

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Bonamici (OR-01)

Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education

"School Choice: Expanding Educational Freedom for All"

Tuesday, April 18, 2023 | 10:15 a.m.

Thank you so much, Chair Bean. It is a pleasure to welcome our witnesses and our colleagues on both sides of the aisle to the first hearing of the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education in the 118th Congress.

Our public education system is a bedrock of our democratic republic – and I'll note that it is not a commodity. As noted by the Founding Fathers, numerous Supreme Court justices, and in many state constitutions, the provision of free, high-quality, public education to all children serves a compelling community interest. This subcommittee is responsible for delivering on that mission.

Unfortunately, the Majority has decided to use our first subcommittee hearing of the 118th Congress not to focus on how we can strengthen public education but—rather—to promote school privatization programs disguised as school choice. As a result, today we are discussing programs that divert taxpayer dollars from public schools rather than identifying how we can improve public education, so it prepares all students for success.

As a policymaker and a parent, I certainly understand the importance of families having a voice in where and how they educate their children; my own daughter chose a public arts magnet school. My husband and I wholeheartedly supported her in that decision. I've enthusiastically joined my colleagues in supporting funding for evidence-based school choice programs that empower parents, improve student outcomes, and increase diversity. I'm pleased to see bipartisan support for increased funding for the federal Magnet Schools Assistance Program, which funds high-quality public magnet schools educating more than 3.5 million students nationwide. Democrats on this Committee support funding for inter- and intra-district choice programs, which provide families and students with a meaningful opportunity to attend a public school that might better suit their needs.

I highlight these choice programs because they are rooted in a common goal: the improvement and advancement of a public education that benefits all students. Vouchers, tax-credit scholarships, education savings accounts, and charter schools with little accountability – those types of programs my colleagues on the other side of the aisle are interested in discussing – are antithetical to this goal for many reasons.

The history of school voucher programs is engrained in active resistance to integration from white families across the South. Between 1954 and 1964, in the decade immediately following *Brown v. Board of Education*, southern legislatures enacted more than 400 laws to undermine or disobey public school segregation. Many of these laws had the intent to, or effect of, draining resources from public schools to benefit private schools, often called "segregation academies." It's important to learn this history because, from the mid-1960s to the 1980s, amid court-ordered desegregation throughout the South, private school enrollment by mostly white students grew by more than 200,000 students. The legacy of these policies is that, today, public schools—particularly those schools that serve students of color and students from low-income families—are left underfunded and with fewer resources.

My colleagues often claim that school privatization programs provide lower income students with the opportunity to leave their public school in search of a better education. This is patently untrue in many, if not most, cases. Many choice programs do not require prior attendance at a public school as a prerequisite, and many programs – including the unprecedented expansion of vouchers passed in the Chairman’s home state of Florida this year – do not even have a family income cap. As a result, taxpayer dollars have been used to provide tuition coupons for students already in private schools, and for wealthy families who don’t need them.

State data in Wisconsin showed that two-thirds of students in the choice program were already enrolled in private schools before receiving the subsidy. Similarly, previous reports indicated half of Indiana’s voucher program recipients never attended a public school before joining the state program.

Private school voucher programs also lack meaningful accountability requirements, leaving taxpayer money vulnerable to significant waste, fraud, and abuse.

In Oklahoma, Arizona, Wisconsin, and Florida, for example, investigations have found millions of taxpayer dollars used by voucher schools to hire unqualified teachers, serve nonexistent students, and pay for school administrators’ personal expenses and items.

Florida’s recent expansion of its school voucher program to all elementary and secondary students regardless of household income is a brazen demonstration that its voucher program is meant to replace traditional public schools and eventually dismantle the public education system.

It’s also worth noting that state legislators from rural communities are apprehensive—and rightly so—about the utility and effectiveness of vouchers for their communities, as we saw during the failure of voucher bills in Texas and Georgia this year. Many rural school districts are already underfunded, and voucher policies would exacerbate their situation while providing no benefits to the families who live there. I represent many rural communities and, in most of them, the school is a community hub. There isn’t another school within miles. We should not drain funds from them to support a meaningless choice.

My Democratic colleagues and I also have serious concerns about the effects of school privatization on students’ civil rights. Once a student enters voucher programs, they are left without most—or even all—of the civil rights protections and academic achievement standards that public schools are required to provide.

Private schools participating in choice programs are not always required to honor students’ and families’ civil rights protections, such as IEPs and 504 plans for students with disabilities, language services for students with limited English proficiency.

Private school students may also be rejected or unnecessarily disciplined or expelled for reasons that would not be allowed at a public school, often with few or no avenues for recourse. Taxpayer dollars, which have clear state and federal accountability standards, have no place in schools like this.

Contrary to proponents’ claims, private school vouchers have also not been shown to improve students’ education—if anything, they may hurt students’ academic success. Research in states with large private school voucher programs—Louisiana, Indiana, Ohio—shows that students using private school vouchers score significantly lower on academic assessments than their public-school peers.

In sum, private school choice programs:

- 1) Drain resources from public education;
- 2) Lead to wasteful and even fraudulent spending;
- 3) Deprive students and parents of civil rights protections; and
- 4) Do not improve student achievement.

So, unfortunately, I am disappointed to see my colleagues on the other side of the aisle supporting low-quality education options instead of following the evidence and research.

Instead, I invite my colleagues to join Democrats in investing in public education and evidence-based choice programs so every family can send their child to a high-quality, accountable, and safe public school.

Thank you, again, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to our witnesses. I look forward to working with my colleagues to help every student succeed.