



K-12 Education Spotlight Forum

“Robbing Our Students’ Futures: The Indefensible Attacks on Public Education”

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WRITTEN TESTIMONY

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Senator Hirono, members of the Senate Democratic Caucus, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is Denise Forte, and I’m the president and CEO of EdTrust. EdTrust is a national nonprofit organization focused on closing opportunity gaps and advancing racial and economic justice in education. At EdTrust, we believe education is not just a pathway to opportunity — it is a civil right.

Our democracy, our economy, and our future are determined by students’ access to education. Yet for far too many students—especially Black and Latino students, Native students, students from low-income families, English learners, and students with disabilities—that access has always been fragile.

I will be direct: we are now witnessing a coordinated attempt to dismantle public education, and as such, an attempt to remake American society. Mass firings at the Department of Education, illegally performed without any regard to job performance; the illegal and unconstitutional impoundment of Congressionally appropriated education funds; and exclusionary policies successfully included in the One Big Beautiful Bill that will create a funding stream potentially larger than Title I and Pell combined for private and religious school vouchers for the wealthy. All of these choices are part of what we’ve come to call the Great American Heist — an unprecedented and calculated effort to strip public resources from the many and hand them to the privileged few. These choices are designed to leave behind millions of students and families to fend for themselves while a select percentage of children receive the educational investment we should expect for all. This is a shocking and immoral failure to maximize and develop the innate talent and potential all children have in this country.

I had the distinct pleasure of speaking to you and your colleagues about some of these topics approximately two months ago, and unfortunately, many of the problems and issues I identified then have worsened. The Department of Education, which embodies and enforces the federal role in ensuring educational equity, civil rights for students and families, and holding states and localities accountable when they fail those students and families, continues to be under attack. The Supreme Court’s recent decision – without any elaboration – to lift a stay preventing the illegal termination of over 1,300 staff at the Department is a travesty. We support the current and ongoing efforts of the Constitutional officers elected in this room to articulate both the damage done to the Constitution when the authorizing and appropriating power of Congress is disregarded, and the real-world policy damage done to students and families by stripping the Department to the bone. Maintaining legal obligations to serve those students and families through a variety of Congressionally authorized programs while eliminating the staff necessary to carry out those programs renders them illusory and will breed additional frustration and disenchantment with the federal government as calls for help and support go unanswered.

The current damage is evident: [thousands of summarily dismissed OCR complaints](#), [millions of delayed student loan repayment plan applications](#). These are intentional policies undermining the ability of students experiencing racial harassment, gender discrimination, or denial of disability accommodations to receive legal redress and justice, and access plans that allow borrowers to be financially stable. The responsibilities of the Department of Education to execute basic oversight of vital funding streams like Title I, IDEA, and Pell Grants has been thrown into question; cuts to Federal Student Aid will harm student loan borrowers navigating a changing system that will hurt the lowest-income among them; the destruction of the Institute of Education Sciences eliminates measures of impact and evidence that policy should be based upon; and the cancellation of contracts and “freezing” of key grant competitions without explanation undermines our ability to address national problems like maintaining and strengthening the development of a high-quality teacher and principal workforce, school safety, college student success, and other vital priorities.

The intentional slowdown regarding grant programs has also metastasized into a full-blown illegal withholding of over \$5 billion dollars in formula-funded educational programs and represents an existential threat to every public school and the 90% of students served – more than 50 million children. This withholding is not just fiscal mismanagement — it’s theft in plain sight, another chapter in the Great American Heist. Funding decisions in thousands of schools, in all 50 states, have been made on the reliance of the executive branch carrying out its basic and legally obligated role of taking care the laws are faithfully executed and disbursing these funds. As a result of the administration’s dereliction of duty by illegally withholding billions in funding, states, districts, and schools are being forced to make painful and unacceptable decisions regarding whether they can maintain the programs, services, supports, and staffing currently provided to serve students and their families. For example:

- As a result of the more than \$2.1 billion in withheld funding from Title II, Part A – of which nearly 80% of this funding supports the hiring and training of high-quality educators – we are already hearing examples of the impact in states such as Tennessee, where [Memphis-Shelby County Schools report](#) that 100 teacher and staff positions are at risk of termination from the \$17 million in withheld funding.
- The withholding of \$890 million in funding for Title III-A, which supports language instruction to help English Language Learners become proficient in English, is having direct impacts in states such as Colorado, where [Denver Public Schools](#) reportedly face a loss of EL support positions that help principals, deans, and educators support the roughly one-third of the district’s 90,000 students learning English.
- Due to the more than \$1.4 billion in withheld funding from Title IV-A, which supports student learning through numerous efforts such as literacy development, improving school technology, and supporting STEM education, under-resourced districts like the [Cicero School District 99](#) in Illinois, are without essential federal funding for programs related to STEM, music, arts, sports, and other opportunities to create and sustain critical student enrichment programs.

These examples are just some of the many ways in which the illegal withholding of billions in funding will have devastating impacts for educators, students, and families. I respectfully urge all of you to continue to make this critical issue a central component of your advocacy over the coming weeks and months, including over the coming August recess. [Republican](#) Congressional members in the House and Senate have even begun to speak out about the damage being done. This is also directly related to the administration’s pushing of rescission packages than undermine the bipartisan, and Trump administration approved, March budget deal. Finally, the draconian FY26 Trump budget proposal is a dire pathway toward block granting federal

educational funds and letting states do as they please, without regard to the civil rights and educational attainment of traditionally underserved students and families.

Finally, the creation of a permanent, uncapped 1 for 1 tax credit for vouchers for wealthy students, most of whom are already attending private and religious schools, is a tremendous waste of billions of dollars. It's the centerpiece of the Great American Heist — a privatization scheme wrapped in tax policy. This decision is made at the expense of public schools which will have some level of declining enrollment and therefore, declining funds related to this provision. Furthermore, the non-public institutions that will be supported and proliferated by this national voucher scheme are often not bound by civil rights laws, not subject to public reporting requirements, not required to serve low-income students, and not subject to the same state level oversight as public schools. The tens of billions of dollars allocated for this program should be redirected into Title I, IDEA, and other educational programs Congress has authorized and performs rigorous oversight of, on behalf of the public.

We stand ready to fight for the future of public education and articulate a vision where investments are increased, civil rights are enforced, privatization is rejected, and opportunities are expanded for low-income students and students of color at every level, in every zip code.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions and to working together to defend educational equity and civil rights for all.