



Statement before the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability Subcommittee on Health Care and Financial Services Hearing on “America’s Report Card: Oversight of K-12 Public Education”

Public School Pandemic Response and Post-Pandemic Challenges:

Remote Schooling and Other Challenges Led to Pandemic Learning Loss and Post-Pandemic Chronic Absenteeism

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Chair McClain, Ranking Member Porter, and members of the subcommittee: Thank you for inviting me here today to share my testimony.

Shortly after the pandemic struck in March 2020, my work at the American Enterprise Institute abruptly shifted to collecting data on schools' pandemic responses. My team began by collecting the first nationally representative data on schools' responses in Spring 2020, and we continued our work through the 2020–21 school year with the Return to Learn Tracker, which—on a weekly basis—monitored the remote instructional status of 8,600 school districts, covering 88 percent of all public school students at the pandemic's outset. Our "Return to Learn" data on the duration of in-person, hybrid, and fully remote instruction has proven invaluable for understanding how pandemic school closures affected students and contributed to the greatest challenges facing them today. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Return to Learn Tracker has also gathered data on school masking policies, ESSER funding, public school enrollment changes, and—most recently—chronic absenteeism.

Test scores make plain that the pandemic caused the largest negative shock to student learning the nation has ever seen, and other indicators show that both schools and academic recovery efforts are struggling. Average learning losses from the pandemic exceed those seen in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina but affected tens of millions of students instead of hundreds of thousands. Achievement gaps that had been narrowing gradually over decades widened rapidly. Students and districts that entered the pandemic behind academically were hit harder by the pandemic and fell even further behind their peers. Achievement is not the only or even the most important aspect of the pandemic's effect on schools, but it is the obvious place to start.

Differences in the Pandemic School Reopening

Before the pandemic, test scores were showing some declines. The pandemic dramatically worsened these declines. The pandemic declines in expected academic progress stemmed from multiple factors, and a principal one of these was the duration of remote schooling, a factor over which policymakers had the most control. Unfortunately, school reopening became politically polarized before the first full pandemic school year even started, such that local voting patterns were more predictive of reopening decisions than local COVID case rates. This was clear in 2020, as described in an analysis by Brookingsⁱ:

There is no relationship—visually or statistically—between school districts' reopening decisions and their county's new COVID-19 cases per capita. In contrast, there is a strong relationship—visually and statistically—between districts' reopening decisions and the county-level support for Trump in the 2016 election.

Our Return to Learn Data show that this pattern played out throughout the 2020–21 school year. The duration of remote instruction was weakly correlated with counties' COVID case rates, but strongly correlated with counties' 2020 presidential vote share.ⁱⁱ Even in April 2021, when COVID cases were low and vaccines widely available, only approximately one-third of districts in counties that voted for President Biden had fully reopened, in stark contrast to the over 60 percent of Trump-supporting districts that had. Throughout the first complete year of the pandemic, the highest percentage of Biden-supporting districts offering full in-person

instruction—38% by year's end—never reached the lowest percentage of Trump-supporting districts that did—40% in January.

The start of the 2021–22 school year reflected these same divides. Despite high COVID rates, nearly all districts reopened with full-time in-person schooling—a tacit admission that the previous year's early reopeners had made the right call—but districts showed similar divides over school masking, data we also captured as part of our Return to Learn Tracker.ⁱⁱⁱ Although masking decisions may seem less consequential, they underscored a more significant reality in schools: the prioritization of restoring normalcy to schools. The gradual return to normalcy in schools followed the same patterns as closures the preceding year, potentially exerting an additional impediment on student academic progress and recovery.

Though politically polarized, these differences were likely less attributable to narrow politics and more related to local attitudes regarding the right way to respond to the pandemic. For instance, county-level masking behavior, measured in summer 2020 before any schools reopened, were much more predictive of remote and hybrid schooling in 2020–21 and masking policies in 2021–22 than weekly local COVID case rates were. Similarly, other static attributes, measured early or late in the pandemic, were also more predictive of closures and masking policies than local COVID rates were. These patterns suggest that although the strong connections between local politics and district responses—both in terms of school reopening in the first pandemic school year and masking policies in the second—are clear, the causes of school districts reactions are not, as several interconnected factors were more predictive of remote and hybrid schooling than were local COVID case rates.

[The Clear Connection between Remote Instruction and Learning Loss](#)

In contrast, the connection between the duration of school closures and pandemic learning loss is quite clear. The Education Recovery Scorecard^{iv} (ERS) gathered state test scores from millions of third through eighth grade students in 29 states between 2019 and 2022 to examine learning loss at a large scale. Combined with AEI's Return to Learn data, ERS data show that the third of districts that were most in-person during 2020–21 lost 44 percent of a typical year's progress in math, compared to 60 percent in the most remote third of districts—a difference of over one third. Fortunately, losses in reading were smaller, but their relation to differences in the duration of remote instruction were even stronger. Similar patterns by duration of remote instruction are clear in numerous studies.^v Numerous federal assessments that capture students' academic progress, including the NAEP assessments (often called the Nation's Report Card), also show large declines in scores, but because the federal government did not systematically collect school closure data, these assessments do not capture differences by the duration of remote instruction as much as many would like.

The lack of federal data collection also means we have a less clear view on how school closures affected students' learning and other outcomes. Most studies that measure learning loss do so by comparing student performance well before the pandemic began with student performance well after all schools had reopened. These studies do not typically have data on student performance between these two endpoints, making it harder to examine the sources learning loss. For

example, the ERS data referenced above come from spring 2019 and spring 2022, and show significant gaps between more and less in-person districts; however, gauging the importance of extended closures requires attention to that fact that these declines stemmed both from spring 2020 closures—which happened for all school districts and during which learning losses were greatest—and from closures during the 2020–21 school year, when district instructional offerings varied widely. Since total academic progress differences stemmed from a uniformly fully remote spring 2020 and a differentially remote 2020–21 school year, the differences between instructional offerings in the first full pandemic school year appear significant.

However impactful, though, the duration of remote learning was not the only source of difficulty for schools and students over the pandemic: The instability of quarantines over the 2020–21 school year hampered learning, and would have been more difficult for schools offering in-person instruction; chronic absenteeism spiked during the pandemic—and remains high—and undoubtedly hampered academic progress for students as well as for teacher and administrator capacity; the introduction of novel instructional practices to allow similar instruction for students who opted out of available in-person learning posed a steep learning curve for teachers and students and were instituted without sufficient time to work out the kinks that come with substantial changes to technical and instructional practices; additionally, the introduction of millions of new devices, and their adoption for much larger portions of instruction than teachers and students had been accustomed to, posed challenges during an already difficult time. Even for schools that resumed in-person instruction early, the pandemic continued to present significant and diverse obstacles to instruction and student learning. We know now that those obstacles have turned into durable challenges that continue to plague the nation’s schools today.

Federal Data Collection and Pandemic Relief for Public Schools

I will now note, but not belabor the fact, that the federal government did not collect and report data comparable to what Return to Learn captured on instructional offerings or masking policies. In my view, these were obvious errors. The lack of masking data are a good example, especially considering the CDC retained controversial guidance that all students mask indoors nationwide for much of the 2021–22 school year.

In February 2022—just days ahead of the state of the union address—the CDC replaced its guidance recommending universal masking with new guidance, which recommended just 37 percent of public school students should be under mask mandates. This sudden shift resulted not from a rapid change in the scientific consensus on COVID but from the CDC’s own decision to link masking recommendations to county-level data on local COVID risks — data that the CDC had been reporting for the entire school year.^{vi}

Our Return to Learn Masking data show that prior to February 2022, many students attended districts where the new guidance would have not have recommended mask mandates. Indeed, even with the September delta wave and the December Omicron surge, had it been in place all year the CDCs updated data-based guidance would have recommended mask mandates for an

average of 61 percent of students between September 2021 and when the new guidance was announced in February 2022.

In my view the federal government should have collected and presented data transparently and based its guidance on clear data-based rationales. It is also my view that although many state and local districts stuck to what they viewed as the right way to respond to the pandemic, the lack of responsiveness on the part of localities stemmed in part from weak federal guidance.

The federal government’s response to the pandemic—including on school closures, pandemic learning loss, student well-being, and chronic absenteeism—has primarily taken the form of relatively sparse guidance and historically unprecedented spending, most notably from \$189.5 billion in ESSER funds. ESSER funds were an enormous expenditure yet came with few guardrails or guidelines for what the funds should be spent on. My Return to Learn team tracked the district allocations of ESSER dollars, and would have attempted to track how these important and historic investments were used. However, the three laws providing ESSER funding included no functional reporting mechanism to gauge how districts were using the funds, making any systematic tracking essentially impossible. Other groups have attempted to track how these funds have been used and done invaluable work but found the task extremely challenging.^{vii} Indeed, it has been difficult to determine how much of ESSER funds have been spent by districts, but recent research suggests more than \$50B still needs to be obligated by this September.^{viii}

There was a requirement that 20 percent of the \$123B in ESSER III funds that came from the American Rescue Plan be used for districts to “respond to students’ academic, social, and emotional needs and address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on underrepresented student subgroups.”^{ix} In reality, even this requirement was so broadly written that it provided little guidance, and the groups that have tracked these funds have found it difficult to establish whether even this minimal requirement was met. Oversight of government spending is not my primary expertise, but this strikes me as difficult spending to oversee.

It should be noted that there are regular political fights over federal education spending: whether there should be more or less of it and what constraints and oversight are appropriate. These fights can be healthy out workings of America’s system of government. However, if one were to devise an expenditure to erode confidence in the federal government’s ability to spend education funding wisely and to advantage, it would be hard to do better than ESSER. Even though its targets—recovery for American public schools—are vitally important, its allocations are enormous, its guidance minimal, and its reporting requirements nonfunctional.

Today, learning loss remains a grave concern, major pandemic era problems are becoming post-pandemic problems, and additional resources may indeed be part of a comprehensive solution to problems that have major economic and human costs. Nonetheless, holding politics aside, the unprecedented expenditures we have made cannot be clearly tied to commensurate benefits. Indeed, even though some benefits undoubtedly came from these expenditures, some of these expenditures were undoubtedly wasted. At a time when prudent investments in schools may be warranted, the track record of federal pandemic recovery spending looks more dubious than ever.

This is particularly troubling given the ongoing challenges schools are facing, the chief of which I turn to next.

Chronic Absenteeism Is the Greatest Post-pandemic Challenge for Public Schools

In testimony before another committee last year, I pointed to academic recovery as the greatest priority for public education. Academic recovery remains an enormous challenge, one perhaps greater than I knew then. Indeed, although students need to learn faster than they did pre-pandemic to catch up from pandemic losses, last year most students learned at a slower pace than their pre-pandemic peers.^x

Despite the importance of learning loss, however, today I offer different testimony. Although learning loss should be a top priority for schools, I now believe that chronic absenteeism is the greatest challenge schools face. Chronic absenteeism—the percentage of students missing 10 percent or more of the school year—exploded over the pandemic, rising from 15 percent in 2019 to 28 percent in 2022. The Return to Learn Chronic Absenteeism data collection, the most current and comprehensive data collection on pandemic and post-pandemic chronic absenteeism, show these increases in every state and across all student demographics. Regrettably, 2023 saw little improvement, with 26 percent of students chronically absent in the 39 states reporting data.^{xi}

Chronic absenteeism stands apart from pandemic learning loss in important ways. The pandemic, a one-time event, disrupted regular schooling and led to lingering learning loss, but the obvious pandemic drivers of that loss have ceased. Chronic absenteeism, however, persists and affects one in four students across the nations. It has an ongoing and corrosive impact on the students affected and the culture in their schools. Teachers, grappling with absenteeism, must divert valuable class time to help chronically absent students catch up, leaving less time for those with regular attendance. Chronic absenteeism disrupts fundamental routines, erodes a culture of high expectations, and is undoubtedly hampering academic recovery.

Moreover, as I detail in a paper to be published by the American Enterprise Institute tomorrow, chronic absenteeism disproportionately affects districts with lower achievement and higher poverty rates—the same districts hit hardest by pandemic learning loss. Chronic absenteeism rates also vary by race, with 2022 rates for Hispanic and black students sitting at 36 and 39 percent, respectively. These rates are even worse in more challenged districts. For instance, in urban districts, the rates for Hispanic and black students reached 41 and 46 percent, respectively.

Addressing chronic absenteeism is crucial for overcoming learning loss. Interventions like tutoring or extended learning time will have limited effectiveness if students are not attending school regularly. Additionally, tackling chronic absenteeism may prove a more promising tack for addressing learning loss than interventions like tutoring or extended learning time. Unlike these interventions, tackling chronic absenteeism doesn't require that parents and students do anything that they weren't already doing before the pandemic. It just requires that they return to pre-pandemic behavioral patterns. That return may not be so easy, but it falls to all of us—

federal, state, and local leaders; school and district leaders; teachers; and of course, students and parents—to make sure that it happens.

Current levels of chronic absenteeism threaten the productivity of American schooling. At the modest rate of decline seen between 2022 and 2023, we may not see a return to pre-pandemic rates until 2030. However, there is additional reason for worry here. We saw a 2 percentage point decline between 2022, the year that Omicron brought COVID case rates to record highs, and 2023, the first truly post-pandemic school year. If the huge declines in COVID cases between those years spurred only a small decline in chronic absenteeism, should we expect greater declines in coming years, or smaller declines?

What can be done to address chronic absenteeism? I will not pretend to have simple or universally effective prescriptions. Rather, in what follows, I will simply describe basic measures that, though not sufficient, I believe are necessary.

First, we need to bring both carrots and sticks to address the problem. Pre-pandemic research has shown both that several “carrot” approaches can be effective and that the more resource-intensive and expensive interventions have larger effects. Unfortunately, none of these effects are up to the scale of the current crisis. Moreover, because post-pandemic chronic absenteeism has different causes than pre-pandemic chronic absenteeism had, there is reason to believe that many of the interventions that were effective before the pandemic would be much less effective now. Of course, districts should bring supports to serve students’ needs and make school more attractive to students; however, positive supports alone will not do. We should accompany supports with persistent and frank communications to parents whose children regularly fail to show up, and there should be consequences when parents fail to fulfil their moral and legal duty to ensure their children attend school regularly.

Second, we need clear leadership on this issue from those at the top to support the work of lower level leaders. At no time has there been a consistent and clear message that the era of exceptional pandemic-era school practices is over and that all parties must return to the work of education in earnest. This needs to change. To give school district leaders and local officials political cover to push for a return to a culture of regular attendance, the president, the secretary of education, and governors, should make clear that pandemic-era exceptionalism is over. Without support from local leaders, it will be hard for principals, building leaders, and teachers to ask and, when necessary, demand that families and students do their part.

Third, teachers—as overworked and burdened as they are—have more relational capital with students and families than anyone else. They need to use that relational capital to effectively communicate the need for consistent attendance. Of course, schools and districts should monitor and identify students falling short on attendance, but no letter, text or email will have the power that regular and personal communication from teachers will. I understand this is a lot to ask of teachers, but I suggest that if they do not do this important work to restore attendance, the rest of their work will be even harder.

Finally, we ask much of schools and of teachers, and it is only fair that political leaders, the research and advocacy community, the media, and schools also call on students and families to meet their responsibilities to ensure regular school attendance. The behavior that was the standard just a few short years ago would be a huge improvement from the current state of affairs, and it is not too much to ask of families. If we are unwilling to ask this of them, who should we blame if the current plague of absenteeism remains with our schools for the near future? Our federal, state, and education leaders must lead on this issue for the sake of our schools and students, and if they do not, they will abet the greatest challenge America's students are currently facing.

Thank you for the opportunity to give testimony in this important hearing. I look forward to presenting these comments and evidence to the subcommittee and answering questions.

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ⁱⁱ Malkus, N. (2021, July). 2020-21 Instructional Status Tracker. *Return to Learn Tracker*, American Enterprise Institute. https://www.returntolearntacker.net/instructional_status/

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^{iv} Kane, T. and Reardon, S. (2023). Education Recovery Scorecard. <https://educationrecoverycorecard.org/>

^v Curriculum Associates. (2021a). *Academic achievement at the end of the 2020–2021 school year: Insights after more than a year of disrupted teaching and learning*. <https://www.curriculumassociates.com/-/media/mainsite/files/i-ready/iready-understanding-student-needs-paper-spring-results-2021.pdf>;

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^{vi} Malkus, N., & Audet, A. (2022). A Failure to Respond: Public School Mask Mandates in the 2021-22 School Year. *American Enterprise Institute*.

^{vii} *ESSER Expenditure Dashboard*, Edunomics Lab, Georgetown University <https://edunomicslab.org/esser-spending/>.

^{viii} FutureEd. (2024, January). *Progress in Spending Federal K-12 Covid Aid: State by State*. <https://www.future-ed.org/progress-in-spending-federal-k-12-covid-aid-state-by-state/>.

^{ix} US Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, “US Department of Education Fact Sheet: American Rescue Plan Act of 2021.”

^x Lewis, K., & Kuhfeld, M. (2023). Education's Long COVID: 2022-23 Achievement Data Reveal Stalled Progress toward Pandemic Recovery. *Center for School and Student Progress at NWEA*.

^{xi} Malkus, N. (2024, January). District Chronic Absenteeism Tracker. *Return to Learn Tracker, American Enterprise Institute*. <https://www.returntolearntracker.net/chronicabsenteeism>