

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

Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education

*"Generational Learning Loss: How Pandemic School Closures Hurt Students"*

Wednesday, July 26, 2023 | 10:15 a.m.

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Thank you very much, Chair Bean. And thank you to our witnesses for being with us to discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected students, and how we can help them recover equitably and effectively.

I want to highlight that we're six months into this Congress, and this is our first hearing dedicated to missed learning time. My Republican colleagues claim they want to address this issue and help students get back on track. Yet, so far, their legislative priorities have focused on culture wars and defunding public schools—including a bill they passed last week that would threaten critical resources for schools that provide shelter for migrants in need.

But today, I hope my colleagues can put politics aside so we can have a productive as the Charman said, and robust conversation and move in the right direction on behalf of students.

In 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, school districts were forced to close classrooms to mitigate the spread of the virus and to protect students and staff and their families.

School leaders did not take this decision lightly. Parents and teachers knew that remote learning could hinder students' learning – especially in the absence of digital equity. But they were also rightly concerned for the health and safety of students and staff and their families—especially because of the lack of testing, tracing, personal protective equipment, and vaccines at the outset of the pandemic.

It was an extremely challenging and stressful time, as we all remember. We didn't know how bad the pandemic would be, or how long it would last. Unfortunately, the Trump administration made things worse by politicizing the crisis and failing to act quickly to implement a science-driven response to COVID-19.

Remember it would be over by Easter.

It is important to keep in mind that schools entered the crisis with a \$23 billion racial funding gap that already existed between school districts serving mostly students of color and school districts serving mostly white students.

And now numerous studies and national assessment results are showing the inevitable: missed learning time hurt student performance and importantly, it deepened pre-existing achievement gaps.

According to recent data released by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, students have suffered a significant decline in achievement across several subjects and grade levels. The students who fared the worst were those who were already struggling prior to the pandemic, particularly Black and Latino students and students living in poverty.

In early 2021, Congressional Democrats and President Biden passed the American Rescue Plan Act, which delivered the largest, one-time federal investment in K-12 education in our nation's history. And by targeting this funding toward the highest-need learners, we worked with the Biden Administration to reopen schools safely with a focus on students' academic, social, and emotional recovery.

In the short term, this historic funding helped schools bridge the digital divide and also avoid extended gaps in instruction.

And in the long term, it has provided students, parents, and teachers with resources to address missed learning time. And thanks to the American Rescue Plan, school districts around the country – including in my home state of Oregon – have been able to hire teachers and tutors, keep their doors open during the summer for academic and extracurricular enrichment, renovate aging HVAC systems to improve the health and safety of students and staff, and design other evidence-based programs to combat missed learning time.

For example, Portland Public Schools used COVID relief funds to make direct investments in students' academic, social, and emotional success and well-being. They hired learning acceleration specialists, invested in summer programming, and implemented professional development for teachers to help them effectively facilitate recovery from the pandemic. In Oregon, American Rescue Plan dollars made – and continue to make – a difference for students and families.

I want to note that the CARES Act in early 2020 and the Consolidated Appropriations Act in late 2020 were bipartisan, but unfortunately, the Republican approach to missed learning time since then has been to leave schools to fend for themselves and to make repeated, brazen attempts to fund unaccountable private schools with taxpayer dollars.

In fact, Democrats on this Committee are especially concerned at present by House Republicans' most recent efforts to defund public schools, including a proposed budget that decimates key resources for our children's education. Under this proposal, funding would be slashed from programs aimed at addressing missed learning time and supporting students from low-income families. It would kick teachers out of classrooms by eliminating funding that helps recruit, retain, and develop high-quality educators.

Democrats have delivered on our commitment to helping students, parents, and schools overcome missed learning time, but those promises and policies are now being undermined unfortunately by an extreme MAGA Republican agenda that's putting politics over people and culture wars over classrooms.

Instead, I urge my colleagues on the other side of the aisle to us in investing in public education and evidence-based programs that address missed learning time and focus on student success at every level.

Finally, I want to remind my colleagues of some sobering COVID statistics. Since the start of the pandemic, more than 6,216,000 Americans were hospitalized, and more than 1,135,000 Americans died. Yes, my colleagues and I are deeply concerned about missed learning, but I also urge us to keep in mind the lives lost - as well as the lives lost as well as the lives saved by limiting risks of exposure.

And Mr. Chairman I would like to introduce into the record there's an article from Education Week titled "Over 1,000 Educators Died From COVID. Here's the Story of One", and from the Chalkbeat publication, "The Pandemic's Toll: Study Documents Fatality Rates of Teachers, Child Care Workers in 2020."

Thank you, again, Mr. Chairman, and I thank you to our witnesses. And I look forward to a productive conversation.