WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF WAI WAH CHIN

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Committee on Education and Workforce
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I. Introduction

Chairman Kevin Kiley, Ranking Member Suzanne Bonamici, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

My name is Wai Wah Chin, and I'm the founding president of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance of Greater New York, a grassroots all-volunteer organization which has, since inception, fought for meritocracy and the right of all students to be judged by their own merit, and not their melanin or identity group. We have two lawsuits against anti-Asian discrimination by our New York City and State Departments of Education, one regarding the world-renowned New York City Specialized High Schools whose alumni include fifteen Nobel Laureates—more than what most countries have—and we have supported plaintiffs in multiple lawsuits defending merit and opposing discrimination in admissions for both top secondary schools such as Thomas Jefferson High School and universities such as Harvard. I am also an adjunct fellow at the Manhattan Institute, where I focus on education policy, merit, school choice, and equal rights.

Asian-American students have been particularly discriminated against in selective admissions in education for decades, as noted in the landmark *SFFA v Harvard* case. They are also targeted at the K-12 level. Discrimination based on identity group is reprehensible and illegal. Where discrimination exists, merit ceases to be, and where merit ends, discrimination begins. Merit in education extends beyond our prosperity and economic well-being. The importance of merit for the future of our nation cannot be minimized.

II. Merit Matters

Merit matters. It matters every time a patient sees a doctor, every time passengers board a plane, every time we use our phones or conduct an internet search. Merit needs to permeate our schools at every level, where we prepare future citizens to support the growth and prosperity of America. But our students are lagging behind those in other countries.

Evidence from multiple independent assessment systems indicates a consistent pattern that, despite the U.S. having among the highest per-student spending in the world, U.S. student performance has stagnated or declined in core academic subjects, proficiency rates in mathematics and reading

remain low relative to international peers, and our schools do not produce the workforce demanded in high-skill sectors.

Domestic and international data sources, including the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and the National Center for Education Statistics' National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), support these findings. How we address these will determine America's ability to continue to innovate and maintain a lead in core industries and technologies and prosper: support for merit and high, objective standards in education, particularly in the STEM fields, should be maintained and expanded.

III. International Academic Performance

International benchmarking provides a critical external measure of U.S. educational outcomes.

In the most recent 2022 PISA cycle (released in 2023), American 15-year-olds scored 465 in mathematics—well below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average and trailing top performers such as Singapore, Japan, and South Korea.

The gap between U.S. students and top-performing systems exceeds 100 points in mathematics—a gap that size is often interpreted as roughly ***three to four*** years of schooling, based on OECD benchmarks that associate approximately 30–40 PISA points with one year of learning.

The TIMSS 2023 assessment (the latest available administration) further reinforces these findings, indicating U.S. eighth-grade students scored approximately 488 in mathematics and 513 in science —top-performing international systems typically score above 600 on the same scale.

PISA and TIMSS measure different dimensions—applied reasoning and curriculum mastery, respectively—yet both indicate a persistent performance gap between the United States and leading education systems.

IV. Domestic Academic Performance

Domestic assessment results are consistent with international findings. According to NAEP 2024 (released in 2025): Grades 4, 8, and 12 math proficiency rates were 39%, 28% and 22% respectively. Reading outcomes show similar limited proficiency levels, with a substantial share of students performing below basic proficiency. Note that "proficiency" is not considered a high bar but a minimal level.

NAEP ("The Nation's Report Card"), the primary long-term measure of U.S. educational performance, is designed specifically to track national trends over time. Current data show no sustained, broad-based improvement in proficiency rates in recent years.

If 65% were, as traditionally, the passing grade, by NAEP's 22% proficiency rate, American education appears to be failing by a wide margin.

V. Alignment Between Grades and Measured Performance

Evidence from multiple districts suggests increasing divergence between classroom grades and standardized assessment outcomes—grade inflation or even grade fraud are problems as performance and assessment are uncoupled.

In some districts, course pass rates have risen even as performance on external assessments in standardized test performance has remained flat or declined. In certain cases, grading practices have been modified with the stated goal of reducing disparities across student groups, from kindergarten through university, to achieve “equitable grading.”

While policy objectives vary, this divergence raises concerns about the reliability of grades as indicators of academic mastery. When internal grades are not aligned with external benchmarks, it becomes more difficult for students, families, educators, and policymakers to accurately assess student progress. Near universal passing, or “social promotion,” when materials are not mastered, may result in students believing work, learning and results are not necessary, and in students denied an education.

VI. Standardized Testing and Measurement

Standardized assessments provide objectivity, anonymity and transparency. In the face of not just the subjectivity of individual teachers but also the norms of locations, standardized assessments provide consistent measurement across schools and districts, and also give external benchmarking against national or international standards, as well as over time.

Critics of standardized measures point to differences in outcomes across groups as evidence of bias. Correlation, though, is not causation. Such differences are far more likely a reflection of the variation in preparation or instructional quality.

It is noteworthy that most elite universities coast to coast—from Stanford University and California Institute of Technology to Massachusetts Institute of Technology and all but one Ivy League institution—that ceased to require standardized tests for their admissions decisions several years ago have all returned to requiring the tests, recognizing their predictive value in forming strong academic classes. It is also noteworthy that the New York City Department of Education itself commissioned the Metis Study which found in 2013 that the entrance exam to the Specialized High Schools was predictive of student performance; however, the Department held the results for five years before the press obtained the report and made it public.

From a policy perspective, reducing reliance on standardized measurement is more likely to diminish transparency and weaken accountability.

VII. STEM Pipeline and Workforce

Educational outcomes are directly linked to workforce capacity, particularly in science and technology. But the U.S. faces a structural mismatch as STEM occupations are projected to grow far faster than the domestic K–12 pipeline can currently produce qualified graduates for the demand.

This shortfall forces heavy reliance on non-domestic talent, which in the long run will negatively impact American economic growth.

American innovation, prosperity, and national security rely on its ***top, world class*** STEM talent. The lag in U.S. STEM education produces fewer mid-level professionals, but also erodes the U.S. lead in science and technology innovation, in areas from AI to batteries, semiconductors, and quantum computing.

STEM proficiency is not developed overnight; it requires sustained, rigorous instruction beginning from the earliest grades and building cumulatively through advanced coursework. Challenging mathematics, science, and critical-thinking curricula from kindergarten onward are essential to preparing students for university-level STEM majors and, ultimately, for careers in research, invention, and innovation. Merit-based acceleration and selective opportunities at every stage are therefore indispensable for a talent pipeline that can power American leadership in science and technology.

VIII. Selective Schools and Merit-Based Admissions

A. Secondary Schools

Selective public schools have historically served as pipelines for high-level academic and scientific talent. These schools, including nationally top-rated Northern Virginia's Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology (TJ), San Francisco's Lowell High School, Boston Exam Schools (such as Boston Latin), and New York City Specialized High Schools (such as Stuyvesant High School and Bronx High School of Science), have historically relied on merit-based admissions centered on objective academic criteria.

What makes them exceptional above all is the peer group of high-ability, motivated students selected by objective academic merit. Generations have shown that the students themselves—sorted by years of preparation, shared interests and commitment to hard work, and a desire to be challenged—drive the schools' excellence. Top teachers repeatedly emphasize that merit-based selection creates the peer environment essential for the highest levels of academic performance. Every year, far fewer seats are available than the demand for them.

Students in larger school districts who do not get into the most selective high schools should still have options of schools that select or track based on academic performance, with instruction that matches the students' performance levels.

Recent policy changes in some jurisdictions, though, have reduced the selective schools' reliance on objective criteria for admissions, in an attempt to pursue "equity" over academic rigor and merit.

Results show that equity admissions, using metrics like holistic measures (TJ and NYC), geography (Boston), or lotteries (Lowell), have delivered a negative impact on academic performance and advanced coursework enrollment. The anti-Asian discrimination can be glaringly blatant: changes to TJ admissions in 2020, for example, resulted in a drop in admissions of Asian American students from 73% to 54% in the year after the changes.

These schools have contributed greatly to the success of America. Allowed to continue to deliver advanced world-class instruction, they may produce, as New York City's Bronx Science and Stuyvesant High Schools have, a host of innovators and scholars who receive Nobel, Turing, Fields, Wolf, Abel and many other distinguished awards for their work that benefit all the world.

B. Elementary Schools

At the earlier grades, from kindergarten through middle school, accelerated programs, such as gifted and talented (G&T) programs, perform the same function. They gather students who show similar levels of high ability and motivation and allow them to learn at an appropriate pace. High ability students held at a standard pace become bored, underachieve, and disengage. Multiple entry points can accommodate "late bloomers" who qualify when older. Students who cannot perform at an accelerated level are not "left behind" but should receive instruction and challenges calibrated to the highest level they can master.

These programs, at all grade levels, are needed to identify and develop future generations of qualified researchers, innovators, scientists and inventors.

Attacks against these accelerated programs in the name of equity have occurred nationwide. In New York City, universal testing for G&T was replaced by recommendations and non-test measures, resulting in a program that many parents call "gifted and talented in name only," as students are no longer selected for their ability for accelerated education. The new mayor intends to cut the program further; more families may then leave the school system.

These rejections of merit do not come from families. These schools and programs, when run meritocratically with high-level academics, are in high demand. Students and families will welcome more high-quality accelerated programs and schools, and so will future employers and communities.

IX. Instructional Time, Curriculum Expansion, and Academic Focus

Instructional time in core subjects is typically associated with student achievement. High-performing international systems generally maintain sustained emphasis on core academic instruction. Yet, non-academic frameworks are increasingly employed to the detriment of academic learning. Social-emotional learning, culturally responsive pedagogy, and equity-focused frameworks, have been adopted by many school systems, taking away time from academic instruction.

Two of the largest education systems have done so: the New York City Department of Education has incorporated culturally responsive-sustaining education into system-wide guidance and the California Department of Education has developed an ethnic studies model curriculum, both to protests from parents for both the time taken and content. Critics note that beyond taking time away from academic instruction, social-emotional learning can pathologize by turning normal childhood behavioral issues into "psychological" problems that teachers aren't qualified to treat, and

culturally responsive pedagogy and equity-focused frameworks introduce political or social agendas into the classroom, which can divide and alienate.

X. Equity and Outcomes

Policies intended to reduce disparities will produce negative effects if they reduce academic rigor. There may be reduced access to accelerated coursework for high-performing students from all backgrounds, including economically-disadvantaged backgrounds. Lowered standards to equalize outcomes hurt all students, both struggling or advanced. Less instruction time on academic work will be available as time is diverted to equity-related materials. This will result in weaker preparation for college-level work for average students and a waste of opportunities for stronger students. And it would still leave persistent achievement gaps due to the lack of targeted skill development.

By contrast, high-performing charter systems such as Success Academy Charter Schools demonstrate that rigorous standards combined with structured support can produce strong outcomes for low-income black and Hispanic student populations.

XI. Policy Considerations

Key policy areas to consider include:

1. Maintaining standardized assessments
2. Aligning grading with objective benchmarks
3. Expanding accelerated learning opportunities
4. Preserving merit-based admissions
5. Increasing transparency in school performance
6. Expanding school choice

XII. Conclusion

The convergence of international assessments, domestic testing data, and workforce indicators shows that the United States faces structural challenges in educational performance and talent development.

To address these challenges, there must be a renewed commitment to academic rigor, objective measurement, and equal opportunity determined by achievement.

Merit-based systems are one of the most effective structures for expanding opportunities across all socioeconomic and demographic groups. Identifying and supporting strong students from all communities from an early age will help address both individual student needs and America’s ability to maintain national competitiveness and long-term economic growth.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.