



Testimony of Paul Runko
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and Secondary Education
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“Leveling Down: How Equity Policies Undermine Excellence and Harm Students”

Chairman Kiley, Ranking Member Bonamici, and distinguished members of the subcommittee: thank you for inviting me.

My name is Paul Runko, and I’m the Senior Director of K-12 Initiatives at Defending Education.

From its founding, the United States has embraced the virtue that effort and ability should be rewarded. When the Declaration of Independence affirmed the “unalienable right” to “the pursuit of happiness,” it reflected a broader understanding: that individuals should be free to develop their talents and enjoy the fruits of their own labor.

Two hundred and fifty years later, a growing number of American public schools are moving in the opposite direction **by minimizing or eliminating merit-based opportunities** in the name of so-called “equity” initiatives. These policies reduce academic rigor, complicate the measurement of student performance, and ultimately leave all students worse off, including those they are meant to help.

First, gifted education and advanced learning opportunities are increasingly being throttled.

Across the country, school systems have reduced or eliminated gifted and talented programs, and access to advanced coursework. In theory, this would level the playing field. In practice, it slows the progress of high-achieving students while failing to meaningfully support those who are academically struggling.

In 2021, my organization intervened in litigation and successfully defended New York City’s specialized school program from challenges brought against in the name of equity.¹ These programs have long provided a pathway to academic excellence. Students, particularly those from lower-income families who benefit from New York City’s gifted and talented programs, deserve opportunities for academic excellence, not a one-size-fits-all approach that could weaken learning for all students. Instead of raising the ceiling, it lowers the floor...and all students lose.

¹ Defending Education, “Defending Education Prevails in *Integrate NYC v. City of New York et al.*, Preserving Equality in NYC’s Specialized School Programs,” October 24, 2025, <https://defendinged.org/press-releases/defending-education-prevails-in-integrate-nyc-v-city-of-new-york-et-al-preserving-equality-in-nycs-specialized-school-programs/>

Much ink has also been spilled in similar debates over the nation's most respected schools, including Boston Latin School² in Boston, Massachusetts, Thomas Jefferson High School for Science & Technology³ in Fairfax, Virginia and Lowell High School⁴ in San Francisco, California. Voters in San Francisco were so outraged by the changes to Lowell High School admission—from a merit-based process to a lottery process—that three members of the San Francisco Unified School Board were removed from their positions in a recall election in 2022.⁵

The real-world ramifications of limiting merit-based opportunities are clear. In San Francisco, the district eliminated Algebra I in middle school for over a decade, arguing it would improve equity. It did not. Only recently has the district restored algebra⁶ as an option at all middle schools after a test period showed that students with access to algebra made dramatic academic gains. As the school board president acknowledged, “Families want to see a public school system that offers rigorous coursework.”

It's not just parents and school boards; educators have also raised concerns. A teacher at Newton South High School in Newton, Massachusetts described the results of placing students of widely varying ability into the same classes— as “devastating” for both advanced and struggling learners alike.⁷

Second, grading practices are being altered in ways that can obscure student learning.

So-called “equitable grading” policies have been implemented in districts such as Portland Public Schools⁸ in Oregon. These approaches remove accountability measures such as penalties for late work, attendance, or even cheating. In some cases they established grade floors, giving students a minimum grade regardless of performance.

While these changes may increase reported grades, they do not necessarily indicate increased learning. More importantly, these policies risk sending the message to students that effort and

² The New York Times, “Boston Overhauls Admissions to Exclusive Exam Schools,” July 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/15/us/boston-schools-entrance-exams-admissions.html>

³ William McGurn, “An Ugly Game of Race Preferences,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 10, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/an-ugly-game-of-race-preferences-thomas-jefferson-high-school-asian-american-black-hispanic-lawsuit-discrimination-admissions-11641853307>

⁴ Annie Gaus, “Judge Orders School District to Rescind Change to Lottery-Based Admissions at Lowell High,” *The San Francisco Standard*, November 18, 2021, <https://sfstandard.com/education/judge-orders-school-district-to-rescind-change-to-lottery-based-admissions-at-lowell-high/>

⁵ “San Francisco Unified School District Recall, California (2021–2022),” *Ballotpedia*, accessed April 20, 2026, [https://ballotpedia.org/San_Francisco_Unified_School_District_recall,_California_\(2021-2022\)](https://ballotpedia.org/San_Francisco_Unified_School_District_recall,_California_(2021-2022))

⁶ Dana Goldstein, “San Francisco Schools Reconsider Algebra for Middle School,” *The New York Times*, March 24, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/24/us/san-francisco-public-schools-algebra.html>

⁷ Ryan Normandin, “My School Experimented with ‘Education Equity.’ It Failed,” *The Free Press*, December 10, 2024, <https://www.thefp.com/p/newton-massachusetts-multilevel-classrooms-educational-equity-failed>

⁸ Alec Schemmel, “Portland School District Workshops ‘Equitable Grading Practices’ That Outlaw Zeros for Cheating, Missing Work,” *Washington Free Beacon*, August 21, 2023, <https://freebeacon.com/campus/portland-school-district-workshops-equitable-grading-practices-that-outlaw-zeros-for-cheating-missing-work/>

mastery are optional. But accurate grading is not punitive; it is essential. Students and families deserve clear, honest feedback about academic progress so that gaps can be addressed.

These policies are not only ineffective they are also unpopular. A poll conducted by Defending Education in 2025⁹ showed that 72% of parents across the political spectrum oppose these grading practices in schools.

Third, we are seeing a broader cultural shift away from recognizing and celebrating academic excellence.

In some districts, traditional forms of academic recognition have been scaled back or eliminated. Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Northern Virginia, for example, did not designate Honors classes¹⁰ on official school transcripts until community pushback prompted a reconsideration. In Colorado's Cherry Creek School District the honor of Valedictorian¹¹ has been eliminated. In New York City, honor rolls and class rankings were discontinued, with officials arguing that celebrating academic excellence "can be detrimental to learners who find it more difficult to reach academic success."¹²

These decisions reflect a view that celebrating excellence is harmful to the success of struggling learners. But intentionally *not* recognizing achievement does nothing to address gaps in student performance; it simply makes them harder to identify and address.

The foregoing consequences of the degradation of merit are reinforced by a higher education system that seems to care increasingly less about academic achievement, evidenced by colleges and universities admitting students who can't perform basic mathematical computations.¹³

⁹ Defending Education, "Parents Defending Education Poll: Parents Support Girls-Only Spaces in Schools, Oppose Parental Exclusion Policies and Grading for Equity," January 6, 2025, <https://defendinged.org/press-releases/parents-defending-education-poll-parents-support-girls-only-spaces-in-schools-oppose-parental-exclusion-policies-and-grading-for-equity/>

¹⁰ "Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Fairfax, Virginia Fails to Designate Honors Courses on Official School Transcripts," *Defending Education*, accessed April 20, 2026, <https://defendinged.org/incidents/thomas-jefferson-high-school-for-science-and-technology-in-fairfax-virginia-fails-to-designate-honors-courses-on-official-school-transcripts/>

¹¹ Nick Mordowanec, "Schools Eliminating 'Outdated' Valedictorian Status Draws Mixed Reviews," *Newsweek*, March 23, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/schools-eliminating-outdated-valedictorian-status-draws-mixed-reviews-1691049>

¹² Susan Edelman, "By Getting Rid of Grades and Honor Rolls, the DOE Will Hurt Kids," *New York Post*, September 1, 2021, <https://nypost.com/2021/09/01/by-getting-rid-of-grades-and-honor-rolls-the-doe-will-hurt-kids/>

¹³ Alex Oliveira, "The Shocking Rise of Gen Z College Freshmen Who Can't Even Do Middle School Math," *New York Post*, December 3, 2025, <https://nypost.com/2025/12/03/us-news/the-shocking-rise-of-gen-z-college-freshmen-who-cant-even-do-middle-school-math>

In conclusion, merit-based education is not about giving opportunities to some students over others; it is about ensuring that every student is challenged, evaluated honestly, and allowed to reach their full potential.

When schools move away from merit, by limiting advanced opportunities, inflating grades, or downplaying academic success, they lower expectations for all students. Merit-based education not only helps high achievers but also ensures that those who are struggling receive an honest assessment of where they are, so they can get the help they need to catch up and ultimately succeed.

We have a responsibility to help all students become the best versions of themselves. Expanding access to gifted and talented programs, maintaining high standards in grading, and recognizing achievement are not barriers to bridging academic gaps; they are essential to addressing them.

Hard work and excellence are universal values. Every K-12 school should reflect and impart those values, preparing students to succeed and enabling America to thrive.

Thank you.