



HEARING SUMMARY

SENATE HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR AND PENSIONS COMMITTEE HEARING ON THE STATE OF K-12 EDUCATION

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On September 18, the Senate Health, Education Labor and Pensions (HELP) [Committee held a hearing](#) on the state of K-12 Education. Witness testimony highlighted concerning achievement among students in the U.S. that has been falling since 2013 and worsened during the pandemic, widening inequality, chronic absenteeism, and adolescent mental health struggles. The discussion centered on how to remedy and restore momentum in student achievement. Proposed solutions included outcome-based accountability systems, stronger teacher pipelines, and performance-driven compensation for educators. The panel stressed the importance of connecting instruction to student interests, expanding literacy and STEM initiatives, and integrating high-quality tutoring and technology. AI was identified as a tool with strong potential for personalized learning, though witnesses and Senators emphasized the need for safeguards and adult mediation in its use. Senators raised issues of school choice, early childhood education, smartphone policies, and how to balance proficiency and growth measures in accountability systems. Despite differing priorities, there was consensus that reforms must empower teachers, better engage students, and balance innovation with equity to restore U.S. educational leadership.

WITNESSES AND WRITTEN TESTIMONY

- [Dr. Eric Hanushek](#), Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution
- [Dr. Martin West](#), Vice Chair, National Assessment Governing Board
- [Dr. Katie Jenner](#), Indiana Secretary of Education
- [Dr. Scott Muri](#), Superintendent Emeritus, Ector County Independent School District
- [Dr. Rebecca Winthrop](#), Director of the Center for Universal Education, Brookings Institution

MEMBERS PRESENT

Chairman Bill Cassidy (R-LA), Ranking Member Bernie Sanders (I-VT), and Senators Susan Collins (R-ME), Jon Husted (R-OH), Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Tommy Tuberville (R-AL), Senator Maggie Hassan (D-NH), Ashley Moody (R-FL), Patty Murray (D-WA), Josh Hawley (R-

MO), Senator Lisa Blunt Rochester (D-DE), John Hickenlooper (D-CO); Senator Andy Kim (D-NJ), Tim Kaine (D-VA), and Ed Markey (D-MA).

OPENING STATEMENTS

Chairman Cassidy opened the hearing stressing that K-12 education is the most powerful tool to lift children out of poverty and enable the American dream. He warned that declining literacy and achievement threaten this promise, noting [NAEP scores](#) are at a 30-year low, with only one-third of high school seniors proficient in reading. Poor literacy, he argued, leads to higher dropout rates, crime, and unemployment, leaving graduates unprepared for the workforce. Cassidy highlighted Louisiana's success with evidence-based strategies, such as the [Science of Reading](#), as a model for the nation, emphasizing early detection for issues like dyslexia. He underscored that education reform is about empowering parents and local communities—not federal bureaucrats—to tailor solutions. Cassidy strongly advocated for school choice, crediting collaboration with President Donald Trump, Senator Tim Scott (R-SC), and Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) in advancing federal choice legislation, and concluded by inviting witnesses' ideas on strengthening K–12 education to secure America's future.

Ranking Member Sanders emphasized that addressing America's educational challenges requires looking beyond schools to the broader conditions in which children live. He noted that while the U.S. once led the world in education, it now lags behind many nations, with public schools weakened and children facing high rates of poverty. Sanders argued that poverty, hunger, and family instability undermine students' ability to learn, and called for prioritizing early childhood, where childcare remains unaffordable and underpaid workers are undervalued. He stressed that improving children's lives must go hand-in-hand with strengthening schools, warning that neglect fuels crime and despair. Sanders also questioned whether the U.S. truly values education, pointing to low teacher pay and lack of prestige compared to higher-paying professions. He urged making teaching an attractive, respected career so that young people proudly choose it, reflecting a national commitment to children and educators.

WITNESS TESTIMONY

Dr. Hanushek argued that U.S. student performance has been in steady decline since 2013, well before the COVID-19 pandemic. Pandemic closures worsened losses, but underlying systemic issues, especially weak incentives for improving achievement, are the main drivers, he contends. He voiced concerns about widening achievement gaps, long-term earnings losses for today's students, and massive GDP implications from declining skills. Hanushek criticized decades of piecemeal reforms and called for outcome-based approaches, including incentive-driven teacher evaluations, greater state flexibility, and a reduced federal role focused on data, research, and support. He urged systemic, incentive-based reforms over incremental fixes.

Dr. West testified that recent NAEP results show steep declines in student achievement across grades and subjects from 2019 to 2024, with 12th grade math and reading at record lows and only one-third of students ready for college-level work. Similar to Dr. Hanushek, he emphasized that achievement was already declining before COVID-19, with pandemic disruptions accelerating the trend, particularly in math. The largest losses hit lower-performing students, widening inequality. West urged policymakers to look beyond pandemic recovery, examining factors such as

smartphones, absenteeism, grading policies, and curriculum quality, while drawing lessons from past bipartisan accountability reforms.

Dr. Jenner encouraged aligning K-12 and higher education to ensure seamless student pathways. She highlighted Indiana's three pillars: student learning and opportunity, educator talent, and system alignment. Key initiatives include a \$170 million science-of-reading investment yielding record literacy gains, STEM-certified schools and curriculum expansion, redesigned high school diplomas with readiness seals and stackable credentials, and a unified K-20 system to reduce duplication and strengthen outcomes. Jenner also emphasized responsible AI integration, transparency through the Indiana GPS dashboard, and requests for ESEA flexibility.

Dr. Muri recalled the 2019 state takeover of half the ECISD's schools rated D or F and with 350 teacher vacancies. Through a strategic plan emphasizing foundational improvements, talent development, and instructional innovation, ECISD introduced high-quality curricula, expanded PreK, high-dosage virtual tutoring with outcomes-based contracts, and teacher leadership models like Opportunity Culture. These efforts reduced vacancies, raised teacher pay, and improved student achievement, including record graduation rates and national recognition. Muri urged federal investment in teachers, principals, and research on strategic staffing and AI in education.

Dr. Winthrop testified that U.S. schools face three interconnected crises: chronic absenteeism, declining academic achievement, and worsening adolescent mental health. She argued that a key, overlooked driver is student disengagement, which undermines attendance, learning, and wellbeing. Her research with Brookings and Transcend found that only a minority of students feel engaged, with fewer opportunities to learn in "Explorer mode," where they exercise agency and connect lessons to real life. Winthrop urged policies that boost engagement through autonomy-supportive teaching, community schools, and limiting distractions like cell phones and open-ended AI tools, while maintaining rigor and high expectations.

MEMBER QUESTIONS

Senator Collins voiced deep concern over declining student performance, noting that Maine has fallen from being among the nation's top-performing states in the 1990s and early 2000s to ranking last in recent U.S. News high school ratings. She emphasized that these declines began before COVID-19 and persist today. Collins asked witnesses why Maine has experienced such sharp declines and which reforms – such as addressing cell phone use, mental health challenges, chronic absenteeism, and teacher incentives – might help. **Dr. Hanushek** argued that the core issue is the lack of incentives to reward and retain highly effective teachers, pointing to successful examples in Dallas, Washington, D.C., and Odessa, Texas that remain underutilized nationwide. **Dr. West** added that Maine is not alone, as several Northeastern states have seen steep declines, possibly tied to a retreat from accountability reforms that had once fueled improvements, alongside broader societal factors beyond schools.

Ranking Member Sanders pressed witnesses on early childhood education, teacher pay, and student engagement. **Dr. Muri** described Ector County ISD's partnership with the YMCA to expand free pre-K, which boosted kindergarten readiness from 36% in 2019 to 57% in 2024, with 66% readiness among pre-K participants. **Dr. Jenner** acknowledged progress but noted her state still has work to do on childcare. On teacher pay, all panelists agreed salaries must rise, with emphasis on both raising the base and rewarding effectiveness to attract and retain talent. Sanders

lamented low pay pushing prospective teachers out of the profession. Finally, discussion turned to student engagement, with Muri stressing the central role of skilled teachers in creating excitement, and Jenner highlighting that high school absenteeism often stems from students not seeing value in education, underscoring the need to rethink secondary schooling.

Senator Husted highlighted his state-level priorities for education reform, including universal adoption of the science of reading, banning smartphones in schools, incentivizing schools to graduate career-ready students, and responsibly leveraging AI as a tutoring tool. He asserted that cell phone bans significantly improve school culture and mental health, while career and technical education ensures students graduate with job-ready skills. Husted questioned whether the education system measures the right outcomes, noting employers value teamwork, reliability, and technical skills more than NAEP scores. In response, **Dr. Hanushek** stressed that NAEP-measured math and reading skills strongly predict labor market success, while Katie Jenner underscored NAEP's importance for state-to-state comparisons but noted the need for better ways to measure soft skills like collaboration and civic literacy. Husted concluded by reaffirming the importance of career and technical pathways to keep students engaged and connected to real-world opportunities.

Senator Baldwin criticized the administration for cutting billions in education funding, canceling grants, and reducing staff, which she argued worsens Wisconsin's teacher shortage, especially in special education. She cited state data showing nearly 75% of districts have vacancies and highlighted the cancellation of a Milwaukee program that would have trained 36 special education teachers. **Dr. Muri** testified that such abrupt cuts force districts to reallocate funds, eliminate effective programs, and ultimately harm students. Baldwin then asked **Dr. Winthrop** about AI in education. Winthrop stressed three priorities: ensuring AI tools are pedagogically sound and teacher-guided, establishing guardrails outside school – such as age verification and limits on open-ended AI platforms – and integrating AI literacy into curricula so students understand both its benefits and risks. She emphasized that without safeguards, disengaged students may misuse AI, while with proper design, AI could enhance active, student-centered learning.

Senator Tuberville drew on his decades as a teacher and coach to stress concerns about social media's disruption, overprescription of ADHD drugs, weak workforce preparation, and the "business" of college. He emphasized school choice, testing for success rather than just college, and the need to "think outside the box." **Dr. Hanushek** responded by urging structural reforms beyond incremental fixes, **Dr. West** highlighted Alabama's early-grade progress through evidence-based curricula, and **Dr. Jenner** warned against schools trying to "boil the ocean" rather than focusing on literacy, STEM, and high school redesign. **Dr. Muri** underscored the importance of aligning vision, strategy, and execution, while **Dr. Winthrop** stressed that strong school-community trust is critical for student success.

Senator Hassan highlighted troubling NAEP results showing nearly half of high school seniors below basic in math and a third below basic in reading. She asked what drove NAEP improvements in the 1990s and why declines began in the 2010s, before COVID. **Dr. West** credited 1990s standards-based reforms and accountability measures, later expanded under No Child Left Behind, with boosting performance. He suggested the later downturn stemmed from weakened accountability, the rise of smartphones and social media, and broader international trends. Senator Hassan then pressed on technology's role, noting bipartisan concern over its harms. **Dr. Winthrop** warned that social media and AI-driven platforms, designed to be addictive and sycophantic,

undermine both cognitive and social development. She cautioned that reliance on AI “friends” erodes healthy socialization.

Senator Moody emphasized Florida’s leadership in expanding universal school choice and argued that current national education metrics, particularly NAEP scores, fail to capture the progress of students in scholarship programs, private schools, and homeschooling. She noted that more than half of Florida students now use school choice options, many of them from at-risk backgrounds, and that Florida showed smaller post-pandemic learning declines due to early school reopenings. Moody urged updating accountability systems to reflect this shift. Responding, **Dr. West** confirmed NAEP excludes homeschooling and generally only includes public school students in state-level results. He noted federal law bars collecting homeschooling data, and private schools often decline to participate, limiting accurate representation. He stressed improving private school participation is crucial as more states follow Florida’s model. Moody warned this gap will increasingly affect accurate state comparisons as choice expands nationally.

Senator Murray sharply criticized the Trump administration’s efforts to dismantle the Department of Education, freeze funding, and undermine programs that support teachers and students. She warned that these actions, coupled with broad and in some cases illegal waivers, threaten the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) she co-authored with former Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN). Murray highlighted alarming NAEP results showing declining math, reading, and science scores, and widening achievement gaps. She argued that the administration’s approach exacerbates inequities rather than helping students succeed. In response, **Dr. Muri** emphasized the need for a balanced approach of pressure and support through policy, funding, and regulation so schools can create strong learning environments. Murray concluded that the administration’s waiver policies jeopardize accountability and risk leaving struggling students behind.

Senator Hawley pressed witnesses on the dangers of AI in education, citing reports of students using chatbots for homework before being exposed to harmful content, including encouragement of suicide. He argued schools must be redesigned around children’s wellbeing, not technology companies’ interests, and questioned whether minors should be barred entirely from AI chatbot use. **Dr. Winthrop** agreed on the need for stronger protections, suggesting age verification and consideration of minimum age standards. Hawley further criticized companies like Meta for promoting AI “friends” for kids, calling the idea dangerous. **Dr. West** added that restricting cell phones during school hours is not enough, as online risks extend beyond the classroom, requiring collaboration between policymakers, educators, and parents.

Senator Blunt Rochester emphasized Congress’s responsibility to shape how AI is integrated into education, highlighting her bipartisan [RAISE Act](#) to encourage states to set AI academic standards. She stressed the need to prepare students to use AI safely, effectively, and responsibly. **Dr. Winthrop** outlined four pillars of AI literacy – engaging with AI, managing multiple AIs, creating with AI, and designing with AI – drawing on OECD, EU, and Code.org frameworks. **Dr. Muri** warned that if business drives AI adoption, profit will outweigh learning and urged educators to lead so AI reduces gaps rather than widening them. **Dr. Jenner** described her state’s work on AI guardrails, focusing on reducing teacher workload and expanding tutoring through AI.

Chairman Cassidy pressed witnesses on teacher evaluation, accountability, and testing. **Dr. Muri** emphasized collaboration with teachers and measuring effectiveness by student growth, not proficiency, especially for disadvantaged students, using an “N-of-1” approach to track individual progress. **Dr. West** agreed growth is a better accountability metric than static proficiency, noting

lessons from No Child Left Behind and endorsing aggregation of individual student progress. Dr. Hanushek added that effective systems, like in Washington, D.C., balance test-based measures with evaluator rubrics to assess how teachers support diverse learners, including dyslexic students. Cassidy raised concerns that standardized testing encourages “teaching to the test,” limiting instruction. **Dr. Jenner** cautioned against over-testing but stressed the necessity of knowing each student’s progress to tailor interventions.

Senator Hickenlooper questioned the witnesses on strategies to strengthen education. **Dr. Winthrop** emphasized that teachers must partner with AI developers to design pedagogically sound tools, noting collaborations with unions and tech firms to improve AI literacy. She highlighted AI’s potential to support neurodivergent learners if responsibly integrated. **Dr. Muri** described ECISD’s apprenticeship model, where teacher residents spend a full year with master teachers, producing more skilled first-year educators and eliminating early learning loss. He urged expanding such programs with federal and state support. **Dr. West** stressed aligning teacher preparation with the “science of reading,” focusing not only on phonics and decoding, but also on broad background knowledge through knowledge-rich curricula. This dual approach, he argued, is essential to reversing declining NAEP scores and closing achievement gaps.

Senator Kim questioned the witnesses about smartphones’ impact on learning. **Dr. West** explained that causality is difficult to prove since smartphones and social media spread nationwide simultaneously, but new research on school phone bans may provide insight. Dr. Hanushek, Dr. West, Dr. Jenner, and Dr. Muri agreed bans may help but pointed out broader solutions, since challenges extend beyond cell phone use. Senator Kim reflected as a parent on balancing academics with unstructured time, asking about parents’ roles. Dr. Winthrop emphasized that parents need better support and should set household rules, educate children about social media, and monitor online activity. She highlighted the need for balance between structure and exploration.

Senator Kaine highlighted inequities in U.S. school funding, noting reliance on property taxes creates disparities between districts, unlike other OECD nations that direct more resources to underserved communities. He emphasized Virginia’s progress, moving from segregated schools to equalization strategies that support low-income areas. Kaine also criticized the Trump administration’s cancellation of innovative teacher residency grants, including those in Virginia, which targeted diverse and high-need communities during a teacher shortage. He underscored the importance of Medicaid in providing wraparound services for students in poverty and with disabilities, warning of harmful impacts from proposed Medicaid cuts. Concluding on a positive note, he praised career and technical education (CTE) as a bipartisan success, citing its ability to engage students, improve academic performance, and connect classroom learning to real-world opportunities.

Senator Markey praised Massachusetts’ strong academic record but warned that recent Trump Administration policies have caused severe harm to schools. He detailed federal funding cuts and clawbacks, including \$106 million in pandemic recovery funds, \$900 million in education research, \$600 million in teacher training, and \$1 billion in school-based mental health programs, along with the withholding of \$7 billion nationwide. Markey argued these cuts destabilize school budgets, threaten staffing, and jeopardize programs for English learners, literacy, and mental health. He also criticized GOP efforts to slash Medicaid and SNAP, which would worsen school staffing shortages and strip millions of children of meals. Responding, **Dr. Muri** acknowledged

that funding disruptions force schools into difficult tradeoffs, while other witnesses agreed on the challenges. Markey concluded by condemning harsh immigration enforcement, saying ICE presence near schools instills fear in families, contributes to absenteeism and undermines learning.

CONCLUSION

In closing remarks, **Chairman Cassidy** emphasized that poor education outcomes stem from decades of systemic failures, not recent policies, noting that \$190 billion in COVID relief produced little improvement. He highlighted AI's potential for personalized learning if grounded in strong instruction and mediated by educators. Cassidy also raised concerns about how curricula often fail to engage distractible learners, with Drs. Muri and Jenner stressing individualized teaching, work-based learning, and connecting instruction to student interests. Discussion turned to accountability, with Cassidy questioning growth versus proficiency measures. Drs. West and Hanushek explained that while No Child Left Behind had flaws, research suggests it boosted performance, and that growth-based metrics better capture educator impact. Cassidy praised performance-based teacher pay models, such as those in Washington D.C., Dallas and Odessa, as promising reforms.

A recording of the hearing and witness testimony [is here](#).