

*United State Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs  
Full Committee Hearing  
American Rescue Plan: Shots in Arms and Money in Pockets  
Thursday, March 25, 2021*

**Testimony of Rory Cooper, Public School Parent**

Chairman Brown; Ranking Member Toomey, and members of this distinguished committee; thank for you for this opportunity to speak for what I believe are millions of parents. I have three kids currently in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and Kindergarten. I love them very much. (I wanted that in the congressional record.) My children and millions of other children have not had access to the education they deserve for over a year.

First, it's important to point out that a majority of students are indeed attending school in-person five days a week. President Biden's goal of having a majority of schools open to some degree in his first 100 days is incomprehensible. It was achieved before he took office.

Two thirds of public-school districts are currently open five days a week. Many of them have done so since the fall. Private schools are offering the same, often a block away from a shuttered public school. The districts that are failing our children are the large metropolitan areas where school boards are heavily controlled by powerful teacher unions, like New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C.

We know schools are safe because not one person is calling on these open schools to close.

Here in Fairfax County, unreasonable union demands coupled with a flat-footed superintendent and school board have crippled what was once a premier district. The goalposts keep moving as they run out the clock on this school year and leave students behind.

We were told that teachers needed to be vaccinated first. So, Virginia put them at the front of the line with healthcare workers and seniors over the age of 65. And then when all willing teachers in Fairfax were vaccinated, they said they would still not fully reopen.

Then we were told they needed more money. The school districts that are currently closed are some of the best funded in the nation. Fairfax County is in the top ten. And schools that are closed have saved millions of dollars this year, while open schools have lost money. Fairfax County is in fact under federal investigation for opening their doors to programs that paid them additional cash while keeping their own special needs students locked out.

But America rallied to give them more money anyway. In the CARES Act, Congress appropriated \$13.2 billion for K-12 COVID mitigation. In December, Congress appropriated an additional \$54.3 billion. Despite most of that money remaining unspent in 2021, this Congress pursued an additional \$126 billion in the American Rescue Plan. Nearly none of it to be spent in 2021. Most of this \$193 billion will be spent years after the crisis is over.

All of this money is distributed using Title I formulas. This means that Congress is rewarding large well-funded districts that remain closed with a huge payout while smaller less well-funded districts who provide in-person instruction receive less.

The latest goal post movement has come around the issue of 6-foot distancing. We knew this was overcautious in 2020 because as I mentioned, a majority of school districts were already successfully ignoring it. But districts like Fairfax used it as a crutch to only consider hybrid learning two days a week.

The CDC finally admitted what they already knew and recently reduced it to 3 feet. Randi Weingarten of the American Federation of Teachers said that still was not good enough and they wanted even more money. No science or vaccination or amount of money will ever be good enough. Kids just have to suffer so unions can thrive.

And the kids are suffering greatly. We've seen a terrible spike in suicides, depression, anxiety and a loss of access to nutrition, socialization and physical health. Children with physical and learning disabilities who require additional support have received a minimum of what the law compels schools to offer. So many students are falling behind and failing that Fairfax County eliminated failing grades altogether. These are the outcomes of the union efforts.

My children have had three-day weekends for a year. On Mondays in Fairfax, kids do an hour of homework in the morning and Fairfax counts it as a day of school so they can pretend they're meeting obligations. Finally, as of a week ago, my kids are now in-person two days a week. They are elated on Tuesdays and Wednesdays and dejected on Thursdays and Fridays.

They're actually lucky. Their wonderful teachers returned to the classroom. Many children are in schools but still being taught on laptops and monitored by untrained high school graduates.

Students are leaving public schools altogether. Fairfax County has lost over 10,000 students with more fleeing to parochial and private options. Inequality is skyrocketing and our most vulnerable populations are getting hit the hardest.

I supported school closures in the spring of 2020 because we had very little information. But since then, the data has been vast and clear: Schools are safe. Public health, pediatric and psychological experts have nearly unanimously agreed that school closures are a crisis in their own right and need to end.

It's time for science and common sense to prevail. And let's not wait another day. The fall is not a goal worthy of this country. It's just an excuse for districts like Fairfax to keep falling behind.

We keep hearing we need more money and more time when schools have had plenty of both. If public school systems like Fairfax can simply choose to not offer in-person instruction, perhaps

all of these billions of dollars should go to students instead so they can have access better choices.

Thank you, I look forward to your questions.