



COMMITTEE ON
EDUCATION & LABOR
REPUBLICANS

COMMITTEE
STATEMENT

**Opening Statement of Rep. Burgess Owens (R-UT), Republican Leader
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
“Back to School: Meeting Students’ Academic, Social, and Emotional Needs”
September 20, 2022**

(As prepared for delivery)

"The near-total shutdown of schools at the beginning of the COVID pandemic caused historic disruptions in K-12 education and beyond. At their peak, these closures affected 97 percent of K-12 students or approximately 55 million students.

"It was obvious from the beginning that children were suffering from shuttered classrooms. Despite this, many school districts prolonged school shutdowns, some for months and some for more than a year. Other districts waffled back and forth between the two, causing mass uncertainty for educators, students, and parents. Other students have faced continued disruptions to their learning due to restrictive quarantine regulations or stringent masking and vaccination requirements.

"The majority of students forced into online education fell behind—significantly. According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress report, the average scores for 9-year-olds in 2022 declined five points in reading and seven points in mathematics compared to 2020. This is the biggest drop in reading scores since 1990 and the first ever drop in math. Another analysis found that on average students were five months behind in math and four months behind in reading by the end of the 2020-21 academic year. Children kept out of school even longer are faring worse. The numbers are also worse for historically disadvantaged communities.

"School closures did not only affect young students, but also left high schoolers more likely not to graduate or pursue college.

"These closures didn't only affect academic performance. Many adolescents also faced immense emotional and mental trauma during the pandemic, due to forced social isolation. Three major pediatric organizations even declared adolescent mental health a 'national emergency' last fall.

"To help schools reopen they were given exorbitant amounts of COVID-19 funding with zero accountability measures in place to ensure these taxpayer dollars are being spent appropriately. Through ESSER alone, states were given \$190 billion to help schools safely reopen. Most of these funds have yet to be spent.

"On top of this, the science and the data from schools that had reopened showed that schools were not a major vector of spread and few children were at risk of serious illness from COVID-19. Even the Washington Post ran a headline on November 20, 2020, stating 'Schools are not spreading covid-19...' And the Atlantic ran this headline in October of 2020: 'Schools Aren't Super-Spreaders: Fears from the summer appear to have been overblown.' Keep in mind, these articles were posted at the end of 2020, 8 or 9 months after the beginning of school closures.

"Yet many schools still did not open. We now know this is because of the immense pressure placed on school boards, school administrators, local politicians, the Biden administration, and even the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention by powerful teachers unions.

"If it wasn't obvious before, it's obvious now: Teachers unions have an outsized and unhealthy influence on K-12 education. Multiple studies suggest that union influence affected school operating decisions more than COVID-19 infection rates. This proves that teachers unions were motivated by politics, not science—and definitely not the interests of students and their education.

"A Los Angeles teachers union, for example, used the pandemic as an opportunity to push for radical social change. Reports from around the world continued to mount about the danger to our children's mental health and learning loss. Instead of addressing these issues our children were hostages as the teachers unions demanded Medicare-for-All, outlawing charter schools, and defunding the police. Other teachers unions made demands—and when those demands were met they moved the goal post. For instance, even after teachers were pushed to the front of the vaccine line, many teachers unions still refused to reopen schools.

"Despite the havoc they wreaked on our education system, teachers unions have faced no consequences for their actions. Nor have school district officials or Democrat politicians who let them run the show.

"Republicans are demanding accountability.

"Republicans are also demanding answers on how schools have been spending ESSER funds. Republicans urged patience after the bipartisan second round of COVID relief in December 2020, but Democrats ignored those warnings and forged ahead with another \$120 billion. As a result, we know some schools have wasted these funds: whether that be to improve athletic

facilities or invite critical race theory consultants to their schools.

"Congress' allocation of emergency pandemic relief was so excessive that the Wall Street Journal editorialized, 'Democrats are using the banner of COVID relief not to increase student learning but to reward a Democrat constituency at taxpayer expense.'

"While Republicans' opposition to the American Rescue Plan has proved correct, we also believe these funds should be used to address students' learning loss now that they have been appropriated. States like Tennessee are leading the way by using taxpayer dollars to address the learning losses students have experienced. This is the example we should follow.

"Pandemic policies failed students. We must do all we can to right this situation and put students back on track to success."

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