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Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
Hearing: "Foundations First: Reclaiming Reading and Math through Proven Instruction"

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Introduction

Good morning Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on proven instruction for reading and math. This critical issue matters deeply to me and to millions of families, students, educators, and policymakers. My name is Jhanae Wingfield, and I serve as an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood and Literacy Education at Rutgers University–Newark. I come before you today in both a personal and professional capacity.

My journey in education has been multifaceted. I have served as a classroom teacher, a literacy coach, an administrative leader, a professor preparing future educators, and a researcher working across many different school types and student populations. Personally, I am also a proud product of public schools, having attended both state and public institutions throughout my academic career. These experiences, both lived and professional, have given me a deep understanding of the challenges and possibilities in literacy and math instruction.

It is from this vantage point that I make the case for proven instructional practices, the urgent need to invest in efforts that strengthen teaching and learning in public schools, and the importance of resisting policies, such as school vouchers, that weaken and undermine our public education system.

Why Literacy is Important

The history of literacy in the United States is deeply tied to questions of equity and civil rights. From anti-literacy laws to the persistent underfunding of schools serving low-income students, access to literacy has always been unequally distributed. Today, the U.S. Department of Education plays an essential role in monitoring and protecting the civil rights of students, including those with disabilities, to ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn. Although literacy learning touches all students, not all students experience literacy learning in the same way. Differences in race, income, and geography continue to shape who has access to high-quality instruction and who bears the burden when systems fail. These inequities compound over

time. Research has shown that children who do not achieve reading proficiency by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school¹.

Literacy is also a gateway to math learning. Foundational numeracy is built on language: understanding word problems, following multi-step instructions, and explaining reasoning all depend on reading comprehension and vocabulary. Students who struggle with reading are more likely to struggle with math achievement, not because they lack ability, but because they cannot access the language in which math is taught². Investing in literacy, therefore, is an investment in both reading and math outcomes.

A literate society is a strong society. Literacy opens doors to education, employment, and civic participation. It is also central to preserving culture, passing down traditions, and sustaining community life across generations. Decades of research have demonstrated that children who grow up in households and schools with strong literacy support are more likely to graduate, secure steady employment, and break the cycle of poverty³. By contrast, limited access to literacy resources is closely connected to lower earnings, poorer health outcomes, and higher rates of involvement with the criminal justice system⁴.

Adults with strong literacy skills earn higher wages, have greater job stability, and are better able to support their families. A Gallup report estimated that low adult literacy costs the U.S. economy more than \$2.2 trillion annually in lost productivity and earnings⁵. Strengthening literacy, particularly in historically marginalized and economically disadvantaged communities, directly contributes to a more inclusive workforce and a stronger economy overall.

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Reading Wars

Neuroscientific research from the 1990s onward, including brain imaging studies, provided strong evidence for the role of phonics and decoding in how the brain processes written language. This evidence gave rise to what is often referred to as the "science of reading."

There is absolute validity and substance to this body of work. The science of reading has clarified important aspects of how children acquire literacy, especially the neurological processes behind decoding and word recognition. Forty states have enacted laws and or policies that mandate that their schools use evidence-based methods informed by the "science of reading" ⁶. This is just one step in the right direction to help improve literacy instruction in schools. However, a problem arises when these findings are treated as a one-size-fits-all solution.

The public discourse around the "science of reading" often overlooks language variation and the sociocultural contexts in which children learn. Students do not all arrive at school speaking or

hearing the same version of English. Children may grow up with regional vowel shifts, distinct accents, African American English, Caribbean English, Spanish-influenced English, or other variations of English. Teachers, however, are often only trained to map *standard English sounds* onto letters. When students' speech does not align with the "expected" sounds, teachers may mistake the difference for a deficit.

These nuances and how teachers address them are understudied but crucial. If we ignore them, implementation of the science of reading risks reinforcing inequities rather than closing them. For example, when a child pronounces words with a regional accent or uses a non-rhotic variety of English (dropping "r" sounds), the instruction they receive may not reflect how they actually hear and produce sounds. This disconnect creates confusion for students and frustration for teachers, who are left without guidance on how to bridge these differences. Addressing this requires more than curriculum mandates, it requires deep investment in teacher education and sustained professional development, so that educators are equipped to recognize linguistic diversity, tailor instruction, and close persistent literacy gaps⁷.

State and local governments' commitment to strengthening public school instruction, particularly in literacy and mathematics, is not only the most equitable path forward but also the most effective one. In New Jersey (NJ), where I have worked across the education sector, there is compelling evidence on the possibilities when the right investments have been made: nine low-income school districts defied national trends by overcoming the COVID slump and outscoring their pre-pandemic performance¹². Union City, long recognized as a national exemplar, demonstrated how districts that leveraged COVID relief funds strategically, through high-impact tutoring, expanded summer learning, and targeted technology supports were able to mitigate learning loss for their most vulnerable students⁷. Yet, the pandemic also exposed stark inequities: higher-income districts were significantly more likely to transition smoothly to online learning because of students' prior exposure to devices, reliable internet access, and digital literacy skills⁷. These disparities remind us that without equitable investment in public schools, teacher preparation, and ongoing supports, instructional reforms risk leaving behind the very students they are intended to serve.

When schools moved online in March 2020, by NJ state executive order to protect the health and well-being of its students, its staff, and the families, these existing digital inequities became learning inequities. National surveys showed that lower-income families were far more likely to report barriers such as relying on a cell phone for schoolwork, lacking a home computer, or using public Wi-Fi to complete assignments. In April 2020, 43% of lower-income parents said their child was likely to do schoolwork on a phone, 40% said they would need public Wi-Fi because home internet was unreliable, and 36% said their child might not complete work due to no computer at home⁸.

New Jersey moved quickly to try to close these gaps. In July 2020 the state launched a three-pronged "Digital Divide" plan and grant program to fund devices and connectivity for students most in need; initial state estimates identified more than 230,000 students lacking a device and/or reliable internet^{9&10}. By January 2021, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) reported fewer than 8,000 students remained without access¹¹.

These access issues aren't just logistical, they shape literacy and math outcomes. Early elementary students were suddenly expected to read and write on screens and compose at a keyboard. NAEP's first computer-based writing assessments (grades 8 and 12 in 2011, a grade-4 pilot in 2012) documented links between word-processing familiarity and writing performance, underscoring why schools must explicitly teach keyboarding and digital composing skills by the upper elementary grades¹³. While third-graders typically display age-appropriate eye-hand coordination and fine motor capacity, keyboarding presents unique challenges: small hands may struggle to span standard keyboards; precise finger isolation and bilateral coordination for touch typing remain emergent; typing endurance is often limited; and cognitive load balloons when students must manage motor planning alongside composing. Early exposure can build familiarity, but without structured instruction, kids may develop inefficient habits. Moreover, handwriting continues to support spelling accuracy, letter recognition, and text fluency more robustly in younger students. Given these dynamics, schools should intentionally teach typing skills using developmentally tailored curricula, ergonomic adjustments, and blending of handwriting and digital composing, to ensure equitable literacy outcomes.

Screen reading itself also carries tradeoffs. Multiple meta-analyses have found a small but reliable "screen inferiority" effect for comprehension, especially under time pressure, suggesting schools should build students' stamina for sustained digital reading while still leveraging print for deep comprehension¹⁴.

Instructionally, the pandemic also exposed an overcorrection: in some places, an intense focus on phonics left too little time for building knowledge and vocabulary through content-rich texts, key drivers of comprehension. Decades of cognitive science show that background knowledge and domain vocabulary strongly support reading understanding; contemporary summaries of the "science of reading" likewise emphasize that systematic foundational skills must be paired with language, knowledge, and text engagement¹⁵.

This matters for math, too. Word-problem performance is tightly linked to language comprehension and vocabulary (both general and math-specific). Longitudinal and meta-analytic work shows that students' reading comprehension and language skills predict math word-problem success; interventions that strengthen linguistic features of problems can improve math outcomes. In short: stronger literacy instruction strengthens math¹⁶.

Looking ahead, developmentally appropriate technology use should include: (1) explicit keyboarding and digital composing instruction by grade 3–4 to reduce construct-irrelevant barriers on computer-based tasks; (2) deliberate practice to build screen-reading stamina alongside continued print use for complex texts; and (3) literacy blocks that secure decoding while systematically building knowledge and vocabulary across subjects. These steps require stable investment in public schools. Continued diversion of public funds to alternatives like private vouchers undermines districts' ability to sustain devices, connectivity, teacher training, and integrated literacy-math supports, precisely the investments that helped New Jersey narrow its digital divide. It is also important to note that decisions regarding reading and literacy curricula are primarily made at the state and local levels, reflecting the principle of local control in education. This decentralized approach allows communities to tailor instructional materials to

their specific needs and contexts, ensuring that curricula are responsive to local priorities and student populations.

For many communities, particularly those with concentrated poverty, the challenge of rebounding from pandemic-era disruptions extends far beyond classrooms and technology use. Research consistently shows that educational recovery is inseparable from conditions of housing stability, neighborhood safety, and access to healthcare¹⁷. Students experiencing housing insecurity, food scarcity, or unsafe living conditions face greater difficulty sustaining the attention and stamina required for literacy growth, regardless of the quality of instructional interventions¹⁸. In districts such as Newark, Paterson, and Camden, where economic precarity and under-resourced housing intersect with racial inequities, schools often become the sole provider of stability and resources. Without continued federal and state investment, these districts cannot buffer the effects of poverty while simultaneously advancing literacy and digital learning goals.

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What do NAEP Scores Suggest

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, often described as the nation's report card, have shown declines in reading achievement since 2012 and sharply worsened following the pandemic, particularly among low-income students and students of color¹⁹. In response, policymakers have suggested that a greater investment should go to school vouchers instead to increase choice. What students need instead are strong high quality preschool enrollment options, early screening systems and continuous checks for learning; tools that allow educators to identify challenges before they grow into larger gaps. These findings underscore why direct public investments in literacy, particularly in the earliest years, are far more effective than market-based solutions like vouchers. When policymakers have invested directly in public

literacy initiatives, the results have been measurable and long-lasting. High-quality pre-K programs such as New Jersey's Abbott Preschool have produced gains in reading and math achievement that persist well into elementary school²⁰. These initiatives not only benefit children academically but also support families and strengthen communities by enabling parents to work and pursue education.

Early childhood investments alone are not enough; their effectiveness depends on whether teachers are equipped to sustain student progress once children enter school. When teachers have access to professional development and understand how to analyze the data from the early screeners and formative assessments, they can adjust instruction in real time and provide the scaffolding students need. Yet too often, teachers are underprepared or under-supported in making sense of what the data is telling them²¹. Professional learning communities and evidence-based training are essential for giving educators the strategies to respond effectively to reading difficulties they observe in their classrooms.

At the same time, literacy instruction cannot ignore the changing landscape of how students encounter text in a digital world. Technology further complicates the picture. Children today are learning to read and engage with text in new ways like on screens, through multimedia, and often in shorter bursts of attention²². This shift changes stamina for sustained reading and alters how students process longer, more complex passages. Rather than ignoring these realities, we must invest in research and teacher training that helps schools integrate developmentally appropriate technology while also maintaining a focus on building deep comprehension skills. Without proper funding, however, schools will remain unprepared to balance the opportunities and challenges technology brings to literacy instruction.

Math instruction is tied to these same concerns. Just as literacy development requires ongoing monitoring and responsive teaching, numeracy depends on cumulative knowledge building and conceptual understanding. Students who lack foundational math and reading skills by third grade are more likely to struggle across subjects, placing them at greater risk for future academic and workforce challenges¹. Public investment in proven instructional practices, not voucher schemes, ensures that schools can strengthen teaching in both literacy and math, setting students up for long-term success.

Redirecting funds through vouchers would do the opposite: it would weaken public schools' ability to invest in professional development, assessment systems, and technology integration all of which are crucial for helping students recover and thrive in the wake of historic learning loss. Investments must occur in our public schools, where the vast majority of students are educated, and where our collective responsibility lies. School vouchers, by contrast, divert critical resources away from public schools and funnel them into private systems that are not accountable to the same standards, civil rights protections, or transparency. Research has found little evidence that voucher programs improve academic outcomes for students; in fact, multiple studies show neutral or even negative effects on student achievement^{23&24}. For students in underfunded districts, losing dollars to voucher programs only deepens inequities and widens opportunity gaps.

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Students with Disabilities

It would be remiss not to highlight students with disabilities when discussing literacy equity. The Civil Rights Act (1965) and Education for all Handicapped Children Act (1975), and later, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) established the legal foundation for inclusive education. These landmark laws guarantee access to learning and support, yet students with disabilities—especially Black and Latino students—remain disproportionately marginalized in both identification and educational outcomes.

Data show that despite IDEA's safeguards, which include, parent participation on the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team, the right to access educational records, and the ability to provide informed consent for evaluations and services, Black students are still overrepresented in categories such as learning disabilities and emotional disturbance. Black boys, in particular, are disproportionately labeled with these categories, which often results in their removal from general education settings and limits access to rigorous literacy instruction⁴³. This overrepresentation reflects systemic bias, not neurological difference, and is exacerbated in under-resourced schools where early intervention and accurate assessment are lacking²⁵. These patterns are not new, they are connected to the long history of eugenics, in which racialized assumptions about intelligence shaped educational decision-making. Without robust IDEA funding, schools lack the capacity to implement appropriate assessments and interventions that can reduce misidentification and ensure equity in special education services⁴⁴. This historical and systemic overrepresentation underscores the critical importance of federal safeguards and research funding under IDEA, resources that directly support accurate assessment, targeted interventions, and equitable access to literacy and other academic opportunities for students with disabilities.

Cuts to IDEA funding and research would have devastating consequences for students with disabilities and their families. Reductions in resources often translate into larger class sizes, fewer support staff, diminished access to assistive technology, and weakened enforcement of the rights and protections that IDEA guarantees²⁶. While there are overlaps between IDEA services and general literacy instruction, students with disabilities require carefully designed scaffolds such as individualized instructional strategies, evidence-based interventions, and specialized professional development for teachers to fully access literacy learning. Without adequate funding and research investments, schools cannot provide these supports, and literacy instruction for students with disabilities becomes inequitable. Instead of fostering inclusion and closing achievement gaps, cuts would widen disparities, leaving families to shoulder additional burdens and students with disabilities at greater risk of academic marginalization²⁷.

Despite these risks, there are proven, evidence-based instructional strategies that can mitigate the effects of resource shortfalls and ensure that students with disabilities continue to access meaningful literacy learning.

High-Leverage Practices (HLPs) and Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs): The broad category of "students with disabilities" often obscures important differences in learning needs, making it difficult to assert that any single instructional method benefits all students equally. However, research has consistently shown that scaffolded literacy supports are particularly effective for students with specific learning disabilities in reading (e.g., dyslexia), speech and language impairments, and students on the autism spectrum. For example, explicit instruction combined with scaffolded practice such as guided oral reading, structured phonics, and the use of graphic organizers has been found to improve word recognition, reading fluency, and comprehension for students with dyslexia and related reading disorders²⁸. Similarly, scaffolding strategies such as modeling, prompting, and breaking down complex tasks into manageable steps can significantly enhance literacy outcomes for students with speech and language impairments, who often need additional support in vocabulary development and syntax to access grade-level texts²⁹. For students with autism spectrum disorder, scaffolded approaches that integrate visual supports, social narratives, and structured peer interactions have been shown to facilitate both reading comprehension and engagement with text³⁰.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while not all students with disabilities benefit from scaffolding in the same way, targeted and disability-specific scaffolds can substantially reduce barriers to literacy. Without IDEA funding and research to sustain such specialized practices, the inequities in literacy access and achievement among students with disabilities would deepen, further marginalizing groups of learners who already face disproportionate educational challenges³¹.

Efficient, Intervention-Oriented Assessment: Dr. Jack Fletcher and colleagues argue that the most meaningful assessments for students with disabilities focus directly on their academic skills and how they respond to targeted intervention. Rather than relying on static measures of ability, Fletcher emphasizes the value of ongoing, curriculum-based assessments that inform instruction and guide individualized supports. His work on dyslexia, in particular, highlights that early and systematic screening of phonological awareness, word reading, and decoding skills is critical to identifying students at risk and intervening before gaps widen³². By centering assessment on literacy skills rather than ability profiles, schools are better positioned to deliver timely, evidence-based interventions that improve reading outcomes. This approach not only enhances the accuracy of identification but also ensures that supports are responsive to how students actually learn, creating a more equitable pathway for students with disabilities to access literacy instruction³².

Together, these strategies affirm that students with disabilities benefit most when instruction is explicit, personalized, inclusive, and grounded in solid evidence, not when efforts are diluted through broad, underfunded reform or diverted into unaccountable voucher programs.

Cutting support in these areas would not only harm students with disabilities, it would deepen existing racial and economic disparities, undermining the promise of education inclusion that federal law is meant to uphold.

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Federal Interruptions and the Real Costs for Schools

Recent federal actions have had tangible repercussions across New Jersey's public schools. When the administration froze federal education funding this summer, approximately \$162 million, roughly 12.7% of the state's annual federal education budget, was withheld just as the 2025–26 school year began, threatening essential programs such as after-school and summer learning, STEM and technology education, English learner supports, counselor staffing, and teacher training³³. Although Title IV-A funds, about \$32.6 million, were released in mid-July restoring funding for critical services that provided resources for students with special needs, English language learners, community learning centers, teacher training, and adult education³⁵, the delay, created chaos in school operations and underscored how every dollar is vital, especially for districts serving historically marginalized students.

These freezes were part of a broader federal pause affecting nearly \$6.8 billion nationwide in education funding for programming supporting migratory learners, academic enrichment, adult literacy, teacher recruitment, and more³⁶. The administration also issued an executive order to dismantle or drastically downsize the Department of Education. Nearly half of the ED workforce was also eliminated separate from the executive order, undermining its capacity to enforce civil rights laws, administer IDEA funding, and oversee Title I and other key programs. Together, these actions strain schools serving low-income and marginalized communities at precisely the moment they need stability and support.

Why These Disruptions Matter

These actions illustrate a broader pattern: when public funding and institutional infrastructure face disruption, it's not the affluent districts that suffer, it's the under-resourced, multilingual, rural, and urban schools that serve students furthest from opportunity. Staffing gaps grow, support services stall, and progress toward equity is reversed. Schools lose the ability to respond

to challenges because planning becomes impossible. Programs for students with disabilities, English learners, and students from low-income families hang in the balance.

Our federal system must remain steady, predictable, and just. Schools deserve clarity, not chaos, and all children, regardless of zip code, deserve reliable investment in their education.

- **Strained Budgets and Staffing Nationwide:** In New Jersey during the 2020-2021 school year, federal aid, which includes Titles II, III and IV accounted for just 5.3% of total education revenue, yet that relatively small share, funds essential services in under-resourced districts³⁷. Without these dollars, school boards weighed painful options like layoffs, larger class sizes, and program cuts. This story was not unique to New Jersey. In states like Texas, Georgia, and Florida, districts reported immediate shortfalls in after-school programming and teacher professional development when federal funds were withheld^{38&39}.

- **Deepened Inequities in High-Need Districts:** Urban districts that serve historically marginalized students in NJ rely heavily on Title I and IDEA funds to sustain supports for multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and children in high-poverty schools. The federal freeze risked erasing years of progress in these communities. Similarly, advocates in Michigan expressed concerns that the withholdings of Title I and IDEA dollars could leave them unable to fully staff special education programs and provide services, amplifying inequities for historically marginalized students⁴².

- **Case in Point—Paterson and Beyond:** In Paterson, NJ teacher shortages meant many students could enter classrooms without certified teachers or consistent instructional staff, problems compounded by the funding freeze. Elsewhere, districts scrambled to cover summer learning costs, and Los Angeles USD reported delays in disbursing literacy intervention funding to schools serving high numbers of English learners^{40&45}. These examples highlight how federal disruptions push already-stretched districts closer to crisis.

These federal actions were not abstract: they caused real disruption, when dollars disappeared, programs shut down and students lost support. For marginalized communities, the stakes were highest. These challenges make it clearer than ever: public schools must have stable, predictable federal support, not volatile policy swings or diverted funds through vouchers. Investing in public education, and defending its integrity, is the most reliable path to equity, resilience, and student success.

Under these uncertain conditions, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and its research arm, the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), are essential. The ED anchors federal commitments in law, resources, and research, ensuring that protections such as civil rights enforcement, Title I funding for low-income schools, and special education supports are applied consistently across all states.

IES, as part of ED, is the nation's engine for rigorous, independent education research. Its work informs teachers, school leaders, and policymakers, providing the evidence needed to make data-driven decisions that strengthen student outcomes. From studies on the long-term benefits of early literacy interventions to research on culturally responsive teaching and its impact on

student engagement, IES generates knowledge that directly shapes effective practice in classrooms nationwide. However, recent federal actions have significantly gutted IES, with nearly \$900 million in proposed cuts, threatening its capacity to fund and sustain research for years to come. These reductions jeopardize ongoing studies and limit the development of new evidence on what works in education, particularly for historically underserved students.

For New Jersey, the stakes are particularly high. Federal guidance and research have helped shape initiatives such as Abbott Preschool, a national model for early childhood education, and supported state efforts to improve bilingual and special education programs. These advances are not accidents of history; they result from sustained federal investment paired with local innovation. Rolling back that investment reduces the capacity to respond to pressing challenges, including literacy decline, shortages of qualified teachers, and inequities in access for Black, Latino, immigrant, and disabled students.

In closing, it is critical to recognize that education is a public good, not a private commodity. Strengthening our public schools strengthens our democracy. Achieving this requires not only proven instructional practices and adequate resources, but also the political will to protect the Department of Education, and the resources of its research arm IES, which hold us accountable to fairness, equity, and truth. Every dollar, every decision, and every act of research matters, they shape the lives of our children and the future of our communities.

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