



OPENING STATEMENT

House Committee on Education and Labor

Chairman Robert C. "Bobby" Scott

Opening Statement of Chairman Scott (VA-03)

Full Committee Hearing

Examining the Policies and Priorities of the U.S. Department of Education

Zoom

Thursday, May 26, 2022 | 12:00 p.m.

Two days ago, 19 children and two educators were gunned down in an elementary school in Texas.

Regrettably, this is too common of an occurrence in this country. According to Education Week, we have suffered 27 school shootings already this year, alone.

We could have prevented a lot of these this if elected leaders valued children and families more than guns. Instead, time and time again, Congress has failed to enact any sensible or widely supported proposals to respond to these tragedies and prevent another one from happening.

Today, I call on each of us, as members of the Committee on Education and Labor, to do everything we can to protect schools and communities from gun violence, and to ensure that this most recent tragedy will be the last.

Therefore, I ask everyone to join me in a moment of silence to honor the students and educators who died, their loved ones, and the entire school community in Texas.

Thank you.

Secretary Cardona, thank you for being with us today. We look forward to hearing your vision to help all students recover from the pandemic and succeed.

Today, 99 percent of our schools are open for full-time, in-person learning five days a week. The safe reopening of America's public schools would not have been possible without the President's American Rescue Plan, which delivered the largest, one-time federal investment in K-12 education in our nation's history. Importantly, this funding was distributed using the Title I-A formula, so the greatest resources went to communities with the greatest need.

There are expenses that schools need to open safely, like fixing dilapidated or improperly working ventilation systems. This is an airborne pandemic. Making sure they have more transportation—you can't pack as many students on a bus during an airborne pandemic. You have to hire counselors and nurses during the pandemic, PPE, things that were not in the budget when the schools began before the pandemic. So, to open safely, they needed the resources of the American Rescue Plan provided the resources so the schools could open safely.

Schools have used this relief funding to cover the costs of implementing school-based COVID-19 testing, upgrading ventilation systems, and hiring additional staff to reduce capacity in classrooms and buses.

Importantly, the American Rescue Plan also required that at least 20 percent of the funding districts received go towards strategies to address learning loss and close the achievement gap. Achievement gaps, as everyone knows, were exacerbated during the pandemic. To do so, school districts in my community and across the country have extended school days, hired counselors, and offered comprehensive after school and summer programs.

Schools are also using this funding to develop innovative programs that are helping students not only make up for lost learning, but also prepare for the modern economy.

Last month, I visited a new STEM resource lab in my district where elementary school students were programming robots to maneuver an obstacle course.

This is just one example of how investments in students and educators can create new opportunities in schools that help all students succeed.

Regrettably, for too long, not all students have had the support they need to reach their full potential.

For example, in our K-12 schools, Black students, boys, students with disabilities, and others face harsher discipline practices at disproportionately high rates. And in our institutions of higher education, there continues to be a prevalence of sexual assault and harassment and a lack of accountability of the institutions to safeguard students.

I am pleased that, in response, the Biden-Harris administration has collected data as an initial step to help inform schools on addressing disparities in school disciplinary practices. I am looking forward to seeing a new Title IX rule that will improve the protections and support survivors of sexual harassment and discrimination that can be done without violating fundamental due process for the accused.

Finally, federal student loans are critical to expanding access to the benefits of a quality, higher education for all students. However, over the past few decades, it has become increasingly clear that our students are taking on a lot more loans than in the past and that our student loan system must be improved to fulfill its promise.

This is why the Biden administration has taken historic steps to forgive more than \$17 billion in debt for 725,000 borrowers and ensure that our student loan programs puts borrowers' needs first. And, since the beginning of the pandemic, we have ensured that borrowers of federally held student loans were spared from making payments on their loans and accruing interest on them.

The Administration has also provided temporary changes to expand access to the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program during the pandemic. Already, the administration has forgiven \$6.8 billion in debt covering more than 113,000 loans through this program. This includes \$233 million in debt forgiveness for roughly 4,000 borrowers in my home state of Virginia.

Simply put, the Department of Education under the Biden administration has taken historic steps to get us back on track. However, we know there is more that still needs to be done.

To that end, I look forward to hearing how the President's budget proposal would strengthen our continued progress to help every student reap the lifelong benefits of a high-quality education.

So, in addition to whatever the administration is going to do with loan discharges, we need to make sure that we significantly increase the Pell Grant to restore it to its historic value; eliminate or significantly reduce interest on loans; make the Public Service Loan Forgiveness and interest-based programs more generous; promote short-term Pell so you can use your Pell Grant for job training programs, as well as college courses that lead to a degree. We need to make sure that those are just the beginning to make sure college is accessible to all.

So, thank you, Mr. Secretary for your time today and your work in support of our nation's students.