

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

Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, Secondary Education Hearing

"Safeguarding Student Privacy and Parental Rights: A Review of FERPA and PPRA"

2261 Rayburn House Office Building

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

First and foremost, I want to make abundantly clear that parental engagement is important to student success.

It has been proven that when families are involved in their children's education, students perform better academically, have better behavior, and develop stronger social skills. We all want the best for our children, and that includes strong, supportive relationships between home and school. On that, Mr. Chairman, we agree – we all agree on that.

But I expect that the conversation we are having today is not about finding new ways to get parents involved in their children's education. Nor will it be about protecting students' privacy, which is also what we should be doing. It's about parents who think it's their right to impose their beliefs on everyone. So instead of empowering parents to be engaged in their children's education, this is about forcing teachers into situations where they are expected to violate the trust students place in them. That kind of breach has the potential to undermine the foundation of the student-teacher relationship, which is a relationship built on trust and care.

Students need to feel safe, be safe, and be supported in school, and that begins with a teacher who is there to guide them without fear of compromising that trust. The reality is that in some circumstances, when teachers are forced to disclose information, it may jeopardize a student's safety or well-being. That may result in risking that student's trust, but also risking their academic and emotional success. When students can't trust their teachers, it affects their ability to learn, grow, and succeed. It's as simple as that.

It's also important to remember that children are constantly changing and evolving. I know, I raised two of them. They may experiment with names, identities, and interests. Forcing teachers to "out" every student every time they want to go by a different name or engage in some form of self-expression is an unrealistic expectation and disrupts the teacher-student bond. Here's an example: children like "Robert," who prefers his nickname, "Bobby." That's just one example of the shifts students make as they grow. I used to be Susie, and then I was Sue, and now I'm Suzanne, and I'm sometimes called Susan. Why should a teacher be forced to notify parents every time a child chooses to be called something different? And, more importantly, why are we putting teachers in the uncomfortable position of quashing a student's curiosity and growth and betraying that student's trust?

This is not a small matter. In some cases, this could possibly lead to "forced outing," which can have very harmful consequences. We know that some students, particularly those in vulnerable situations, face homelessness or abusive circumstances when they are outed before they are ready. Research shows that LGBTQ+ youth are over 120 percent more likely to experience homelessness than their non-LGBTQ+ peers. The right to privacy and the ability to trust one's teacher is especially critical for these students who do not have or do not feel they have a

trusted adult at home. I want to express – and this is a difficult thing to talk about, but it’s important to say. It would be ideal if all parents were supportive of their LGBTQ+ kids. Sadly, that is not the reality. We must protect all children—especially the most vulnerable, those who may not have the safe and supportive home environment we hope all children enjoy, but sadly do not.

I also want to touch on something larger. I remain deeply concerned about the political agenda driving this conversation. This hearing is being framed around an issue that misrepresents the concerns of parents and educators. I hope we can resolve these issues and really work together on finding common ground on how we protect privacy rights and strengthen FERPA, but I don’t want to have another divisive culture war that distracts from the urgent needs of our nation’s students and families.

We’re seeing this administration’s ongoing effort to dismantle the Department of Education through six unconstitutional inter-agency agreements that shift crucial responsibilities to other departments, including the Departments of the Interior, State, Health and Human Services, and Labor. The transfer of these programs is not only highly inefficient and wasteful but will also result in inconsistent enforcement of federal education policy. When education programs are scattered across a large number of federal agencies, this has led to fragmented, duplicative, and often inconsistent policies regarding education.

I hope we can focus on building stronger partnerships between families and schools, and not on divisive measures that threaten to undermine the student-teacher relationship and hinder student outcomes.

So, we stand firmly on this side of the aisle in support of parental rights, but we also stand for the rights of students to feel safe, supported, and respected in their classrooms. We stand for the rights of teachers to do their jobs without being forced to violate the trust of their students. And we stand for the idea that education should be about nurturing the whole child, not about creating political distractions.

Mr. Chairman, I do look forward to the testimony, and I yield back.