COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & WORKFORCE
CHAIRMAN TIM WALBERG

COMMITTEE STATEMENT

Opening Statement of Rep. Kevin Kiley (R-CA), Chairman
Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Subcommittee
"Foundations First: Reclaiming Reading and Math through Proven Instruction"
September 3, 2025

(As prepared for delivery)

The Reading Wars are over.

For years, for decades, countless young people in this country received literacy instruction that was not science-based and did not promote the mastery needed for success in school and in life. But now, in almost every state in America, science-backed literacy instruction has prevailed.

Still, progress has been uneven, and there is unfortunately still much work to do to see that best practices are followed in states and districts across the country. And more recently, we are seeing the same type of mistakes repeated when it comes to math.

The latest Nation's Report Card (or NAEP) reflects this limited progress, showing that both 4th grade and 8th grade reading scores dropped 5 points compared to 2019; math scores dropped 3 points for 4th graders and 8 points for 8th graders

These low scores are part of a longer-term trend of poor performance in the U.S. Essentially, all scores on the NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment have nearly flatlined since 1971.

International comparisons paint the same troubling picture. A recent international assessment showed that American 15-year-old students are below average in math among nations across the world.

There are many reasons for this decline. But one major reason, which is our focus today, is how schools moved away from grounding their instruction in the science of learning.

For generations, students in elementary school were taught to read by identifying letters and the sounds they represent. But then, starting in the 1970s, a new idea called “whole language” arose, leaving behind the explicit instruction of phonics as old-fashioned. This new method, which came to be known as “three-cueing” or “balanced literacy,” encourages students to read by guessing an unknown word based on its context and structure within a sentence, or even adjacent pictures in the book.

This approach was at odds with the Science of Reading, which aims to ensure students develop strong foundational skills.The Science of Reading emphasizes five core skills that every child must master: phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

More than 40 states have now passed legislation for evidence-based reading programs in their schools. These programs emphasize the importance of phonics and building a deep vocabulary, rather than guessing words based on context.

There is a similar science behind learning math skills, where foundational skills like the four basic functions of arithmetic (addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division) are taught so that students can perform these functions automatically, and students are given step-by-step, direct instruction in problem-solving. But in too many places, this approach has been overtaken by teaching philosophies that reject direct instruction from teachers, devalue content knowledge, and insist on

student-led exploration.

Here's the good news, which provides great hope for the future of education. States that truly emphasize the science of learning in reading and math have gotten outstanding results. In Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama, for example, a renewed focus on phonics and arithmetic mastery, and holding schools accountable, has resulted in rapidly rising test scores, even through the pandemic. Similarly, Luminous Minds, a California-based education platform, has proven that literacy gains can be achieved in even the most challenging districts through rigorous, science-based literacy instruction. Today we'll hear from witnesses who have proven that principled leadership and science-backed instruction transform student outcomes.

It is time we reclaim America's academic foundations. This means getting back to basics when it comes to reading and math. Our nation's freedom, prosperity, and national strength depend on it.