

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Suzanne Bonamici (OR-01)
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
"Education Without Limits: Exploring the Benefits of School Choice"
Tuesday, March 11, 2025 | 10:15 a.m.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I want to begin by acknowledging the role that public schools play in our communities, our economy, and our democracy. With the overwhelming majority of students in public schools, public education is the foundation on which we build our future. Public schools serve the needs of every child, regardless of background or income. That's why we need to protect public education and importantly, funding for public education, from "voucher scams" that funnel taxpayer dollars into private institutions.

That being said, I – and most Democrats – support a wide range of options within the public school system. In many states and districts, families have choices among magnet schools, public charter schools, as the Chairman mentioned, and intradistrict and interdistrict open enrollment policies.

For instance, in the district I represent, we have some of the top magnet programs in the state, including Portland's Benson Polytechnic High School, a CTE-magnet school that offers major programs in automotive, building construction, electrical engineering, health occupations, media production, and more. And the Beaverton district has many choices, an international magnet, Arts and Communication magnet, and the Beaverton Academy of Science and Engineering.

These valuable opportunities are offered to all students – and most importantly, they are offered at free public schools that are required to comply with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. I want to note that the Chairman mentioned "woke ideologies," and this is just another reminder that the federal government does not, by law, set curriculum.

But let's talk about universal vouchers, which are often pushed with little to no income restrictions, meaning that every student—whether from a single-parent home where the mom is working and making minimum wage or from a billionaire family like Elon Musk's—could receive the same amount of taxpayer money. All while the public schools that serve the rest – the majority - are left to do more with less.

And in this discussion, we must consider rural areas. In the district I represent, I have urban areas, but I have a lot of rural school districts where the public school is often the heart of the community, and the only option is a public school. So, in those rural school districts, I know what reaction I would get if I told them that part of their public school funding was cut but here's a voucher so the students can go to another school – there is no other school! And there's very little chance of bridging that funding gap, leaving them to either make cuts, increase class sizes, or both. That's the main reason why several states, including Nebraska, Kentucky, and Colorado — they've all rejected voucher schemes.

Moreover, what message does it send to teachers and students who are already feeling the strain of a system that is underfunded and overburdened? Stripping already strained public schools of more funding to support private schools is not the answer.

The solution is clear: We must invest in public education, so every child has the chance to thrive in the classroom.

It is also worth noting that voucher schemes permit private schools to discriminate against students based on disability, religion, and other factors, and they have also been found to increase segregation. And people across the country remain legitimately concerned about the use of taxpayer dollars for religious schools because it is so intertwined that it violates the Constitutional principle of separation of church and state.

And for many reasons, the argument to support universal vouchers based on NAEP scores — it's really not persuasive. Test scores are only one way to evaluate student success. We had a global pandemic that led to social isolation and according to the American Psychological Association, there's a mental health crisis among youth. There's increasing - some say excessive - use of electronic devices by kids. Importantly, the scores of high performers stayed pretty much the same; it was scores for low performers that plummeted. That's not a case for vouchers; it's a case for fully funding Title I, McKinney-Vento, and other programs that support low-income students.

We cannot ignore facts. Voucher programs do not improve student outcomes. Research shows that in states with large voucher programs, like Louisiana, Indiana, and Ohio, students using vouchers tend to perform worse than their peers in public schools.

These programs are a misuse of taxpayer dollars, and they contribute, again, to discrimination, segregation, and a lack of accountability. Speaking of a lack of accountability, a recent study about the Arizona voucher program found that the state imposes no transparency or accountability requirements on private schools that receive taxpayer dollars through the state's voucher program, and additionally, Arizona parents who are shopping for a school say it's difficult to get any independently verified information about the quality of instruction or financial stability of these private schools that are getting public dollars.

Public education is already under attack from this Administration, we know that, with the looming threat of an executive order to dismantle the Department of Education. Let's not make things worse by allowing the use of public funding for private schools.

So, instead of funding private schools, we need to invest in public education. Every child, no matter their zip code, deserves access to a high-quality education.

I look forward to the conversation, and I yield back the balance of my time.