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**Date:** September 17, 2025

**Hearing:** “Opening Doors to Opportunity: The Promise of Expanded School Choice and Alternatives to Four-Year College Degrees”

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Cody Hirschi, Superintendent of the Reeds Spring School District in southwest Missouri. We are a rural school with 1800 students, similar to many found across our great state and throughout our country.

Our students are amazing; however, like many children across our nation, they face serious challenges. Chief among them is the deep and persistent disintegration of the family and the generational poverty that follows. These forces shape the lives of our youngest learners long before they set foot in a classroom. Children arrive carrying burdens such as trauma, food insecurity, and a lack of stable adult guidance. These directly impact their ability to learn. We educate them all, regardless of their life circumstances.

I believe this is the greatest time to be an educator and that we are raising the greatest generation of children our country has seen. I am here because I believe in the efforts of our educators, parents, and students to build stronger, more resilient American communities. Our goal is simple but ambitious: to be the best educational choice for every parent and every child. To do that, we must provide the very best education for all kids.

Nearly 90% of America’s children are educated in public schools, and the vast majority of secondary career and technical education (CTE) programs are housed within these institutions. This alignment is strategic and essential. Public schools serve as a nexus for collaboration among industry partners, postsecondary institutions, and community organizations, enabling students to access real-world learning experiences. These partnerships mean that public schools can and must build programs and facilities that reflect both student interests and the evolving needs of local economies.

More than a century ago, a national panel known as the “Committee of Ten” designed the framework of American secondary education for an industrialized, factory-based economy. That structure, while innovative for its time, no longer matches the realities of today’s knowledge-based and technology-driven world.

At Reeds Spring, we have created our own modern “Committee of Ten,” a coalition of educators, parents, business leaders, and community members specifically to re-imagine what school must look like today. Our mission is to move beyond a nineteenth-century factory model and build a system that equips students with the durable skills, adaptability, and real-world experiences demanded by the twenty-first-century economy. This community-driven reform effort guides our Portrait of a Graduate work and our expansion of career pathways, internships, and pre-apprenticeship opportunities.

Public education must do more than deliver academics; it must provide stability, mentorship, and opportunity. If we are to break cycles of poverty, our schools must be both a safe haven and a launch

pad. Public education is everything to rural communities across the country. We are the counseling centers, food distribution centers, and mental-health support systems, and in our area, even tornado safe zones. We are everything for those we serve. We need innovative buildings and programming to educate every one of our children, but we also must be welcoming and accepting of every community member who relies on us.

In the Reeds Spring School District, our educators and community partners, including teachers, counselors, support staff, business community, students, and parents, are working tremendously hard to bring real-world learning to all our diverse learners. We chose to invest in real-world learning because we see every day how students thrive when their education connects directly to authentic careers, community needs, and the skills that matter most for life after graduation. This vision was created in partnership with our entire community. We have implemented several key initiatives to provide our students with choice and options.

First, we created a regional internship program called RSWorks. We strategically invested in a full-time internship coordinator who develops partnerships with our area Chamber of Commerce and business community to create placement opportunities for our high school students. Here are a few examples of how our internship program is allowing students to determine whether a particular career path aligns with their skills, values, and long-term goals and reduces costly missteps in their post-secondary journey.

Max is a student in our high school who, as a junior, was ready to extend his learning beyond the regular curriculum. Our counseling team worked with Max to create a schedule that allowed him to take thirty-three college credit hours in his junior year alone. These classes were taken from Brigham Young University, Ozarks Technical Community College, Missouri State University, and Southwest Baptist University. Max entered his senior year thinking he wanted to go into dentistry. Through our RSWorks program, Max obtained a paid internship with a local dentist, where he receives on-the-job training and can now determine if this is the path he wants to pursue.

Another one of our students, Emma, was deciding between a career in law and working with animals. During her law internship, she quickly realized that being an attorney was not the route for her. She fell in love with working with animals and is now in the pre-veterinary program at Missouri State University.

Another area where we are innovating and providing real-world experiences is the intentionally designed Table Rock Career Center, which we opened last year with programming partly funded by federal Perkins dollars. We opened the Table Rock Career Center last year to give students across the region real-world, hands-on training in fields such as EMT, health occupations, automotive and collision repair, culinary arts, welding and construction, graphic design and technology, education, marine technology, engineering, and criminal justice. Before launching these programs, we surveyed students, analyzed regional labor-market data, and worked with local employers to design pathways that align with both student goals and workforce needs. Students now build homes, repair cars, and serve in nursing homes and on ambulances, among several other real-world learning opportunities. Not only do our students gain incredible experience, but they are also earning Industry-Recognized Credentials, growing from just 28 earned when I arrived to 226 earned last year.

Through our Portrait of a Graduate framework, we emphasize durable skills such as communication, critical thinking, adaptability, integrity, perseverance, and emotional resilience. We are implementing

student pathways, strength-based assessments, and competency-based learning, giving students voice and agency in their education. Families who might otherwise look outside the public system for individualized programs can find those very opportunities right in their neighborhood public school.

Great things are happening in public education across Missouri. We engage in a collaborative process with businesses, families, and each other to develop strong systems that support our work with kids. Yet we often face significant challenges with the current barriers to creating the educational environments we know our students need.

We are also proud to be part of Missouri's Success-Ready Students Network (SRSN), whose framework is critical in guiding our work. SRSN promotes a competency-based mindset, continuous improvement, and readiness for high school, college, career, and the workplace. Reeds Spring actively participates in this network, embracing these practices in our classrooms and systems. The SRSN framework ensures that what we build locally connects to statewide expectations by raising the bar for all students in Missouri. Part of that work has involved seeking federal approval for a waiver from the current school accountability model to one that actually makes sense. The goal is to increase accountability for public schools by aligning the system with a multiple-assessment approach that provides real-time feedback and mastery-based progress rather than relying on a single test score released months after students have moved on to another grade level or school.

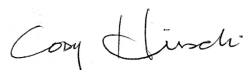
We believe the answer is to make public schools themselves the best choice. We provide the diversity and quality of options that parents seek, with the hope that they will stay with us as we work to change their lives.

Shifts in family structures due to economic and social pressures present real and urgent challenges. But the promise of public education is strong.

By building a world-class, student-centered system that offers meaningful pathways and personalized learning, we ensure that public schools themselves embody the very best of school choice.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our story and for your commitment to America's children.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Cody Hirschi".

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