correctly.

States have begun threatening colleges' accreditation, or not hiring teachers graduating from these schools, if they do not improve and guarantee they are teaching proven instructional methods. This is a step in the right direction and has effectively pushed effected teacher prep programs to improve.

Let Teachers Teach

Beyond training, teachers are facing burnout from having to manage unruly students, with little guidance and support from administrators for handling difficult cases. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) shows that in 20 percent of schools, there are physical attacks or fights between students at least once a week.[21] In over one-third of schools, teachers are disrespected by students at least once a week – and in 17 percent of schools this takes the form of verbal abuse from students.[22]

Louisiana Superintendent Cade Brumley has set a strong example through his "Let Teachers Teach" initiative. Last year, Superintendent Brumley launched a workgroup comprised of over two dozen educators to explore complications within the teaching profession and issue recommendations for improvement. These recommendations cover a host of concerns – from disciplining disruptive students to improving professional learning. These recommendations and the work to implement them should serve as a model for other states on how to engage their teacher leaders and chart a better course for K-12 education and the teaching profession.[23]

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At the federal level, funds used for teacher professional development can be better targeted and spent more effectively. Currently, ESEA Title II funds – which are intended to improve teacher recruitment, retention, and development – are spent with few quality checks. Though the Department must publish an annual report on how Title II funds are spent, the data is broad and unreliable. It can provide general statistics like the percentage of Title II funds that districts spent on professional development (78 percent) and it can tell you that 88 percent of districts spent funding on short-term professional development.[24] However, it does not provide insight into the quality or effect of funded-programs, projects, or practices.

This is concerning when there is scant evidence that Title II funds are spent in ways that teachers find

meaningful to improving their practice. A 2023 survey found that nearly half of teachers (48 percent) think the professional development provided or required by their school or district is irrelevant to their job. What's worse, school leaders do not realize that the professional development they are selecting is unhelpful. The poll also found that 84 percent of school leaders believed the same professional development was relevant.[25]

Recommendations

Congress should help states hold colleges of education accountable to ensure that America's teachers are well-prepared. To do so, Congress could incentivize states to collect and share deidentified data on how teachers from different preparation programs fare in the classroom. This will provide a better sense of the impact teachers from different programs have on student achievement, as well as how long they stay in the classroom, and other measures of teacher effectiveness. This data will help policymakers identify teacher preparation programs that are failing teachers and mandate corrective action.

Congress could also consider how to strengthen the definition of professional development and require that funds spent on literacy professional learning be aligned to the science of reading. Further, Congress could require these funds be used for professional learning that is sustained, coherent, job-embedded, and grounded in educators' day-to-day practice. Strengthening the guardrails around how funds are used will prevent the professional development teachers receive from feeling irrelevant, sporadic, and wasteful.

Finally, the Department should also highlight how states and districts can use their ESEA Title II allocation to fund the innovative education workforce initiatives that are gaining popularity. Many states and districts are trying to find ways to fund teacher career ladders or strategic staffing models, but do not see the federal funds as an option for such work. This should be corrected through technical assistance and using the bully pulpit to promote best practices.

Policy Goal #3: Empowering Parents

"Parents are their child's first and best teachers. Successful efforts to improve the education system must center around parents, ensuring their buy-in and involvement."

Parents are their child's first and best teachers. Successful efforts to improve the education system must center around parents, ensuring their buy-in and involvement. But parents are pessimistic about the state of K-12 education. The 2024 edition of EdChoice's annual Schooling in America survey found that nearly two-thirds of school parents say K-12 education is headed in the wrong direction, which is up eight points from 2023.[26]

This was echoed in responses to the Committee: Parents are deeply concerned about the state of schools. Many parents and organizations that represent them from across the political spectrum expressed their experiences watching schools fail their basic mission to teach students how to read. Such experiences further erode the trust between parents and schools.

Protecting Parents' Rights

No parent should have to worry that their child will not learn how to read in school. Nor should parents have to worry that their child's school will willfully and knowingly hide information from them or try to usurp their role and authority.

It is important that families demand strong instructional methods and materials in their schools and information on their student's performance. But being able to do so depends on them having access to the right information. Respondents indicated that parents often have to fight for access to basic information about their child's schooling, like what materials are being used in the classroom or what instructional methods are employed. Furthermore, school performance and student achievement data must be easy to understand and access. States are charged with maintaining school report cards so that parents can make informed decisions about where to send their child to school. Unfortunately, Morgan Polikoff, an education researcher at the University of Southern California, along with a team at the Center for Reinventing Public Education found that these report cards often fall short of being useful. Key issues include a lack of information to track a school's performance over time, that data was presented in an unwieldy way that made it difficult to navigate, and that in 30 states it was difficult to find reading and math performance data. At the heart of these issues is that these scorecards are not always geared towards parents. As Polikoff explained, "the report cards were perhaps trying to serve too many audiences and, in the end, not serving any very well."[27]

States should examine how their report cards stack up and solicit parent feedback on how to improve them and make them more accessible.

Recommendations

In all federal policy, the goal should be to enable parents - the ultimate decision-makers to take charge of their child's education. If we empower them with information about schools, they can pair it with the knowledge they have of their child to make the best decision to meet their student's needs.

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is intended to be the backbone of protecting students' rights in education. However, it has not been updated since 1974. A key piece to having parents' backs will be for Congress to explore where FERPA is and is not working for parents. I have already begun this work and found that, too often, savvy vendors or bad actors can find loopholes to get around what should be clear, ironclad protections. If a parent experiences this, I hope they will reach out to me so that we can help them fight back or update the law to guard against such violations.

Charting a Better Path for K-12 Education

Improving student literacy is a crucial step in fixing our broken K-12 education system. It will be an all-hands-on-deck endeavor. This report has outlined a few key areas where the field can begin to work together and where federal policy might be necessary to move efforts forward. But this is just the beginning.

States are best suited to drive this improvement in education, which is why Congress gave so much power back to them through ESSA. Congress should continue to prioritize state innovation and find ways to use federal funds to help build states' capacity for steering progress in districts and schools. With such power, though, will come the need for greater accountability. It is crucial that the Department and our Congressional committees focus our oversight efforts on ensuring that federal funds in education are well-spent towards evidence-based practices and programs that move the needle for student learning.

To support this work, the Department needs to continue to clarify federal rules and regulations around K-12 education. Doing so removes unnecessary roadblocks and empowers innovative education leaders to break out of the status quo, leveraging new technologies, methods, and strategies to meet students' needs.

Congress should also consider removing unnecessary requirements so that we can focus on the guardrails that are fundamental to success: Are schools teaching students to read and do math? Are they preparing students for the workforce? Are parents in the driver's seat of their child's education? By focusing our efforts and empowering state and local leaders to prioritize student outcomes, we can better identify who is doing right by kids and who is not.

Furthermore, parents' rights must be protected. They must have a seat at the table and be equipped with the information necessary to ensure their child's needs are met. Schools putting barriers between parents and their kids should not be tolerated.

Improving our nation's schools will be challenging, but it is essential for the success of our children and the nation. As Chairman of the Senate HELP Committee, I look forward to being a partner on moving the needle for students. Now, it's time to get to work.

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