

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Bonamici (OR-01)

Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education

"Proven Results: Highlighting the Benefits of Charter Schools for Students and Families"

2175 Rayburn House Office Building

Wednesday, March 6, 2024 | 10:15 a.m.

Thank you, Chair Bean. And thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

As recognized by the Founding Fathers, numerous Supreme Court justices, and many state constitutions, the provision of free, high-quality public education to all children serves a compelling community interest. And Mr. Chairman, I see your scenario not as a case for more charter schools but as a case for making all public schools the best they can be.

You know, when we invest in education, we are investing in our future. Members of this committee should understand that children, regardless of where they live or how involved their parents are, deserve access to high-quality public education that allows them to achieve their full potential.

Now, most agree that parents should have a say in their child's learning environment – and under some circumstances, this *may* include well-regulated public charter schools. Well-funded, transparent, and accountable public charter schools, in some instances, may be a better fit for some students. For example, KairosPDX is a charter school in Portland. They work to dismantle structural racism and close opportunity and achievement gaps for students of color through hands-on, culturally competent teaching.

But unfortunately, charter schools are not subject to the same level of oversight and accountability as traditional public schools, and as a result, we often do not know whether charter schools will provide students with any meaningful benefits. Concerningly, in many instances charter school schemes are another way for my colleagues across the aisle to divert taxpayer dollars and community resources from already struggling public schools.

Now, we must not ignore the growing number of charter schools that are operated by for-profit corporations located in states that have lax or even non-existent oversight. According to the Network for Public Education, more than 1,100 charter schools are now run by for-profit entities. That's more than 14 percent of charter schools. Prior to the Education Department's updates to the Charter Schools Program (CSP), a 2016 audit found that charter school programs run by for-profit entities in California, Florida, Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania, and Texas all lacked internal guardrails that posed risks to student learning and enabled waste, fraud, and abuse of federal funds.

I also have serious concerns about the effects of charter school programs on students' civil rights. Although charter schools by law are required to honor students' and families' civil rights protections—such as Individual Education Plans for students with disabilities – gray areas surrounding a school's legal status may leave them ill-equipped to provide every student with a legally required fair and equitable education.

Studies show that charter schools are more segregated than traditional public schools. In addition, students may be rejected, unnecessarily disciplined, or expelled for reasons that would not be allowed at a traditional public school, often with few or no avenues for recourse. And then there is the issue of the number of charter schools that close – often abruptly. In fact, about 25% of charter schools close within 5 years - leaving students and families without support and sometimes without information.

And often for-profit management entities are based outside the bounds of federal oversight - not really the “choice” parents are looking for.

Yes, parents should be able to decide the best way to educate their children; however, this should not come at the expense of a strong, quality public education system that protects and supports every child. That’s why I ask that committee members join me in supporting more magnet schools – schools that provide choice within the public school system and that come with accountability and nondiscrimination. My home school district in Beaverton Oregon, for example, offers some very popular options - an art magnet, a science and engineering magnet, and an international magnet.

So instead of proposing an 80 percent cut to the Title I program, my colleagues to invest in public education and evidence-based choice programs so every family can send their child to a high-quality, accountable, and safe public school.

So, thank you to our witnesses for being here, and I yield back the balance of my time.