

Statement of Congressman Jared Polis
House Education and the Workforce Subcommittee on Early Childhood,
Elementary, and Secondary Education Hearing
“Helping Students Succeed Through the Power of School Choice”
Thursday, February 2, 2017, 10:00AM
2175 Rayburn House Office Building

Thank you, Chairman Rokita, for hosting this morning’s hearing on such an important topic. It’s no secret that I’m a strong supporter of high-quality public school choice. Before coming to Congress, I founded two public charter schools. One school provides education for recent immigrants and English Language Learners, and another serves homeless and at-risk youth. Both of these schools are meeting the unique needs and challenges of its students, and providing a chance at the great public education that they deserve.

Colorado is an example of how public school choice can be done well, and how it can be a valuable tool for advancing equity in our public school system. That’s the school choice I know and the school choice I believe in. A great example is Denver Public Schools, which was named the best large school district for choice in the country by the Brookings Institution in 2015. Denver truly empowers parents through a transparent and non-discriminatory enrollment process, meaningful partnerships between charter and district schools, and strong community support.

Unfortunately, not all public school choice is made equal. In a number of states, weak charter school laws undermine accountability and transparency, and for-profit corporations running charter schools put profits before students.

Republican school choice proposals allow private schools to maintain selective admission requirements, require students with disabilities to sign away their rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and withhold information from parents regarding their student’s performance.

There are numerous examples of the failures of this type of system. In Michigan, 79 percent of charter schools are run by for-profit corporations, and they have some of the worst schools in the nation. In Ohio, a school falsified attendance records to receive additional taxpayer funding. In Louisiana, low-quality curriculum in voucher-participating schools has produced dismal results for students. In Wisconsin, general education funds have been drained – largely to support students already enrolled in private schools. In Georgia, data shows that it

is actually upper income families who benefit from the state's voucher program, meaning taxpayers are actually subsidizing private education for the wealthy.

I hope that today's hearing makes clear to the American people that Republican school choice is not the type of choice that will achieve equity of educational opportunity for all children. In its 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court affirmed that education is necessary for personal and economic success, stating that state-funded education is a right that must be made available to all on equal terms. If we are truly committed to fulfilling the promise of *Brown* for all of our children regardless of zip code, income, race, language status, or disability, we should invest in our public education system instead of siphoning public dollars away from public schools for unaccountable private schools.

Just last year, this Committee worked in a bipartisan fashion to write the Every Student Succeeds Act. Under ESSA, public schools are required to transparently report the performance of vulnerable students and address issues when schools are not appropriately serving these students. I've seen firsthand Republicans' on this committee's concern for civil rights. But unfortunately, Republican school choice is a backdoor to undermining those civil rights protections we wrote into ESSA. Under IDEA, students with disabilities are guaranteed a free and appropriate education. But private school voucher programs have no obligation to ESSA, and parent surveys show that too many private schools require parents to fully or partially sign away their rights under IDEA. I deeply believe that all students with disabilities deserve the protections and supports to provide them with an equal opportunity at a high-quality education as any other student.

Finally, as co-chair of the Congressional LGBT Equality Caucus, I have deep concerns about the rights of our LGBT students in voucher programs. A 2013 study found that at least 115 private schools participating in Georgia's voucher program have or promote anti-LGBT admission, scholarship, and discipline policies. Some voucher participating schools in Georgia, and I suspect throughout the nation, have policies stating that a student can be expelled for identifying as LGBT or coming out as LGBT. Our nation was built on the principle of equality for all Americans—including racial minorities, individuals with disabilities, and the LGBT community. It is essential that we further empower these communities rather than promote policies that treat them as second-class citizens.

Republican school choice does not empower parents or students; it is a false choice that only further exacerbates educational inequities, strips parents of their voice, and undermines important civil rights protections for parents and students.

I look forward to hearing from today's witnesses about how meaningful choice that supports parents and students can be used to strengthen our system of public education, not dismantle it. Thank you, and I yield back.