Opening Statement of Ranking Member Suzanne Bonamici (OR-01)
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
"From Chalkboards to Chatbots: The Impact of AI on K-12 Education"
Tuesday, April 1, 2025 | 10:15 a.m.

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

I am encouraged that all of the witnesses submitted testimony that recognizes the opportunities and challenges of Artificial Intelligence in K-12 education.

We are at a pivotal time in education, and the path we choose will determine whether we can equip students and educators with the tools, critical thinking skills, and knowledge they need to succeed in an ever-evolving, technologically driven world.

Artificial intelligence is not in the distant future — it's in our schools right now. It's reshaping how students are educated and how they learn. Although this is an exciting prospect, it also presents significant challenges, particularly regarding equity and regulation.

Without a doubt dismantling the Department of Education will exacerbate inequities and set us back as a nation. The Department of Education is not just a building; through its programs, it plays a pivotal role in closing achievement gaps and helping to meet the goal that all students, including those in rural and low-income communities and including students with disabilities, have an opportunity to access high-quality public education. It is the Department of Education that helps level the playing field and provides critical resources that many districts are not able to afford without federal funding.

Title I, for example, provides resources for schools with high concentrations of poverty, a lifeline for the schools that need it most. In fact, every witness here today mentioned in their testimony the importance of access, which is the main point of Title I. It's unclear what will happen to Title I but without experienced implementation at the Department of Education, it's likely – assuming it survives – we will see support severely cut or limited. And the prospect of waivers to block grant Title I, which some Republicans are advocating for, is troubling because,

without accountability systems, we won't know if these dollars will go to the highest-need schools, resulting in deepening inequities and academic gaps.

It is also important to mention that the Trump Administration cut funding for a significant portion of federal grants that support educator professional development, including the Teacher Quality Partnership. Thankfully federal courts have ordered the Administration to restore these funds. Professional development opportunities are crucial to equip educators with evidence-based teaching practices, as well as prepare educators on AI technologies and other necessary skills needed to educate students for the 21st century.

It's no question that a loss of funding, or inconsistent or delayed funding disbursement, will disproportionately harm struggling, low-income, and rural schools and students. Without a robust and equitable funding system with a strong accountability framework, the digital divide will widen and technology disparities will mirror existing inequalities, leaving vulnerable students with fewer opportunities to benefit from AI-integrated learning environments or learn proper guardrails surrounding the use of AI.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, as technology was rapidly evolving, it was the Department of Education that led efforts to close the digital divide. Without federal leadership, we would have seen even greater inequalities.

Unfortunately, today the Department of Education is still reeling from a significant reduction in force, including the elimination of the Office of Educational Technology (OET). This office was instrumental in guiding schools on the safe and ethical integration of new technologies like AI, providing resources on data security and best practices. With the OET gone, we risk leaving schools and students unprepared for AI's opportunities and challenges. And related to the topic today, the massive chainsaw cuts to IES, the Institute of Education Sciences, is absurd; research helps educators and policymakers make good decisions. And that's not something local school districts and states can easily replicate.

Several states – including Virginia, California, and my home state of Oregon — have started developing guidance and policies about AI use in the classroom. But without the Department of Education's leadership, states are left to navigate this complex landscape on their own, which again, creates inconsistencies and exacerbates achievement gaps. And we recognize that local schools and districts already have the authority to determine local decisions whether it be teacher standards, class size, curriculum. That is local but it is that federal investment in research and leadership that makes a difference.

As we continue to grapple with the role of AI in education, we must equip students with skills necessary to survive in today's society and economy. The jobs of tomorrow will demand proficiency in technology, including AI. Without proper education, students – especially those from underfunded districts - will find themselves at a disadvantage, unable to compete in an increasingly globalized economy.

But this issue isn't just about access to technology. It's also about how we use that technology. As AI is integrated into classrooms, we must be diligent, so it does not reinforce existing biases or create new ones. With the Department's staffing cuts and an overwhelming caseload, the Office for Civil Rights in the Department of Education —which addresses discrimination in schools through investigations— is struggling to keep up.

We need federal leadership and research to help guide the use of AI in schools so all students—regardless of their zip code, income, or race—have the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive in this new digital age. That's clear from the testimony of the witnesses today, and it's also clear that eliminating the Department of Education – and for that matter, the National Science Foundation and other research-based entities – is antithetical to that goal.

As we move forward, Democrats are committed to providing equal access to public education for all students. We are looking for reasonable policymakers, from either side of the aisle, to join us in strengthening local schools by preserving these important federal investments in education and education research. This should not be a partisan issue— it affects every student, teacher, and family in the country, and it most certainly affects our potential for growth and competitiveness in a global economy.

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