

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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February 25, 2021

The Honorable Carolyn B. Maloney  
Chairwoman  
Committee on Oversight and Reform  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairwoman Maloney:

The Committee on Oversight and Reform must examine the school reopening process in light of the recently revised Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidance, which would in effect keep ninety percent of schools shuttered as our nation's children experience knowledge loss, mental health challenges, and social and emotional disruption.<sup>1</sup> This guidance was a “big step backwards,” according to parent advocacy groups working on the issue of school reopening.<sup>2</sup> We hope to work with you to conduct a series of hearings on child welfare and school reopening. Today, we are calling on you to work with us to provide solutions for school districts currently shuttered. This is not and should not be a partisan issue. The science is clear—schools are not vectors for viral spread.<sup>3</sup>

On May 11, 2020, author and journalist David Zweig began covering the plight of our nation's children. Zweig correctly pointed out that as both Republican and Democrat governors closed schools, children “appear to be bearing an undue burden for society” since early observations and CDC data indications were that children were less susceptible to COVID-19.<sup>4</sup> Now, with a great deal of data, studies, and international evidence we know that kids are safer in school. The American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Academies, the Journal of the American Medical Association, researchers from esteemed U.S. universities, and the majority of American moms and dads understand that children can safely return to school without it costing outlandish sums of money. On October 9, 2020, after the initial data from states like Georgia and Florida was in, Dr. Emily Oster of Brown University wrote: “We are starting to get an evidence-based picture of how school reopenings and remote learning are going (those photos of

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<sup>1</sup> Will Feuer, *CDC's classroom guidance would keep 90% of schools at least partially closed*, CNBC (Feb. 18, 2021), <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/18/cdcs-classroom-guidance-would-keep-90percent-of-schools-at-least-partially-closed.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Open Schools US, *Parents Respond to CDC Guidelines Which Impede School Opening*, MEDIUM (Feb. 14, 2021), <https://openschoolsus.medium.com/parents-respond-to-cdc-guidelines-which-impede-school-opening-9bf1b18649e5>.

<sup>3</sup> Emily Oster, *Schools Aren't Super-Spreaders*, THE ATLANTIC (Oct. 9, 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/10/schools-arent-superspreaders/616669/>.

<sup>4</sup> David Zweig, *The Case for Reopening Schools*, WIRED (May 11, 2020), <https://www.wired.com/story/the-case-for-reopening-schools/>.

hallways don't count), and the evidence is pointing in one direction. Schools do not, in fact, appear to be major spreaders of COVID-19.”<sup>5</sup>

The refusal to open schools has had devastating consequences. Las Vegas has lost 19 students to suicide since schools shutdown in March.<sup>6</sup> Although a number of factors can lead to suicide, the CDC and health professionals across the country are sounding the alarm on the need for schools to reopen. According to the CDC, “[b]eginning in April 2020, the proportion of children’s mental health–related [emergency department or ED] visits among all pediatric ED visits increased and remained elevated through October. Compared with 2019, the proportion of mental health–related visits for children aged 5–11 and 12–17 years increased approximately 24% and 31%, respectively.<sup>7</sup> Students are dropping out in shocking numbers. According to a study by the national nonprofit Bellwether Education Partners, since March 2020, three million students are missing from school.<sup>8</sup> The reasons for these numbers vary but undoubtedly, the most vulnerable are those students with special needs.

Those with special disabilities and English learners are not receiving the service to which they are entitled causing them to fall even further behind. Another in Fairfax, Virginia recently pleaded with elected leaders to open schools and investigate localities compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Her child who has special needs has not received so much as a learning device from her school district much less the service their family is entitled under federal law. Another D.C. mom, whose children’s school is open, has already been told there will be no room for her third grader this year or in the fall of 2021. As a result, she is contemplating sending her youngest child—her baby—to live with his grandparents in Florida so he can be in-person school. A mother of three in Oregon shared this heart-wrenching testimonial about her daughter, Lizzie, who has Down Syndrome:

In September, our daughter Lizzie started online learning with more than 500,000 Oregon children. They gave us a Chromebook, a Zoom link and Google classroom. Like her peers, Lizzie would receive all instruction online and the school buildings would remain shut.

Unlike her peers, Lizzie has Down Syndrome and her cognitive delays make online learning impossible. She is still learning site words. She needs speech and physical therapy. She was never taught to use a Chromebook.

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<sup>5</sup> Oster, *supra* note 3.

<sup>6</sup> Rhitu Chatterjee, *Child Psychiatrists Warn That the Pandemic May Be Driving Up Kids' Suicide Risk*, NAT’L PUB. RADIO (Feb. 2, 2021), <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/02/02/962060105/child-psychiatrists-warn-that-the-pandemic-may-be-driving-up-kids-suicide-risk>.

<sup>7</sup> Rebecca T. Leeb, et. al., *Mental Health-Related Emergency Department Visits Among Children Aged <18 Years During the COVID-19 Pandemic-United States, January 1-October 17, 2020*, U.S. CTRS. FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION (Nov. 13, 2020), <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6945a3.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Hailly T.N. Korman, et. al., *Missing in the Margins: Estimating the Scale of the COVID-19 Attendance Crisis*, BELLWETHER EDUCATION PARTNERS (Oct. 21, 2020), <https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/missing-margins-estimating-scale-covid-19-attendance-crisis>.

We got started, but she was confused about the teacher not hearing her because the mute button was permanently on. Her peers weren't waving hello to her. They couldn't see her.

We hired a nanny so that I could continue working as a CPA and my husband in his law practice. But it took three of us to support 2.5 hours of daily Zoom learning. We also have two other kids in 2nd and 7th grades.

Lizzie's frustrations maxed out quickly. By the third week, she threw the Chromebook away without us knowing and asked for "far away school with her friends," as she called in-person learning.

We sent video clips to the principal, the superintendent and school board members. They said their hands were tied. But we pushed and pried open the doors in mid-October. Lizzie was the first student in our district (and the entire metro area) to return to something called "limited in-person" by the Oregon Department of Education.

But it was (and is) "limited." No friends. No teachers. No therapies.

Classified aides deliver two hours of instruction a couple times a week. Today, only about 200 of our district's 8,000 students are provided limited in-person instruction in Lake Oswego. The Portland Public School district never got it off the ground for any of their 50,000 students.

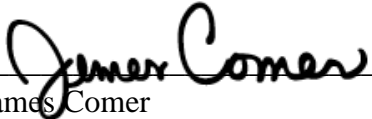
And that's where we've been EVER since.

Lizzie's story is not unique. It is happening across our country. Even where schools are "open" they are not truly open, if they are operating the "concurrent" model. Even where teachers have been vaccinated, schools are just starting to consider reopening, and then, only for two days per week. This is not enough.

Children, especially our most vulnerable, are falling behind. Please work with Republicans to find solutions for America's families. We are not advocating a return to school without proper mitigation. There is a wealth of knowledge, information, strategies, and innovations to protect students and teachers. Let us work together to make a difference in the trajectory of our nation's schools and children. Please ask your staff to contact our staff as soon as possible to develop a hearing plan that will assist states and localities in this effort.

Thank you for your attention to this important request.

Sincerely,



James Comer  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Oversight and Reform



Jody Hice  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Government  
Operations



Glenn S. Grothman  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on National Security



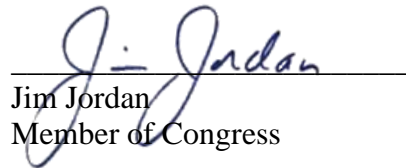
Michael Cloud  
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Ralph Norman  
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Subcommittee on Environment



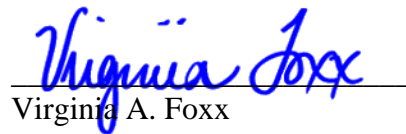
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Jim Jordan  
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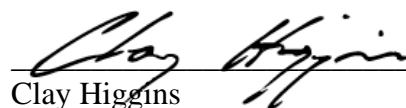
Paul A. Gosar, D.D.S.  
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Virginia A. Foxx  
Member of Congress



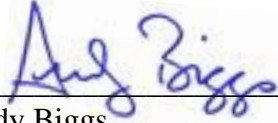
Bob Gibbs  
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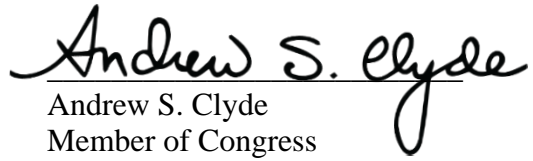
Clay Higgins  
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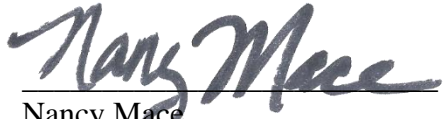
Fred Keller  
Member of Congress



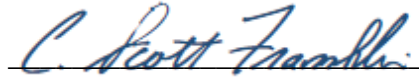
Andy Biggs  
Member of Congress



Andrew S. Clyde  
Member of Congress



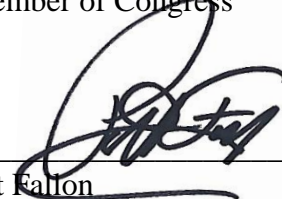
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Member of Congress



Scott Franklin  
Member of Congress



Jake LaTurner  
Member of Congress



Pat Fallon  
Member of Congress



Yvette Herrell  
Member of Congress



Byron Donalds  
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable Gerald E. Connolly, Chairman  
Subcommittee on Government Operations

The Honorable Stephen F. Lynch, Chairman  
Subcommittee on National Security

The Honorable Raja Krishnamoorthi, Chairman  
Subcommittee on Economic and Consumer Policy

The Honorable Ro Khanna  
Subcommittee on Environment

The Honorable Jamie Raskin, Chairman  
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties