



Statement before the House Committee on Education and Labor  
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education  
On Serving All Students: Promoting a Healthier, More Supportive School Environment

# Student mental health and school safety

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Good morning, and thank you all for the opportunity to address the essential issue of healthy and supportive schools.

I would be remiss if I did not begin by addressing the root cause of the current mental and school safety crisis plaguing American schoolchildren: teachers' unions and their allies. They exploited the pandemic and effectively held kids hostage for their own financial and political benefit. And they did this under the name of "science."

But legitimate social science has demonstrated that after the initial viral panic, school closures were not driven by the degree of community spread. They were driven by the strength of teachers' unions and by the partisanship of their fellow travelers.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, public records have demonstrated that the Biden administration rewrote COVID guidance after being given a "homework" assignment by the unions. To paraphrase: please rework these with an eye toward our "collective bargaining"—negotiations.<sup>2</sup>

It will take legitimate medical and social scientists years to sort through the sheer and utter wreckage that the teachers' unions caused. Perhaps some children were spared a physical disease that, for them, was less deadly than the flu. But warning signs of the true cost have been flashing red: rises in mental illness<sup>3</sup> and school violence.<sup>4</sup> Untold emotional and social damage has been done by refusing to allow students to see each other's faces and by programming them to look at their friends as vectors of disease. I expect that this chapter in American history will be looked back on as a peculiarly American atrocity against our children.

These themes also relate to a bill that this committee is considering. The same sort of "science" is on display: looking at numbers that don't truly say what they seem to say, failing to contextualize them properly in the complex reality of human nature, and then taking an aggressive measure that runs an obvious risk of doing profound harm to children. A measure that, if history is any guide, could be declared a success despite its virtually—if not literally—incalculable damage.

This committee is considering a bill to curb restraint and seclusion. Certainly the numbers look very upsetting before you seriously analyze them. And certainly, many of us have seen outrageous viral videos of restraint and seclusion gone very wrong, abhorrent videos that reflect malpractice that everyone should oppose. But anyone who has ever been to school knows that sometimes situations escalate beyond the power of a teacher's calming word. Then the question becomes not whether, but rather how, they will be restrained and secluded.

Oregon attempted something very much like what this committee is considering imposing on America. We already know what happens next. What happens is "room clears." Have you heard of these? In a "room clear," the entire class is evacuated. The troubled student is left to destroy the room until he calms down. Other students are ushered into the hallways—learning disrupted, their psyches disturbed. According to one survey, 56 percent of Oregon teachers and parents reported having experienced a room clear in their or their child's schools.<sup>5</sup>

It's easy for some of us here in DC to believe we have the answers to American education's problems. But it's unfortunately all too hard for anyone to admit when their solution has made the problem worse. There's a clear parallel here in the Obama administration's lenient school discipline initiative. Policymakers saw substantial racial disparities in school suspensions and pushed to make it harder for teachers to suspend students.<sup>6</sup> What happened next?

The results are in. In Philadelphia, substantial damage to reading and math scores.<sup>7</sup> In California, substantial damage to math scores.<sup>8</sup> In Pittsburgh, a randomized control trial of restorative justice found academic harm to Black students in particular.<sup>9</sup> School climate surveys have shown substantial deteriorations in measures of healthy and supportive schools.<sup>10</sup> Yet I've never seen one advocate of this policy initiative fundamentally reconsider whether maybe they didn't really understand the cause of the disparities and whether maybe they really didn't have a better answer on offer.

As with school suspensions, we also basically know what will happen with restraint and seclusion. The numbers will go down. Activists will cheer but insist that we must do much more. Students and teachers will face ever greater physical danger. But no one will speak for them. The teachers' unions certainly will not. If their actions on school discipline are any guide, they will prioritize social justice ideology over the physical safety of the teachers and students they purport to protect.

The bill regarding corporal punishment presents a stickier problem. But a problem that, if properly considered, should point us to the obvious path to healthier and more supportive schools. I am not personally in favor of this practice. But no state mandates it. And, imposing the will of the federal government is the opposite of the proper path forward. The real solution is to empower parents. To provide them with transparency. With knowledge—which is power. To equip them to reassert authority over their children's education.

The real political path toward healthier and more supportive schools is being traveled by moms and dads across the country at local school board meetings. Rather than slander these parents, rather than try to shut them out, rather than threaten them with the specter of the PATRIOT Act, politicians on both sides of the aisle should join forces with them. The federal government should not seek new ways to impose its will. It should, rather, find ways for parents' will to be done. Rather than passing these measures, Congress should consider using every tool at its disposal to rein in the greatest threats to student health and safety: the teachers' unions and their corporate and activist allies.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael T. Hartney and Leslie K. Finger, "Politics, Markets, and Pandemics: Public Education's Response to COVID-19" (working paper, Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, Providence, RI, October 2020), <https://www.edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai20-304.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Callie Patteson, "Biden HHS Officials Told to Factor Teacher Union Talks into Reopening Guidance," *New York Post*, December 17, 2021, <https://nypost.com/2021/12/17/biden-hhs-officials-told-to-factor-teacher-union-talks-into-reopening-guidance/>.

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<sup>3</sup> Rhitu Chatterjee, “Kids Are Back in School—and Struggling with Mental Health Issues,” National Public Radio, January 7, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2022/01/07/1070969456/kids-are-back-in-school-and-struggling-with-mental-health-issues>.

<sup>4</sup> Laura Meckler and Valerie Strauss, “Back to School Has Brought Guns, Fighting, and Acting Out,” *Washington Post*, October 26, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/10/26/schools-violence-teachers-guns-fights/>.

<sup>5</sup> Oregon Education Association, *A Crisis of Disrupted Learning: Conditions in Our Schools and Recommended Solutions*, May 2019, [http://opb-imgserve-production.s3-website-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/original/a\\_crisis\\_of\\_disrupted\\_learning\\_1549344834428.pdf](http://opb-imgserve-production.s3-website-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/original/a_crisis_of_disrupted_learning_1549344834428.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Max Eden, *Safe and Orderly Schools: Updated Guidance on School Discipline*, Manhattan Institute, March 2019, <https://media4.manhattan-institute.org/sites/default/files/R-ME-0319.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew P. Steinberg and Johanna Lacoë, *The Academic and Behavioral Consequences of Discipline Policy Reform*, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, December 5, 2017, <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/academic-and-behavioral-consequences-discipline-policy-reform>.

<sup>8</sup> Dominic Zarecki, “Banning Math Progress: The Academic Impact of California’s Suspension Ban,” Social Science Research Network, 2019, <https://www.californiaeducationalresearchassociation.org/outstanding-paper-award.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Augustine et al., *Can Restorative Practices Improve School Climate and Curb Suspensions? An Evaluation of the Impact of Restorative Practices in a Mid-Sized Urban School District*, RAND Corporation, December 2018, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2840.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2840.html).

<sup>10</sup> Max Eden, “Studies and Teachers Nationwide Say School Discipline Reform Is Harming Students’ Academic Achievement and Safety,” 74, June 10, 2019, <https://www.the74million.org/article/eden-studies-and-teachers-nationwide-say-school-discipline-reform-is-harming-students-academic-achievement-and-safety/>.