

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

Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Subcommittee Hearing

“Back to Basics: America’s Founding, Civics, and Self-Government in K-12 Curricula”

2175 Rayburn House Office Building

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

As we discuss the state of our K-12 education system, I want to emphasize that the federal government does not dictate curriculum – nor should we. This was once a noncontroversial, bipartisan value. I find it interesting that many of my colleagues view school curriculum as a state and local issue only when schools are teaching topics in a way they agree with. The majority titled this hearing “Back to Basics: America’s Founding, Civics, and Self-Government in K-12 Curricula” yet they often advocate to block the teaching of facts and ideas set by state and local communities.

Based on today’s testimony, one thing my colleagues and I can agree on is the importance of civics education. Students should be critical thinkers and informed participants in our democracy. They should know and understand accurate and culturally relevant history. I strongly support the great work of the National Center for Civics Education – which runs excellent programs like Project Citizen with a civics education program for middle, secondary, and post-secondary students, as well as youth and adult groups. In my home state of Oregon high school teams participate in the Center’s We the People competition, organized in Oregon by our local nonprofit Civics Learning Project. I assure you that the students who participate know more about the Constitution than most members of Congress.

Although we all appear to support civics education, states and school districts ultimately decide what to teach their students. This is how our national public school system has worked since “America’s Founding.”

Instead of spending time interfering with state and local decision-making, we should talk about issues that Congress does have the power to influence. We should talk about the unmet needs of students; students with disabilities, students from low-income families, students of color, students who need counseling or behavioral health care, and youth experiencing homelessness or living in foster care.

Today Committee Democrats will focus on one of those important issues: the infrastructure of our schools. Our committee should be finding ways to make a real, tangible, and positive difference in the lives of students, teachers, and our communities. That’s why we’re here.

School infrastructure is not just about the walls and ceilings of school buildings; it’s about the entire environment in which our children learn. Right now, far too many of those environments are unsafe, outdated, and desperately in need of repair.

The average public school in America is more than 50 years old, and many have been crumbling for decades—long before the pandemic. Poor ventilation, broken heating and cooling systems, outdated plumbing, and lack of modern digital infrastructure are just a few of the issues students and teachers face daily. These conditions are not only a distraction; they pose serious health and safety risks to the millions of children and educators who learn and work in these facilities. The need for investment in public schools is evident.

That's why I want to emphasize the need for Congress to pass the Rebuild America's Schools Act—a crucial piece of legislation introduced by Ranking Member Scott and Representative Norcross.

This bill represents a comprehensive investment in our schools' physical and digital infrastructure, focusing on those that face the most significant challenges—especially in high-poverty communities. And I didn't know we were going to talk about ranking today, so I didn't bring the statistics. But if you adjust for income and socioeconomic status, you'll see a difference in school rankings.

This investment is not just about repairing buildings, it's about investing in the health and safety of students and investing in our future as a nation.

This is not just a moral imperative; it's an economic one. According to the Economic Policy Institute, each \$1 billion spent on construction generates nearly 18,000 jobs. This means that the Rebuild America's Schools Act's \$130 billion investment would create more than 2 million jobs. When we invest in our schools, we're improving learning environments while also stimulating the economy by creating good-paying jobs across the country.

Notably, nearly 54 percent of school districts report needing to replace or upgrade critical infrastructure in their school buildings. A 2020 GAO (Government Accountability Office) report confirmed that this neglect threatens students' health and academic success. This is especially important in low-income and rural areas where it's harder to raise local and state revenue.

We can and must do better. There are many important issues we need to address in education, and the condition of our school buildings should not be an afterthought. It should be a top priority. Children cannot learn in an unsafe environment, and a teacher cannot teach effectively in a building that's falling apart.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today, and I hope we can all agree on the urgency of this issue. Our children, teachers, and communities deserve schools that are safe, healthy, and conducive to learning.

Thank you, and I yield back.