

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

Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education

"Foundations First: Reclaiming Reading and Math through Proven Instruction"

2175 Rayburn House Office Building

Wednesday, September 3, 2025 | 10:15 a.m.

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

Welcome back. I expect that we have all spent the previous month visiting, learning, and connecting with our constituents. And although we may disagree on some things, we surely can and should agree that our nation's children deserve an education that allows them to reach their full potential and that is safe.

The inspiring educators, school administrators, and bright young people I meet with in schools in Northwest Oregon always remind me of this.

That being said, unfortunately, as we are having this hearing today, people in Minneapolis are still reeling from yet another school shooting – this time at Annunciation Catholic School. The start of the school year should begin with joyous activities – not burying classmates or recovering from bullet wounds.

And as Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey said in the aftermath, we can't "just say, 'This is about thoughts and prayers right now.'" These kids were literally praying," when the shooter attacked. Congress needs to act to prevent gun violence, and after every senseless shooting, I am increasingly more frustrated that we don't. And this is relevant, because we want kids to be focusing on learning, not worried about safety.

Now, to the issue at hand: improving math and reading instruction for students. I'm looking forward to this hearing, and I have some optimism that we can find some bipartisan agreement, as we did with our hearings on screen time and child care.

But I need to start with a few reminders: the Trump administration is trying to eliminate the Department of Education; they are proposing a 67% cut to IES, the Institute of Education Sciences, where important education research is done; delayed funding along with massive cuts of Department of Education staff who administer important programs like Title I and IDEA have already caused chaos in public school districts across the country; and finally, as we frequently discuss, curriculum decisions are made locally, not by Congress.

That being said, I trust that we all agree that literacy in reading and math are important for success in school and the future. We can also agree that the latest NAEP scores show room for improvement, no doubt about it.

As we have this discussion, I urge us to keep in mind that this year's NAEP results now have more specific information about the socioeconomic status of students. Those results show, for example, that 77% of fourth-graders from the highest socioeconomic status scored above the national average, while only 34% of students from the lowest socioeconomic status performed above average.

I just hope we keep these disparities in mind during our hearing today and beyond. This committee works on things like school nutrition, and if kids are hungry, they can't learn.

Also looking back on the screen time hearing, a growing number of schools and districts and even states are banning cell phone use during the day; it will be interesting to see how students do in math and reading once those bans have been in place for a while.

But here's the bottom line: without long-term and sustained federal investments, students and schools will lack the tools, the resources, and, importantly, the research they need to best teach all students to learn, including math and reading.

The overwhelming majority of students in the United States, about 90%, attend public schools. Public education is the foundation on which we build our future. Public schools serve the needs of every child, regardless of background or income.

That's why we must invest in public education and, I submit, oppose "voucher scams" that funnel taxpayer dollars to private institutions.

That said, I—and most Democrats—support a wide range of options within the public school system, including magnet schools, where I have seen students thrive when they have these options. For example, we have some of the top magnet programs in the state in the district I represent, including Portland Oregon's Benson Polytechnic High School, a CTE-magnet school that offers programs in automotive, building construction, electrical engineering, health occupations, media production, and more. Those are engaged students who are learning.

And the Beaverton district has many choices: an international magnet, an Arts and Communication magnet, and the Beaverton Academy of Science and Engineering – again, programs that engage students, keep them in school, increase attendance, and make them more likely to succeed.

These valuable opportunities are offered to all students – and most importantly, they are offered at free public schools that are required to comply with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Unfortunately, my colleagues have just passed, and the President signed into law the 'Big, Ugly Law,' which will create the first nationwide school voucher program, effectively diverting taxpayer funding and resources away from public schools.

That enables donors of school voucher programs to receive a 100 percent tax credit for contributions, elevating donations to voucher programs above all other donations, including donations made to food pantries, or hospitals, or places of worship, and every other kind of charity.

Additionally, the new law will allow individuals earning up to and including 300 percent of the area median gross income to qualify to use the vouchers to send their children to private schools, including religious schools.

An analysis by the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy found that this new private school voucher program could cost \$56 billion per year—more than all current federal K-12 spending combined.

As I said before, there is room for improvement and families want to have options. But the newly established national school voucher program is counterproductive and will make things worse for the majority 90 percent of students who attend public schools, which is especially concerning in rural areas, like in parts of the state that I represent, where there are no other options. They are already short on funding, and there is no other school a student could use a voucher for.

Instead of spending time and resources on voucher schemes that don't work, and I'll be introducing a very recent study proving that, Congress should focus on holding the Education Department accountable for carrying out its mission to promote a high-quality education, free from discrimination, for all students.

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