

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Suzanne Bonamici (OR-01)

Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education

"Reimagining Education: How Charter Schools Are Closing Gaps and Opening Doors"

Wednesday, May 14, 2025 | 10:15 a.m.

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

Charter schools, as a reminder, are public schools that receive taxpayer dollars. At their best, they offer the potential for innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness to community needs. But at their worst, and too often in practice, they operate without adequate oversight, without sufficient safeguards for civil rights, and without the transparency required of traditional public schools. That matters, because the consequences fall most heavily on Black and brown students.

This Saturday marks 71 years since the landmark Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, yet our nation still struggles to provide equitable access and opportunity for all students. Without meaningful guardrails, charter schools can become a driver of segregation. We have seen this before. After *Brown*, resistance to integration took many forms: private segregation academies, neighborhood school policies, and later, school choice plans. Today, we must ask whether we are repeating that history under a different name.

The data is sobering. Charter schools, on average, are more racially isolated than traditional public schools in nearly every state and major metropolitan area. Research shows that the expansion of charter schools has measurably increased school segregation. It has reduced the likelihood that Black and Hispanic students attend school with peers of other races. And that racial isolation is often paired with economic isolation, compounding inequality.

This is not a theoretical concern. Segregated schools are under-resourced schools. They are more likely to employ less-experienced teachers, offer fewer advanced courses, and struggle to provide essential student supports. When we concentrate disadvantage, we limit opportunity. That harms not only students of color, but the entire promise of public education.

Research shows that many charter schools face additional challenges. For example, teachers tend to be less experienced and have higher turnover rates than those in traditional public schools. Charter schools close at a higher rate than traditional public schools. And they have been found to have higher risks of waste, fraud, and abuse than traditional public schools.

When I served in the Oregon legislature, I was on a committee formed to examine Oregon charter school policies and practices 10 years after our enabling statute passed. We had many questions then that remain unresolved today, including - How are charter schools determining which students to enroll? Who serves on their boards? To whom are they accountable? What happens to students when charter schools close? How can we prevent charter schools with poor outcomes, especially online charter schools, from proliferating?

A November 2024 report by the National Center for Charter School Accountability and the Network for Public Education called “Doomed to Fail: An Analysis of Charter School Closures from 1998 to 2022” found that more than 25 percent of charter schools close within five years of opening, and this increases to 49 percent within fifteen years of opening.

Several audits by the Office of Inspector General in the U.S. Department of Education identified problems with charter schools and charter management organizations, including conflicts of interest; lack of accountability of federal funds; waste, fraud, and abuse; failure to provide students the services required by federal programs; and unresolved compliance issues, among others.

This hearing is not about attacking charter schools as a concept. It is about our responsibility to everyone. Our responsibility to ensure that public dollars support schools that serve the public good. Our responsibility to ensure that the growth of charter schools does not come at the expense of equity, inclusion, and civil rights and the rest of more than 90 percent of students who attend public schools. And our responsibility is to examine whether current policies help us move forward or if they reinforce the very barriers we have spent generations trying to dismantle.

Congress has the tools to help. The *Strength in Diversity Act* and the *Equity and Inclusion Enforcement Act* offer targeted support to school districts that are working to develop, implement, or expand desegregation initiatives. And the bill that I co-lead with Representative DeLauro, the *Championing Honest and Responsible Transparency in Education Reform (or CHARTER) Act*, would prevent for-profit entities from managing charter schools and siphoning taxpayer dollars from children for their financial gain rather than the students they serve.

Together, these bills would help close achievement gaps, support integration and accountability, and fulfill the vision laid out in Brown. But we must also look beyond charter schools as part of this conversation. We should be asking what we can do to improve our nation’s public education system for all students in all public schools to help them succeed to the best of their abilities.

In 2015, we passed the bipartisan *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA). The law intended to ensure that funding continued to be directed to those most in need and meaningful steps would be taken to address achievement gaps, while at the same time providing significantly more flexibility to states and districts to determine how to make these improvements. It focuses on a well-rounded education that includes the arts and better-quality assessments. ESSA has not been implemented with fidelity since it was signed into law; that would be a worthy task for this committee.

I would be remiss if I didn’t mention the irony of my Republican colleagues continuing their hearings about “closing gaps and opening doors” in education while the president is actively dismantling the Department of Education and terminating grants for public education initiatives. President Trump’s budget proposed to invest additional funds in charter schools while slashing \$4.5 billion from other K-12 education programs. Whereas, again, as a reminder, 90 percent of students are enrolled. Republicans on this committee just voted to cut \$330 billion from higher education, ending the student loan programs that truly open doors of opportunity for underserved communities.

I hope that today we will see a real commitment to making public education accessible, accountable, and exceptional for every student.

Schools that receive public dollars must be part of a public education system that is accountable, transparent, and committed to equity. We cannot afford to ignore the evidence. We cannot allow innovation to become a shield for inequality. If we are serious about giving every child, regardless of race or ZIP code, a fair shot at success, then we must design our school system to deliver on that promise.

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