



Opening Statement

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & LABOR

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The Hon. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott • Chairman

Opening Statement of Chairman Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan (CNMI)

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

Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Hearing

2175 Rayburn House Office Building

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We are here to ask what Congress must do to help America's students get back to school during this pandemic.

All of us want our schools to reopen for full time, in-person instruction as soon as possible. That fact is not up for debate. The question is: What must Congress do to help our schools get students and faculty back into classrooms safely?

We are all coming to a new understanding of just how essential schools are to life in America; where working parents can be confident their children are cared for, where economically challenged families know their children can be fed, where our communities can find common ground cheering at sporting events, and where America's future is being formed by the knowledge and values we impart to the next generation.

Schools are currently struggling to safely reopen because of this President's failed response to the pandemic. There is still no testing and contact tracing strategy or science-based plan that we know other countries are using successfully to combat COVID-19.

Now, the daily number of new cases in the U.S. is exceeding 60,000 – *much higher* than when the pandemic first caused schools to close nationwide in March.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has made clear that fully reopening schools carries the highest risk of creating new spikes in COVID-19 infections. We had hoped to have CDC here today to discuss what best practices could help safely reopen America's schools, but the White House refused to let its officials testify at today's hearing.

While initial studies suggest that students are less likely to contract COVID-19 and suffer serious illness, across the country, outbreaks at summer camps and even among infants make clear that we do not know enough about the risks for children.

And a Kaiser Family Foundation analysis estimates that 1.5 million teachers — nearly 1 in 4 — have health conditions that put them at higher risk of serious illness if they contract COVID-19.

These risks can be mitigated, and tragedies can be prevented. But it requires both a nationwide strategy to contain the spread of the virus and a significant federal investment to help schools take necessary safety precautions.

House Democrats have not been idle, waiting for a miraculous disappearance of COVID-19.

The *CARES Act* in March provided over \$13 billion directly to schools to help deal with the costs of closure and transition to an online learning environment.

In May, the House passed the *Heroes Act* with another \$60 billion in emergency school funding to help schools buy Personal Protective Equipment, sanitize classrooms, and make special arrangements for students and teachers in high-risk categories, so schools can safely reopen.

And, this month, this Committee's *Reopen and Rebuild America's Schools Act* was included when the House passed the *Moving Forward Act*—another investment of \$130 billion that can be used to reconfigure and modernize schools to protect the health of students and staff.

Unfortunately, our Republican friends in the Senate have chosen—like the President—to hide from the problem and taken no action on the House proposals to help America's schools safely reopen.

We are hearing this week the Senate may finally be waking up to the enormity of the problem.

I hope they shake themselves awake, because time is not on our side. For many, the school year should begin next month, but you cannot modernize the HVAC system in a 40-year-old school on a moment's notice.

According to the Superintendents Association, the average district will need \$1.8 million of work before schools can safely reopen. The House voted to give them the money to get started months ago. The Senate slept.

Meanwhile, instead of joining Democrats to deliver more funding to help schools reopen safely, Secretary DeVos and President Trump are threatening to strip funding from public schools that determine they cannot safely bring all students back into the classroom full-time.

They have it backwards. As a national survey published on Monday found, 86 percent of America's school principals said it is "extremely important" to get *additional* funding, so their schools can safely reopen – just the opposite of the Administration's threat to defund schools.

To be clear, the President has no legal authority to withhold school funds that Congress appropriated.

But I should also note that my Republican colleagues – who have consistently railed against the federal government's role in education – now believe that the Trump Administration should act as a national school board that coerces schools into opening for full-time instruction, regardless of local health conditions. Meanwhile, the Education Department has no plan for transitioning students back to in-person instruction safely. Instead, it is blaming teachers and administrators for not doing enough.

So, we will be listening today to national leaders and experts, who want to make sure Congress provides meaningful assistance to America's schools. I thank our witnesses in advance for their advice.

I yield to Mr. Allen for the purpose of an opening statement.