

Testimony of Luke Messer
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Chairman Bean, Ranking Member Bonamici, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. As a former member of the Education & Workforce Committee, former president of a state school choice organization, and a former state legislator, I've worked for many years to reform K-12 education, with a particular emphasis on expanding education freedom and parental empowerment in K-12 education.

This month marks the 40th anniversary of "A Nation at Risk", arguably the most important document assessing the state of K-12 education ever published by the federal government.

For those who don't recall, "A Nation at Risk" was a data-based report issued in April 1983 by the Reagan Administration's National Commission on Excellence in Education. The most famous line of the report declared that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people." (U.S. Department of Education, 1983).

The report was fashioned as "an open letter to the American people" and called on elected officials, educators, parents, and students to reform a public school system it described as "in urgent need of improvement."

Forty years later, not enough has changed. The truth is: we are a long way away from having a 21st Century K-12 education model where every student has access to a great education, and schools are laser focused on learning and improving academic outcomes for students.

Today, our K-12 "system" continues to place the interests and agendas of adults above the learning and academic needs of students. We are still, for the most part, the same antiquated 19th Century model that funds systems instead of students. If we learned anything during the pandemic, it is that our K-12 "system" remains woefully inadequate for the times, inflexible, and incapable of ensuring a quality education for every child.

More alarmingly, the pandemic exposed a disturbing underlying political dynamic that, too often, places the interests of adults above the welfare, both emotionally and academically, of students. The result was a widespread, documented learning loss that will take years to recover.

As Members of the Education Committee, you are fully aware of the catastrophic learning loss that occurred because of school closures and often unreasonable government mandates during

the pandemic. Millions of students lost an entire year (or more) of learning. The loss fell disproportionately hard on children in low-income families and special needs students. The 2022 NAEP scores reinforced what we already knew. Fourth grade reading scores were the lowest since 2005. One quarter of fourth graders performed at the "below basic" level in reading. Math scores for the 4th and 8th grades showed the biggest declines since NAEP assessments began in 1990.

During the pandemic, with millions of students learning from home, America's parents also got a much better look at the substance of what is being taught in our nation's schools. Unfortunately, many schools are driving an agenda that has little to do with reading, writing, math, science, art, music or history. Many parents discovered that their own local public schools no longer aligned with or respected their family's values.

Thanks to the leadership, Rep. Letlow, Chairwoman Foxx, and many other Members of this committee, the House recently passed a bill, the Parents Bill of Rights, which is intended to ensure that parents have a much stronger voice in our nation's schools.

No doubt, the Parents Bill of Rights will bring more *transparency* into our public school system. But importantly, school choice is the engine that makes the Parents Bill of Rights enforceable.

Parents need the freedom to choose the education environment that best meets their child's needs. Parents, especially lower-income parents, need the power to be able to leave the government-assigned school that isn't working for their child. Parents need school choice.

Parental empowerment through school choice will transform an outdated 19th Century education system into a 21st Century model where every child has access to a great education, regardless of their parents' income, residence, privilege or social status.

The great myth about school choice is that it allegedly hurts public schools. Decades into this debate, school choice is an experiment no longer. In America today, there are 3.5 million students in public charter schools. There are around 700,000 students benefitting from a voucher, tax credit scholarship, or education savings account. Yet, the public school system is still standing and still educating the vast majority of our nation's students. In other words, school choice hasn't hurt public schools. In fact, more than 20 years of research compiled by EdChoice shows that the existence of school choice actually *improves* academic achievement in surrounding public schools.

School choice is also incredibly popular. In America today, it's hard to find a public policy issue on which Republican, Democrat, Independent, Latino, African American, and Millennial voters all agree. Yet, poll after poll, shows 70% to even 90% support from these groups for various forms of school choice.

We have seen this support playing out in the states. There are now 31 states, plus Washington, D.C., with a voucher, tax credit scholarship, or education savings account program (ESA). Four

states have even passed universal school choice programs in which every K-12 student is, or soon will be, eligible to participate. Of course, there are still 19 states where parents of school-aged children are denied the opportunity to choose the best school for their own children.

Congress should heed the call from voters and parents of school-aged children and pass America's boldest school choice bill – H.R. 531, the Educational Choice for Children Act (ECCA).

The ECCA respects federalism and ensures K-12 education remains a state and local issue. It creates no new mandates or government programs. Instead, the ECCA creates a \$10 billion federal tax credit that allows individuals and businesses to contribute to non-profit scholarship granting organizations (SGOs) in the states. These SGOs provide scholarships for students to use for a variety of educational purposes such as tuition, tutoring to address learning loss, special needs services, school-related fees, education technology, or curriculum materials. That's private money – not federal money – to fund scholarships, while donors get a 100% non-refundable federal tax credit.

Once implemented, the ECCA would provide educational opportunities for more than a million families throughout the country. Imagine, how different the policy debate would have been throughout the pandemic if one million families could have voted with their feet.

This is important enough to say again: the ECCA contains no government mandates or encroachments on SGOs or schools that educate scholarship students. It protects religious liberty and private school autonomy. It benefits students who live in urban, rural, and suburban parts of the country. For states that already offer school choice, the ECCA scholarship can be stacked on top of an existing state scholarship, voucher, or ESA, thereby increasing the purchasing power for parents and allowing more students to benefit, especially during the more expensive high school years. The ECCA also creates educational opportunity in states that lack education freedom by directly empowering parents to choose the school or education service that meets their child's needs. And, it does these things **without expanding federal government education policy or spending new federal money**.

Giving more parents the freedom to choose the best school or education service for their children is where K-12 education must go. It is just common sense. There is nothing to fear from directly empowering parents. Our view is that it shouldn't just be wealthy or politically powerful parents who get to choose the best school for their child. All parents should have this right.