

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE  
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EDUCATION

Generational Learning Loss: How Pandemic School Closures Hurt Students

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Chairman Bean, Ranking Member Bonamici, and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for allowing me to present this testimony today. My name is Derrell Bradford and I am the president of 50CAN, the 50 State Campaign for Achievement Now, which supports leaders in 10 states across the nation working on a wide range of education policy issues, including pandemic recovery. We're committed to ensuring that every child gets the education that works best for them regardless of their zip code, the color of their skin, or how much money their parents make. And we see learning loss catalyzed by poorly delivered virtual instruction and schools that were closed for too long, predominantly in big cities and school systems that are highly unionized, as one of the great domestic policy failures of our lifetimes. Indeed the harm of the last three years will be with us for the next 30 if something is not done.

With this in mind I'd like to focus on a few things. First the conditions that allowed school closures to continue longer than necessary. Second, the scale and depth of learning loss particularly for the nation's neediest children, and why after committing \$190 billion in COVID relief to schools results are worse now, not better. And lastly some positive examples that have emerged across the nation, despite these challenges, that the committee can look to for interventions and a way forward.

It is important to understand that pandemic related school closures did not happen in a vacuum and that they were, in fact, the opportunistic culmination of a multi-year program of labor actions across the country led by the nation's teacher unions. While this may be unpopular to point out, it is critical that the broader context is recognized, understood, and remembered if we do not wish to visit this sort of learning disruption on the nation's students in the future. Indeed strikes in Columbus, OH and Seattle, WA in the last year have continued to disrupt learning for American students.

In 2018, before public schools were closed across the country for COVID, they were closed in Kentucky because of pensions and education choice. Then Governor Matt Bevin sought to pass pension reforms the state's teacher union opposed in addition to a scholarship program that would have expanded educational opportunities for Kentucky families. The state's teachers launched a coordinated program of sick outs which essentially shut down many of Kentucky's school districts. This sort of disruption is only possible because of the unique nature of compulsory public education laws and teacher union collective bargaining in public schools. In the absence of alternatives, these unions are, quite literally, able to deny a compulsory public service to families as a way to create political pressure for what they want or what they oppose. The Kentucky school choice program was defeated, the pension reforms overturned by the courts, and Governor Bevin was ousted soon after.

This was the first in a series of job actions, largely but not exclusively over teacher pay, that came to be known as Red for Ed, not merely for their signature red t-shirts, but for the deep red states (Oklahoma, West Virginia, and Arizona) where striking teachers shut down their state's public education apparatus for political gain. The teacher strikes, sickouts, rallies, and activism were ultimately effective in achieving the goal of increasing teacher pay. Oklahoma legislators increased teacher pay by an average \$6,000 (approximately 16 percent). West Virginia's teachers won a 5-percent increase, while Arizona's protests saw then [Governor Doug Ducey increase teacher pay](#) by 20 percent preemptively. More importantly, though, these efforts left teacher unions emboldened, laying the groundwork for school closures as a key tactic in their future activism.

In 2019, two of the largest school districts in America, Los Angeles and Chicago, also struck over teacher pay and, in Los Angeles, the growth of charter schools. These strikes left hundreds of thousands of low-income students in the lurch academically while their parents scrambled for child care. While the Chicago strike is notable for the militancy of its teacher union, the 14% proposed raise the union dismissed, and the progressive Mayor, Lori Lightfoot, who made the offer, the Los Angeles strike matters because it captured the attention of the media and the political class during the democratic presidential primary, making teacher pay a prominent issue among candidates with several promising to increase federal funding to raise teacher pay. The message to the unions was clear. These large-scale disruptions could extract policy victories from elected officials on both sides of the political aisle with little or no fallout for the unions themselves. And while it would be financially impossible for teachers unions to run what would amount to a national strike under normal circumstances, the COVID pandemic in the spring of 2020 gave them the opportunity to do just that.

In April of 2020 [I argued strongly](#) for school closures, urging schools and districts to improve virtual instruction rapidly in the face of epidemiological uncertainty. It seemed the right choice at the time and the fear of many American families was genuine. And I'd like to thank State Superintendent Truitt for her work in North Carolina on this issue and her call to use the COVID disruption to "make change because for the past 30+ years, the system has failed millions of kids." But by August it was clear that school reopening had become a political football and we argued instead, in a brief titled [Fund Everything](#), that if a family wanted in-person instruction they should be able to get it and that funds should follow the student to make this possible. Private schools and public schools in some states, and some nations, were already showing this was an achievable goal.

We did this because what should have been a circumspect moment where we prioritized teacher excellence and student safety had been co-opted by teacher unions as they sought to take advantage of the crisis, eliminate competition, consolidate their position and receive a generational cash infusion from the federal government in the form of COVID relief aid. For example, virtual charter schools saw increased enrollment due to brick and mortar school closings so a cap was enacted in [Oregon](#) at their behest. United Teachers of Los Angeles took the opportunity to negotiate new work rules that capped the number of hours a teacher could teach while making it optional for a teacher to appear "in-person" during virtual instruction. One does not need to be an economist to know that making a teacher more scarce makes their time more expensive. And despite early guidance from several state departments of education that emphasized the importance of in-person instruction and the relationship between a student and a teacher, educators protested school reopening with scythes and coffins, with the Chicago Teachers Union [asserting](#) that the push to reopen schools was "rooted in sexism, racism and misogyny."

All the while the price for reopening was going up. After congress's first \$13.2 billion infusion of COVID relief in March of 2020, the Council of the Great City Schools sent a [letter](#) to congressional leadership requesting an additional \$175 billion in COVID aid, describing the first round of relief as a "downpayment." While some monies went directly to Governors in the form of the Governor's Emergency Education Relief fund, the larger aid dispersals of ESSER II and III (\$54.3 and \$122 billion as part of President Biden's American Rescue Plan respectively) went primarily through State and Local Education Agencies with little to no guidance for how the funds should be used and as little oversight. In March of 2021, Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona told Utah Senator Mitt Romney, who described the funding request as "gratuitous" that "The funds that are being discussed are really to help us with the long-term recovery process, preventing layoffs, when we need more teachers, not less," citing personnel as the primary focus of the aid, not student recovery. Becky Pringle, the head of the National Education

Association, [asserted](#) of the President's plan that "if you have the unions behind what you want to do, it gets done." This is how the teachers unions manipulated the COVID crisis to achieve their own financial goals. And on March 11, 2021 despite what I am sure were the best intentions of many congressional officials, a blank check was sent to the nation's school districts in the hope that something would be done to ameliorate learning loss for the nation's students.

More than two years on the data is not good. In October of 2022 Education Week, reporting on results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, featured the headline [Two Decades of Progress, Nearly Gone: National Math, Reading Scores Hit Historic Lows](#). [The New York Times](#) noted that 1990 and 2004 were the last time performance was this low for 13-year olds in math and reading respectively. [Chalkbeat](#) reported that, in New York City, one of the last school districts to reopen for in-person learning, "Just 18% of the city's fourth graders were proficient in math, compared with 24% in 2019. Levels that low in New York City have not been seen for nearly 20 years, according to the results," with one advocate offering that "There will be ripple effects for decades."

Sadly, this was not the end of the bad news for the nation's students, but the beginning. On July 11, [The Times](#) reported on NWEA's newly released study, [Education's Long Covid: 2022-23 achievement data reveal stalled progress toward pandemic recovery](#). After analyzing spring assessment data from approximately 3.5 million public school students, the study's researchers found slower than average growth in math and reading when compared to pre-pandemic results, with one of the study's authors stating that "We are actually seeing evidence of backsliding." This is surprising even after considering the work of Dr. Macke Raymond at the Center for Research on Educational Outcomes at Stanford who proposed in her [Pace of Learning](#) report that simply returning to pre-pandemic instructional levels would still leave students far behind. Without rigorous intervention and increased learning time fewer than [two-thirds](#) of students will achieve a level of "average knowledge" in reading and math by the time they reach their senior year in high school. Far from being addressed, for millions of American students learning loss appears to be locked in and, perhaps, worsening. To call it a disaster understates what has happened to an entire generation of American children.

Which all begs the question: what happened to the \$190 billion in aid sent to the nation's public schools to prevent exactly this result? Instead of a once-in-a-lifetime infusion of federal aid to catch up the country's students, parents, leaders, and taxpayers got a black box with little transparency and even less student recovery. A 10-month long investigation of 15 school districts which received collectively \$3.4 billion

in relief aid by the education website The74 titled [\\$190B Later. Reason to Worry Relief Funds Won't Curb COVID's Academic Crisis](#) is troubling to say the least. It shows little urgency and less coherence in how many districts tackled learning loss. Providence, RI, for example, still has [\\$120 million of unspent](#) relief funds. Newark, NJ [spent just 5%](#) of its ESSER III aid on tutoring according to Chalkbeat. Oregon's [Klamath County](#) is spending 70% of its relief dollars to buy new turf fields, renovate bleachers, build a gym and resurface a parking lot. Marguerite Roza and Katherine Silberstein of the Edunomics Lab at Georgetown found in [a recent analysis](#) that many states have failed to track their spending accurately and roughly half of states have used the money on "labor," setting the stage for a "painful fiscal cliff" given how difficult it will be to rightsize staffing when federal funds run out. Roughly 20% of funds were invested in facilities overall. Twenty states share no details other than what each district has spent with "other" as a common category. This is, again, a costly disaster but students who need help to catch up will pay the price.

Or perhaps it isn't. Indeed teacher unions, school districts, and other aligned interests did exactly what one would expect them to do when given billions in aid with few if any strings attached. They spent the money on themselves. We should all learn this lesson.

Fortunately some elected leaders, educators, and philanthropists rose to the challenge of COVID learning loss and in them we find the green chutes of what could be future progress. In the summer of 2020 the Bill and Crissy Haslam foundation launched the Tennessee Tutoring Corps with the goal of helping students receive high quality tutoring so they could catch up from COVID school disruptions. The former mayor of New York City, Michael Bloomberg, and a cadre of philanthropists in 2022 and 2023 have made a similar and significant investment in [summer tutoring](#) by partnering with charter schools and networks in New York and seven other cities across the country. New Jersey has funded a statewide tutoring program, the New Jersey Tutoring Corps, Inc., out of its budget and their efforts have increased grade level proficiency in math from 16% to 40%, and from 23% to 40% in literacy, for participating students. In Louisiana, the State Department of Education and Louisiana Kids Matter have partnered with the non-profit Accelerate and several school districts to deliver high dosage tutoring to students, and Governor John Bel Edwards signed SB 177 which makes tutoring available during the school day for struggling students. Ohio's Governor DeWine has also made access to the [math learning platform](#) Zearn free for the state's middle school students through 2025.

At the end of his tenure Arizona's Governor Doug Ducey used COVID relief funds to launch [AZ on Track](#) which made summer camp free for nearly 70,000 students. Tennessee Governor Bill Lee has done similarly with the state's [Summer Learning](#)

[Camps](#). And notably Idaho Governor Brad Little funded families directly to support their children's learning with his [Strong Families, Strong Students](#) plan which sent up to \$3,500 to Idaho families for educational expenses. Given the records of many school districts, and [survey data that show 30% of all families](#) (and 40% of low-income families) said they used funds from the child tax credit for education, sending COVID funds to families directly could have been the more effective way to disperse them.

It is also worth remembering that the nation's urban Catholic schools, in cities like Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia, performed a critical public service by proving that schools could be reopened safely for students and teachers, with little federal aid, despite assertions by teacher unions and other interest groups to the contrary. Their preservation represents an important policy priority as well as a safety valve for parents, students, and policy makers now and into the future.

In closing I would offer that no one believed that schools would not need money to reopen, or to support and catch up students. And I suspect that, despite what amounts to the failure of COVID relief to ablate learning loss, you will be approached for more money to address the issue. I would urge committee members to be both cautious and bold when this happens. Cautious when appropriating any money if you do so, and bold when deciding who to give it to and for what purpose. Families are your most important partners and school districts are but one vehicle among many educational providers—public, private, charter, and others—that can support the nation's students. You have before you not just an opportunity to help the nation's children in the current system, but a chance to help a future, more responsive education system start to take root. Please don't waste it.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Derrell Bradford', with a large, stylized initial 'D' and 'B'.

Derrell Bradford  
President  
50CAN