



Statement before the House Committee on Education and Workforce
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
On the Demise of Academic Excellence

The Demise of Academic Excellence

How the Pursuit of Equity Has Created Mediocrity for All

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Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Bonamici, and distinguished members of the committee.

During my time as a teacher in Title I schools, I watched as year after year expectations for students got only lower and lower, all in the name of “equity.” Every standard to which we used to hold students—from memorizing basic math facts to writing a simple paragraph with proper punctuation—was deconstructed by progressives.

I sit here today frustrated. Frustrated because I’ve watched progressive policies ruin schools, lower standards, and codify into law the soft bigotry of low expectations. Frustrated because those who champion equity and underprivileged students advance the very policies that make schools worse for those students.

The clearest and most recent example of this trend is Mayor Zohran Mamdani’s promise to eliminate gifted and talented education in New York City. Despite his own privileged educational journey from the Bank Street School for Children, with an annual tuition over \$60,000, to the elite Bronx High School of Science, the mayor now wants to pull up the academic excellence ladder behind him.¹

It’s not just the Big Apple. In 2014, San Francisco removed the option for eighth graders to take Algebra I, with the hope that it would result in more equitable access to advanced courses in high school.² A research paper from scholars at Stanford University found that this policy resulted not in more equitable access to advanced courses in high school but rather in fewer students overall taking advanced courses. Concurrently, more affluent students reached calculus and other higher-level math classes through extracurricular measures, such as summer classes and tutoring, that are less accessible to impoverished students.³ What’s more, looking beyond course enrollment to academic outcomes, achievement gaps on standardized tests got worse after the San Francisco experiment in algebra for none, according to *Education Next*.⁴

Outside of major cities, American schools offer meager gifted and talented programming. Research generally finds that acceleration, in which students learn through accelerated curricula in advanced classes, is the best method to serve gifted students.⁵ But a 2019 survey found that three-quarters of schools that offer any kind of gifted and talented programming offer only supplemental activities, such as projects or games for gifted students, rather than the accelerated curriculum their abilities require.⁶

Removing gifted programs doesn’t solve inequities; instead, it often closes off the only route that underprivileged students have to advanced learning and the career pathways that come from it. Affluent students get accelerated education through supplemental services, and poor students get fewer options.

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At the school and district level, equity grading is yet another policy pushed by progressives that accomplishes only lower standards and depressed achievement. Stories abound of schools in Virginia, Oregon, California, New York, Georgia, and Nevada implementing more lenient grading scales, no-zeroes grading (in which a student receives partial credit even for entirely incomplete work), unlimited retakes, no late penalties, no homework grades, and no grades for participation.⁷

Last year, researchers from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute partnered with the RAND Corporation to conduct a representative survey of teachers on the topic. Their top-line finding: Over half of teachers report that their schools have implemented at least one of these policies. As for their opinion on the matter, a full 81 percent of teachers oppose giving partial credit for no work, with 51 percent labeling this approach “very harmful.” Majorities of those polled also oppose the abolition of late penalties and support grading homework and participation.⁸

Several studies have confirmed that students learn more when they face tougher grading. If you set high standards for students, they will reach them. Conversely, if you allow students to turn in work late or not at all, then that is precisely what they will do.⁹

Many prominent Democrats have also spoken out against charter schools. Senator Elizabeth Warren, for example, claimed that charter schools “strain the resources of school districts and leave students behind, primarily students of color.”¹⁰

Quite to the contrary, a 2015 report from Stanford’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes on urban charter school students found that they receive “the equivalent of roughly 40 days of additional learning per year in math and 28 additional days of learning per year in reading.”¹¹ Moreover, as the Fordham Institute’s Mike Petrilli has observed, there is a “large and ever-growing research literature” confirming that the competition from charter schools does indeed improve local public schools.¹²

Finally, of all the ill-conceived policies, the turn against testing in recent years is the clearest example of lowered expectations. More than any other mechanism, standardized tests and exit exams have exposed the inequalities and failures of our education system. But instead of fixing the failures, progressives have chosen to shoot the messenger.

In recent years, Massachusetts, New York City, and Oregon have all opted to remove exit exams—the final demonstration of K–12 systems’ success or failure—as a graduation requirement.¹³ But they’re only following an ongoing trend. In 2012, half of all states required exit exams. That number has since dropped to six.¹⁴ In the words of my colleague Frederick M. Hess, “It’s hard to think of a policy more threatening to minority kids than the insistence that it’s okay for them to graduate without being able to read.”¹⁵

Many universities, too, have also gone testing-free, and the result again is an increase in inequities. A paper last year from the National Bureau of Economic Research concluded that “test score optional policies harm the likelihood of elite college admission for high achieving applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds.”¹⁶

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The reason is simple: Test scores are correlated with socioeconomic background—affluent students tend to perform better—but essays, extracurricular participation, and other so-called holistic measures are even *more* highly correlated with socioeconomic background.¹⁷ Affluent families have the cultural capital to secure prestigious letters of recommendation, the time to transport their children to after-school activities, and the resources to pay for writing services. Meanwhile, students from underprivileged backgrounds, who lack these resources, have no such privilege.

In every case, progressives have implemented a regime of equity in which everyone gets nothing. Instead, a system that prizes excellence, one that always implements the most meritocratic approach, is best. And in every case, the policy solution is simple: Keep the standards high.

Yes, there are currently inequalities in access to gifted education, but the response should be to improve and reform identification methods, not to abolish the programs. How can we better screen students for academic aptitude, better match curricula and instruction to students' academic potential, and provide students more options? We accept differing gifts in music, art, and athletics, and we accept the premise that society should cultivate a child's strengths and talents. Importantly, universal screening for gifted and talented education increases the representation of low-income and minority students in gifted education.¹⁸ But in New York City and elsewhere, there's no discussion of improvement—only an assault on and deconstruction of the very notions of merit and excellence.

Instead of passing laws to allow the expansion of successful charter schools—and thereby supporting good schools in any form—Democrats block charter schools' acquisition of buildings, stymie their authorization process, place state and city caps on their numbers, refuse to fund them fairly, and berate them from the bully pulpit. In the District of Columbia alone, thousands of students sit on waiting lists for charter schools, unsure if they'll be enrolled in a quality school. Expanding access to successful charter schools is arguably the single most promising policy to obliterate the achievement gap, but progressives oppose them regardless.

Standardized tests are imperfect. They cannot capture all that an individual is. But the alternatives introduce subjectivity, caprice, favoritism, lotteries of chance, and quotas. Tests may be imperfect, and a family's ability to afford additional supports may alter their results—but they're the best and fairest option we have.

As for exit exams, when students know that their education career ends with a final measurement of their knowledge and academic skills, it encourages them to learn throughout their educational journey. If they can get to the end of their schooling and graduate having learned nothing, why bother trying?

I have had a front-row seat in schools for the last decade, watching as progressives have waged damaging wars against merit, all in the name of equity, and blocked meaningful reforms at every level. I want to thank this committee for the opportunity to speak, and I implore you all to reject equity policies that only make schools worse for the students they purport to help and instead adopt an excellence agenda focused on high standards, merit, and academic rigor.

¹ Greg Toppo, “How Zohran Mamdani Bucked the Establishment and Won Election—in Middle School,” *The 74*, January 5, 2026, <https://www.the74million.org/article/how-zohran-mamdani-bucked-the-establishment-and-won-election-in-middle-school/>; Bank Street School for Children, “Tuition & Financial Aid,” <https://school.bankstreet.edu/admissions-2/tuition-financial-aid/>; and Matt Flegenheimer and Benjamin Oreskes, “How an Elite Public High School Set Mamdani on the Path to Politics,” *The New York Times*, October 20, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/20/nyregion/mamdani-bronx-science-high.html>.

² *The Economist*, “San Francisco’s ‘Woke Maths’ Experiment,” May 18, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2023/05/18/san-franciscos-woke-maths-experiment>.

³ Elizabeth Huffaker et al., “Ahead of the Game? Course-Taking Patterns Under a Math Pathways Reform,” EdWorkingPaper No. 23-734 (Brown University, Annenberg Institute, March 2023), <https://doi.org/10.26300/yk56-yy47>.

⁴ 3. Tom Loveless, “San Francisco’s Detracking Experiment,” *Education Next*, March 29, 2022, <https://www.educationnext.org/san-franciscos-detracking-experiment/>.

⁵ National Working Group on Advanced Education, *Building a Wider, More Diverse Pipeline of Advanced Learners*, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, June 12, 2023, <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/building-wider-more-diverse-pipeline-advanced-learners>.

⁶ David Long et al., “National Center for Research on Gifted Education (NCRGE) Brief on Gifted Education Curriculum and Gifted Achievement Growth of Gifted Students in Three States,” National Center for Research on Gifted Education and University of Connecticut, April 2019, <https://ncrge.uconn.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/982/2019/04/NCRGE-Brief-on-Gifted-Education-Curriculum-and-Gifted-Achievement-Growth.pdf>.

⁷ Frederick M. Hess and Eric Wolf Welch, “Should Schools Adopt Equitable Grading Practices? A Teacher Voices His Concerns,” Thomas B. Fordham Institute, August 29, 2024, <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/should-schools-adopt-equitable-grading-practices-teacher-voices-his-concerns>; Alec Schemmel, “Portland School District Workshops ‘Equitable Grading Practices’ That Outlaw Zeros for Cheating, Missing Work,” *The Washington Free Beacon*, August 21, 2023, <https://freebeacon.com/campus/portland-school-district-workshops-equitable-grading-practices-that-outlaw-zeros-for-cheating-missing-work/>; Ileana Najarro, “A Guide to Equitable Grading in Schools,” *Education Week*, April 16, 2025, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/a-guide-to-equitable-grading-in-schools-downloadable/2025/04>; Paul Nelson, Schenectady Schools Adopt New Equity Grading System Aimed at Equity and Empowering Teachers, *Times Union*, October 9, 2023, <https://www.timesunion.com/news/article/schenectady-schools-adopts-new-equity-grading-18415330.php>; Taylor So, “Better Late Than Never: APS Enforces New Late Policy,” *The Warrior Wire*, August 18, 2023, <https://www.thewarriorwire.org/12781/news/better-late-than-never-aps-enforces-new-late-policy/>; and Clark County School District, “CCSD Updates Guidelines to Reflect Teacher Feedback,” press release, July 28, 2023,

<https://newsroom.ccsd.net/ccsd-updates-guidelines-to-reflect-teacher-feedback/>.

⁸ David Griffith and Adam Tyner, “Equitable” Grading Through the Eyes of Teachers, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, August 20, 2025, <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/equitable-grading-through-eyes-teachers>.

⁹ Seth Gershenson, *Great Expectations: The Impact of Rigorous Grading Practices on Student Achievement*, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, February 4, 2020, <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/great-expectations-impact-rigorous-grading-practices-student-achievement>; and Philip Babcock, “Real Costs of Nominal Grade Inflation? New Evidence from Student Course Evaluations,” *Economic Inquiry* 48, no. 4 (2010): 983–96, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-7295.2009.00245.x>.

¹⁰ Bruce Fuller, “The Charter School Debate Is More Complex Than Either Side Admits,” *The Hechinger Report*, December 12, 2019, <https://hechingerreport.org/opinion-the-charter-school-debate-is-more-complex-than-either-side-admits/>.

¹¹ Stanford University, Center for Research on Education Outcomes, *Urban Charter School Study Report on 41 Regions*, 2015, <https://urbancharters.stanford.edu/summary.php>.

¹² Amber M. Northern and Michael J. Petrilli, foreword to *The Education Competition Index: Quantifying Competitive Pressure in America’s 125 Largest School Districts*, by David Griffith and Jeanette Luna, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, December 5, 2023, <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/education-competition-index-quantifying-competitive-pressure-americas-125-largest>. The research Northern and Petrilli cite is David N. Figlio et al., “Competitive Effects of Charter Schools,” paper presented at the 6th IZA Institute of Labor Economics Workshop on the Economics of Education (virtual), September 22, 2021, https://conference.iza.org/edu_2021/viewProgram?conf_id=3392; Matthew Ridley and Camille Terrier, “Fiscal and Education Spillovers from Charter School Expansion,” Working Paper No. 25070 (National Bureau of Economic Research, September 2018), <https://www.nber.org/papers/w25070>; Sarah A. Cordes, “In Pursuit of the Common Good: The Spillover Effects of Charter Schools on Public School Students in New York City,” *Education Finance and Policy* 13, no. 4 (2018): 484–512, https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00240; Sarah R. Cohodes and Katharine S. Parham, “Charter Schools’ Effectiveness, Mechanisms, and Competitive Influence,” Working Paper No. 28477 (National Bureau of Economic Research, May 2021), <https://www.nber.org/papers/w28477>; and Dick M. Carpenter II and Paul M. Medina, “Exploring the Competitive Effects of Charter Schools,” *International Journal of Educational Reform* 20, no. 1 (2011): 33–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/105678791102000103>.

¹³ Michael Jonas, “Voters in Massachusetts End MCAS Graduation Test Requirement,” *Rhode Island Current*, November 6, 2024, <https://rhodeislandcurrent.com/2024/11/06/voters-end-mcas-graduation-test-requirement/>; Alex Zimmerman, “NY Graduation Overhaul: State Approves ‘Portrait of a Graduate’ as Regents Exams Are on the Way Out,” *Chalkbeat*, July 14, 2025, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/newyork/2025/07/14/new-york-board-of-regents-exam-portrait-graduate-requirements/>; and Hannah Ray Lambert, “Blue State Suspends Basic Skills Graduation Requirement Again, Citing Harm to Students of Color,” Fox News, October 23, 2023, <https://www.foxnews.com/education/blue-state-suspends-basic-skills-graduation-requirement-again-citing-harm-to-students-of-color>. The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, 501(c)(3) educational organization and does not take institutional positions on any issues. The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author.

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¹⁴ Shelby McIntosh, *State High School Exit Exams: A Policy in Transition*, George Washington University, Center on Education Policy, September 2012, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED535957>; and Kalyn Belsha, “Many States Picked Diploma Pathways over HS Exit Exams. Did Students Benefit?,” *The 74*, June 1, 2025, <https://www.the74million.org/article/many-states-picked-diploma-pathways-over-hs-exit-exams-did-students-benefit/>.

¹⁵ Frederick M. Hess, “Oregon Democrats Resurrect the Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations,” *The Dispatch*, August 12, 2021, <https://thedispatch.com/article/oregon-democrats-resurrect-the-soft/>.

¹⁶ Bruce Sacerdote et al., “How Test Optional Policies in College Admissions Disproportionately Harm High Achieving Applicants from Disadvantaged Backgrounds,” Working Paper No. 33389 (National Bureau of Economic Research, January 2025), <https://www.nber.org/papers/w33389>.

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¹⁸ David Card and Laura Giuliano, “Universal Screening Increases the Representation of Low-Income and Minority Students in Gifted Education,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in the United States of America* 113, no. 48 (2016): 13678–83, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5137751/>.