



## House Education and Labor Committee

Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education Subcommittee

*Underfunded and Unprepared: Examining How to Overcome Obstacles to Safely Reopen Public Schools*

July 23, 2020

10:15 AM, 2175 Rayburn House Office Building

### Purpose

*The purpose of this hearing was to examine the current state of education and discuss strategies to prepare to return to school in the fall.*

### Members Present

Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Allen, Representatives Hayes, Foxx, Schrier, Thompson, Davis, Grothman, Morelle, Keller, Scott, Murphy, Courtney, Bonamici, Underwood, Stevens, Lee, Shalala, Wild, and McBath

### Witnesses

**Mr. Michael Hinojosa, Ed.D.**, Superintendent, Dallas Independent School District

**Ms. Leslie Boggs.**, President, National Parent Teacher Association

**Ms. Penny Schwinn, Ph.D.**, Commissioner of Education, Tennessee Department of Education

**Mr. Sean O'Leary, M.D., M.P.H., FAAP.**, Vice Chair, Committee on Infectious Diseases, American Academy of Pediatrics

### Opening Statements

**(32:55) Chairman Sablan** said that today this Committee asks what Congress must do to get students and faculty back into the classroom safely. It is clear how important returning to school is for all Americans. This is where America's future is being formed. Unfortunately, schools are struggling to open due to actions taken by this administration. There is still no national contact tracing or testing strategy. In addition, there is still not enough known about the impact of COVID-19 on children. Democrats have not been idle waiting for COVID-19 to go away. The house has passed important legislation in the HEROs Act. This legislation contains key provisions to protect students and teachers as schools begin to reopen. The Senate must take action on this legislation. Meanwhile Secretary DeVos and President Trump are threatening to take away funding from schools who cannot open safely. This is a disaster.

**(38:55) Ranking Member Allen** said that the decision of whether or not to return to school has dominated the conversation across the nation recently. Luckily, science can guide these decisions. The question has become, how can schools be reopened rather than if schools can reopen. It has become clear that the lack of educational opportunity is devastating for student growth. When all the impacts of COVID-19 are combined, the average student may lose 7 months of developmental progress. Luckily,

President Trump is committed to helping students return to school safely. This is even more important in low-income communities that rely on free or reduced meals. Furthermore, if children cannot return to school, parents cannot return to work. This could result in significant economic loss. There can be no single uniform approach to reopening schools. Instead, schools need to open based on the conditions and guidelines of their local community.

#### Testimony

**(50:30) Dr. Hinojosa** said that schools currently face many challenges. While many schools have worked to transition to a remote environment, this has not been done without mishaps. Many students still face connectivity issues and basic technology infrastructure shortages. While this is true, it still seems like remote learning will be essential in the fall. This is because the rate of infections across the nation is still too high. It is possible that there will be a hybrid environment where some students physically go to school while others utilize the online environment. It is important to consider the risk that is posed to family members of children returning to school. Many of these families are ethnic minorities and have already been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. It is unreasonable to continue to ask these communities to accept more risk. Finally, broadband connectivity is a major concern. Without reliable, high-speed broadband, online learning cannot be effective.

**(55:55) Ms. Boggs** said the partnership between parents and school leaders is more important than ever. Unfortunately, this pandemic is far from over. We cannot downplay the critical nature of this virus. Children are the future of this nation and they must be kept safe. Any claim that all children are asymptomatic and not at risk are simply not true. States and school districts should not push plans for reopening schools onto parents. Strategies must be adopted to promote both safety and educational progress. Parents want their children to be back in school, but beyond that, they want their children to be safe. Parents have significant concerns surrounding schools ability to reopen in a safe manner. Safely reopening schools is going to take significant resources. This should not be a political issue. Investments in these areas are essential and must be sustained. Congress must deliver additional aide to public schools. In addition, public funds must not be diverted from public schools to private and charter schools.

**(1:01:20) Dr. Schwinn** said that Tennessee has committed to maintaining the same level of funding to school districts as every other year. However, it is known that this year will not be like any other. At its core, the system has the monumental task of keeping people safe and healthy so that children can return to school safely. As schools begin to reopen, the following three issues need to be addressed: the health and safety in schools, technology, and child wellbeing. The health and safety of students needs to be the largest priority when reopening schools. Schools need large amounts of personal protective equipment (PPE) as well as classroom disinfection kits. Additionally, Congress must address the broadband gaps that exist across the nation. This type of investment allows for the continuity of instruction and will continue to pay dividends in the future. As we balance the needs of community health, we must continue to ask the question ‘what is best for the children’. This is not an abstract conversation, this is a reality. If schools are going to be open, it must be done with sufficient health protocols in place. If schools are going to be closed there needs to be a plan to support working families and deliver the academic services that children need.

**(1:07:00) Dr. O’Leary** said that schools help students develop important social and emotional skills and provides access to many other services. Any parent of school aged children can talk about the challenges posed when schools are closed. There is already evidence of the negative impact that school closures

have on children. These impacts have been particularly hard on minority children and children who are medically fragile. AAP carefully weighed the evidence and decided that it is best to aim to have children back in school this fall. However, this cannot be done without significant investments and modifications. AAP is not saying that every school should be open for 5 days a week, rather the goal should be to find a way to have children in school in some capacity. AAP recognizes that many districts will have to use distance learning strategies. School systems may prioritize the return of younger children, as the evidence suggests these students are at the lowest risk. Schools will need to follow public health guidance's and adopt their own unique strategies.

#### Questions and Answers

**(1:11:55) Chairman Sablan** asked how families have reacted to the idea of rotating school schedules. **Ms. Boggs** said that not everyone feels the same. Local school districts need to have these conversations with their community members. It is clear that parents do feel concern about almost any plan. However, parents are the most concerned about in person learning. **Chairman Sablan** asked if parents have a preferred rotating schedule. **Ms. Boggs** said that there was no clear preference.

**(1:18:00) Ranking Member Allen** asked if decision makers have considered the negative side effects caused as a result of not reopening schools. **Dr. Schwinn** said yes. It is known that more vulnerable populations are at risk. **Ranking Member Allen** asked what unique challenges have been addressed when reopening schools in Tennessee. **Dr. Schwinn** said they have moved to an online academic system and distributed PPE.

**(1:24:20) Rep. Hayes** asked if states and districts should be responsible for making sure diagnostic tests are available in schools. **Dr. O'Leary** said that it is a very complicated issue. There should be more testing in general across the country. It does not appear to be a good approach to test every student before school. However, symptomatic students must be tested. **Rep. Hayes** asked if there are plans to support vulnerable staff members. **Dr. Hinojosa** said yes. His district has asked faculty to self-identify at-risk conditions. This will allow for a personalized response. **Rep. Hayes** asked how a potential shortage in the teacher workforce can affect students with disabilities. **Dr. Hinojosa** said it would be disastrous. These students are already at risk and many are medically fragile.

**(1:29:55) Rep. Foxx** asked what advantages there are to returning to school in the fall. **Dr. Schwinn** said many topics like learning to read cannot be taught as well remotely. Students also rely on healthcare and counseling services that are provided in the school. **Rep. Foxx** asked why Dr. Schwinn is confident that schools can return in the fall. **Dr. Schwinn** said that this conversation is about what adults can do to help children. Adults can make sacrifices to ensure the local environment is ready for students to return to school. **Rep. Foxx** what challenges are presented by remote learning. **Dr. Schwinn** said that it is very hard for working families and it deprives children of personal education opportunities.

**(1:34:55) Rep. Schrier** asked if there is a prevalence rate that indicates it is safe to go to school in person. **Dr. O'Leary** said the reproductive number is a better metric to use to make these determinations. Other metrics can be used but there is no one defined cut off point. **Rep. Schrier** asked if there are any other interventions that can be leveraged if broadband cannot be expanded for everyone. **Dr. Hinojosa** said yes.

**(1:40:15) Rep. Thompson** asked if teachers are essential workers. **Dr. Schwinn** said yes. **Rep. Thompson** asked how to help students that are in professional or career tracks. **Dr. Schwinn** said that

Tennessee is looking to invest in these areas and ensure that remote learning can be used in conjunction with in person learning.

**(1:45:45) Rep. Davis** asked if schools should lose funding for demonstrating that they cannot open safely. **Dr. O’Leary** said no. **Rep. Davis** asked if schools want more funding. **Dr. Schwinn** said that schools will absolutely take additional funding. **Rep. Davis** asked if lost state revenue effects school budgets. **Dr. Hinojosa** said yes. This is why schools need additional resources right now. **Rep. Davis** asked if Congress should appropriate fund to schools. **Dr. Hinojosa** said yes. The HEROs Act would be very helpful.

**(1:51:00) Rep. Grothman** asked if children spread COVID-19 less rapidly than adults. **Dr. Schwinn** said that according to the Tennessee Department of Health, yes. **Rep. Grothman** asked if data coming out of the Netherlands suggest that children play a minor role in infection spread. **Dr. Schwinn** said that she cannot comment on that. **Rep. Grothman** asked if school closures are especially damaging for students with disabilities. **Dr. Schwinn** said yes.

**(1:57:15) Rep. Morelle** asked if it is true that there is less transmission among children. **Dr. O’Leary** said that the evidence suggests that young children are at lower risk. However, they can still get the disease and spread it. **Rep. Morelle** asked if the reason that it is not practical to test every student is because the nationwide testing capacity is so limited. **Dr. O’Leary** said he does not think it is practical to test all asymptomatic students. If a student has symptoms, they should be tested.

**(2:02:50) Rep. Keller** asked if the knowledge that young children are at a lower risk of transmission of COVID-19, makes the decision to reopen easier. **Dr. Schwinn** said yes. It also tells us that protecting adults will protect children. **Rep. Keller** asked how schools are communicating with parents to share new information. **Dr. Schwinn** said that Tennessee is planning on releasing family communication documents in the coming days. **Rep. Keller** asked if there is a difference in transmission rates between younger and older children. **Dr. O’Leary** said yes.

**(2:08:40) Rep. Scott** asked why ventilation is so important in schools. **Dr. O’Leary** said that he is not an environmental engineer but it is known that poor ventilation increase the risk of transmission. This is one example of why schools need resources. **Rep. Scott** asked what plan exists to deal with a student that is beginning to show symptoms. **Dr. O’Leary** said that this speaks to the need to drive overall infection rates down. The specific protocols to deal with his event are still being developed. **Rep. Scott** asked if there should be nurses in every school. **Dr. O’Leary** said yes. Unfortunately, that is not the reality.

**(2:13:50) Rep. Murphy** asked what the true relative risk is for children under 18. **Dr. O’Leary** said that new evidence is coming in every day. However, so far the evidence suggests that children are at a lower risk for contracting COVID-19 when compares to adults. It is unknown to what extent this risk is reduced. **Rep. Murphy** asked if schools should be liable for student safety. **Dr. Schwinn** said that is a worthwhile conversation because schools are worried about this. Schools do have a duty to keep students and staff safe.

**(2:18:30) Rep. Courtney** asked if schools are going to have different protocols depending on the state of COVID-19 infections in the surrounding communities. **Dr. O’Leary** said yes. These decisions need to be made based on local epidemiology.

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(2:23:10) **Rep. Bonamici** asked if the flu kills more students than COVID-19. **Dr. O’Leary** said what is missed in this conversation is the fact the influenza is considered deadly to children. Thus minimizing COVID-19 by saying it is less deadly than influenza is irresponsible. **Rep. Bonamici** asked what mental health supports will be needed in schools. **Dr. O’Leary** said that mental health is already vastly underfunded. Schools should be planning to handle mental and behavioral health at the community level. Schools need to partner with community stakeholders. **Rep. Bonamici** asked how schools are meaningfully engaging with families. **Dr. Hinojosa** said that his district has been proactively engaging families to get feedback on remote learning.

(2:28:50) **Rep. Underwood** asked what data the CDC should be relying on to make decisions about opening schools. **Dr. O’Leary** said that the CDC is currently working with local and state health departments to develop guidance. These decisions are best made at the local level. **Rep. Underwood** asked why it is important to have school nurses during a global pandemic. **Dr. O’Leary** said that numerous studies have documented that nurses in schools lead to improved health outcomes for students.

(2:34:00) **Rep. Stevens** asked what the primary concerns of principals are. **Dr. Hinojosa** said the primary concern is making sure that teachers have all of the resources that they need. This includes educational materials and PPE.

(2:39:12) **Rep. Lee** asked how Congress can best address revenue shortfalls. **Dr. Hinojosa** said the biggest need right now is broadband connectivity. This is essential to stay connected to families. Schools also need more special education support.

(2:44:45) **Rep. Shalala** asked if there is concern around the idea of sending kids to school in hot spots. **Dr. O’Leary** said yes. **Rep. Shalala** asked what should be done to help low income students catch up on missed school time. **Dr. O’Leary** said assessments can help to determine who needs more services. Unfortunately, many of the community based services are no longer available due to COVID-19.

(2:48:30) **Rep. Wild** asked if parents and PTAs have been included enough in the conversation around reopening schools. **Ms. Boggs** said she believes that parents have been meaningfully involved. Of course, there are still some districts that are not engaging with parents.

(2:53:10) **Rep. McBath** asked if the responses in the Virginia PTA parents survey indicate that there is significant concern when returning to school. **Ms. Boggs** said yes. There is a lot of concern that there are not enough options for students, parents or teachers.