

couldn't provide tax-free contributions to help employees with education debts that they had already incurred. Our bill allows them to make tax-free contributions to help with employees' already existing student loan debt. That is a win-win situation. It is a win for employees who get help paying off their student loans, and it is a win for employers who have a new option for attracting and retaining talented workers.

Our bill is not a silver bullet, but it will certainly help ease the pain of paying back student loans for a number of young Americans. I am pleased it was enacted into law for a 5-year period, and I hope Congress will act to make it permanent.

Another big thing we could do is make sure that graduates have access to good-paying jobs. This is key to enabling people to pay off their debt, and we should resolve to build on the economic progress that we had made pre-pandemic and focus on policies that will allow our economy to grow and to thrive.

High college costs and student debt are a problem, but blanket loan forgiveness is not the answer. I hope that President Biden will resist Democratic calls to put taxpayers on the hook for literally billions and billions of dollars in student loans.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. BOOZMAN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

REOPENING SCHOOLS

Mr. BOOZMAN. Mr. President, in recent days the Biden administration has backed away from its original goal to reopen most schools within the first 100 days. This comes despite new Centers for Disease Control and Prevention research recommending that schools can safely reopen for in-person instruction.

Arkansas schools reopened their doors in August of 2020. Currently, the Arkansas Department of Education reports that 67 percent of K-12 students are attending school in-person full time, almost 13 percent have a hybrid schedule, and 20 percent are entirely remote.

Natural State school districts invested in cleaning supplies, barriers, and retrofitting classrooms. Educators thought creatively and found solutions to these new problems. And although every school and community has different challenges, they moved ahead with the same goal: finding the best and the safest way to get and keep children and teachers in the classroom.

I had the opportunity to visit several school districts last fall. I was so impressed with their daily efforts to keep their doors open, keep their staff

healthy, and provide the learning that children desperately need.

These heroes need our support. Over the course of this past year, Congress has delivered \$113 billion—and over \$686 million to Arkansas—to support education through the COVID-19 pandemic, including nearly \$68 billion to help bring K-12 students back into the classroom. That money is already hard at work. However, much of it remains to be spent.

Parents can see that virtual learning simply isn't working. If you need more evidence of the unbalanced impact of 100-percent virtual learning, a study by the RAND Corporation in fall 2020 highlighted tremendous areas of concern. Researchers surveyed educators across the country and concluded that State and Federal Governments needed to prioritize making schools safe to attend. One particularly shocking result of the survey found that principals in America's highest poverty schools reported only 80 percent of their students had adequate internet access at home. When schools are virtual, we are knowingly failing 20 percent of those students without even getting to the question of how effective the instruction is or addressing the negative effects on students' social needs and development.

This crisis in education also means that families are falling behind. Women, in particular, are shouldering an incredible burden through this pandemic. In February 2020, women held the majority of nonfarm payroll jobs. They outnumbered men in the workforce for the first time in American history. Today, the number of women in the workforce is at a 33-year low. Much of this is attributed to the outsized role women are playing in balancing their families' financial, educational, and caregiving needs.

Of all the challenges we have faced through the COVID-19 pandemic, the mission of educating children continues to be one of the most critical and complex. It has been rewarding to see educators receive their much needed COVID-19 vaccine. These heroes are essential to our recovery.

Arkansas is setting the example. The Natural State can be proud of the teachers, administrators, and elected leaders who continue to find ways to keep schools open and provide critical services that children deserve. It is time that students in other States have the same opportunities.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. BLUNT. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. BLUNT. Mr. President, a year ago, schools began to close due to the coronavirus. Teachers quickly scram-

bled to try to figure out how they were going to teach kids who weren't there. They set up virtual classrooms on the internet. Parents started googling activities to keep their children motivated and active, but they didn't start that a year ago. They started 11 months ago. It didn't take long to figure out that kids at home are different than kids at school. And even before that, many parents had to start accommodating their schedule to try to figure out how they were going to deal with this new and unanticipated schedule.

Congress stepped up. On multiple occasions, we passed emergency legislation to get money to schools to clean classrooms, to buy laptops for students, and to do almost anything else that schools thought they might need at the elementary and secondary level. But what started as what I believe everybody thought was a stopgap—certainly no longer than until the weather got hot in the summertime as we finished up the last school year—has become, in many places, permanent, full time now, where students for a year have not been in school. That is despite a lot of widespread consensus that both scientists and medical experts think that kids can be back in the classroom.

The science on studying and learning is also clear that when schools are closed, students suffer. There have been a lot of studies to show that prolonged remote learning puts kids at higher risk for falling behind, for failing classes, for suffering from mental health problems, and, in many cases, just deciding not to show up. And, you know, the one thing about virtual is it is pretty easy to not virtually be there as well.

The risks on all those areas—the mental health problems, the falling behind, the failing grades—are even greater for students with disabilities or for minorities or people who live in generally underserved areas. A study by McKinsey looked at the toll prolonged remote learning has taken on students. It estimated that when it comes to mathematics, students, on average, are likely to lose 5 to 9 months of learning by the end of this school year. It said that students of color—this is according to McKinsey—could be 6 to 12 months behind at the end of this school year. Think about that. One year of remote learning could leave students 1 year behind where they should be in math if you look at these expert studies.

In addition to the academic damage, remote learning has led to an increase in mental health challenges facing students. A report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that mental health problems accounted for a growing proportion of students' visits to hospital emergency rooms. Visits were up 31 percent for kids between ages 12 and 17 and 24 percent for kids between ages 5 and 11, and according to the CDC, many of those visits are based on a mental health challenge rather

than some other kind of health challenge.

The risk of keeping kids at home are significant. What is worse, they are unnecessary by the growing number of people who are looking at this. Dr. Rochelle Walensky, who is the head of CDC, recently appointed by President Biden—she began her work there on January 21—talked about what we should do earlier this month. She said that there was “increasing data”—“increasing data that schools can safely reopen.” That ends the quote, but she went on to say, even if teachers aren’t vaccinated for the virus.

Anthony Fauci—Dr. Fauci echoed that point. He said: “I would back the CDC recommendation because that is really based on data . . . we need to try and get the children back to school.” That ends Dr. Fauci’s quote. He went on a step further by saying that it is not even workable to wait for every teacher to be vaccinated before schools reopen because, when you think about that, if every teacher had their first vaccine today in the double-vaccine world we are still in, it will be the end of March before every teacher had their second vaccine, and you are so far down the line, before you know it, the school might not be able to reopen in that circumstance.

Dr. David Rosen, a professor of pediatric infectious diseases at Washington University in St. Louis, said:

There is no situation in which schools can’t be open unless they have evidence of in-school transmission.

The Biden White House actually immediately said they just didn’t agree with the experts on this, even the ones in their own administration. The President’s Press Secretary said that Dr. Walensky was speaking in her personal capacity when she said that you can go back to school even if teachers weren’t vaccinated, even though she was speaking in an official White House coronavirus briefing. Now, how the head of the CDC speaks in her personal capacity at an official White House coronavirus briefing on this topic, I don’t know, but that is what happened.

The White House just keeps repeating these points that teachers should be a priority for vaccination. I don’t have a problem with that. I think that would be a great thing. It would make teachers more comfortable and might make parents more comfortable. In fact, when we were debating the budget resolution just a couple of weeks ago, I offered an amendment that would have incentivized school districts to get kids back to school after teachers had been vaccinated. That is more stringent than the President himself has said and more stringent than the CDC has said, but my amendment was blocked on a party-line vote. Every single Member of our friends on the other side voted against an amendment that would say we should incentivize, financially, getting kids back to school when teachers have been vaccinated.

Now, a couple of my friends on the other side walked up and said: Well, we

just need to work this language a little bit because all of us that have kids know how important it is that we get our kids back to school. Democrats say we need emergency legislation to help the schools. I have been part of five bills that did that, and we provided \$67.5 billion for K–12 schools to reopen safely. So far, States have spent just under \$7 billion of that \$67 billion, so clearly money is not the obstacle to getting back to school.

The new plan would give an additional \$128.6 billion for schools, according to the CBO, and, again, only 5 percent of that money would be spent by the end of this fiscal year, only about \$6.5 billion. The rest of the money would be available over the next 7 years. Hopefully, that money is not money that is designed to get kids back to school. We don’t need to be waiting 7 years to get kids back to school.

If schools need money right now, they, first of all, should spend the money that the Congress has already provided. There is no reason to have over \$60 billion still waiting to be spent if that is what it takes to get kids back to school.

This probably isn’t about funding. It is really a discussion about whether the schools should reopen and what else we need to do with money that might be available right now because of this coronavirus legislation.

We need to be sure we get back to school. Our goal should not be to keep the schools closed. If it is, why are we providing all this extra money so that schools can reopen, even though it will be a long time before that is spent?

I started out my career, after college, as a high school history teacher and then later I was a university president. I know the challenges educators face every day and the ways well-meaning policy experts sometimes miss the reality of the classroom. I also know that teachers are used to big challenges. They see them every day. They meet them every day. They do their best every day to overcome the challenges in front of them. Teachers want to help kids learn, and they don’t know what to do when they can’t have the contact they need to have with the kids. They know that kids won’t be doing as well as they need to do, in more cases than not, until they are back to school.

In a recent Axios poll, teachers said they would return to school and are ready to do that. It is really time for a commonsense appraisal of what needs to be done to get kids back in school. This should not be something that we wait till next fall to do. It is something that needs to happen right now.

The CDC guidelines are helpful, but they need to be more flexible. We need to constantly look at all the data. As people working hard to get kids back to school, we need to be sure that we understand where that is working, why that is working, how that is working, and we are getting that information out to school districts all over America. It is time to go back to school.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Iowa.

Ms. ERNST. Mr. President, the experts, the health officials, and the data have made it clear, we can and we should safely reopen our schools. But parents, students, and even some teachers are asking the question: Why have we failed to do that?

There is a pretty simple answer. Politicians are putting political interests ahead of the livelihoods of our kids and of our families. According to the science presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC, schools can dust off their books and safely open up classrooms to students with commonsense precautions.

Transmission of COVID among students is relatively rare, and classrooms have not been a significant source of community transmission, according to the CDC. Furthermore, the CDC says “it is possible for communities to reduce the incidence of COVID-19 while keeping schools open for in-person instruction.”

So what is the holdup? Despite his CDC’s own advice, President Biden’s administration continues to play games, to ignore the science, and to send mixed messages to the American people.

Their lack of clarity and their reluctance to get students back in the classroom is a detriment to our children, our working families, and our economy.

Just recently, President Biden’s own CDC Director stated that the “vaccination of teachers is not”—not—“a prerequisite for safe reopening of schools” and that “there is increasing data to suggest that schools can safely reopen.” But shortly after her statement, the White House Press Secretary moved the goalposts once again, claiming that the Biden administration’s aim is to have more than 50 percent of the schools offer “some teaching” in person “at least one”—one “day a week” by the 100th day of Joe Biden’s Presidency. One day a week, folks. Yes, you heard it right, have kids in school only one day per week and no sooner than the end of April.

Just days after this, after coming under immense pressure from the American people, including folks on the left, the President moved the goalposts again and threw his communications staff under the bus—a school bus—for the one-day-a-week goal.

Folks, our youngest generation is falling behind. Virtual learning does not give them the attention they need to be successful, and the isolation it creates has had an enormous impact on their mental health.

But it is not just impacting our kids. The closure of schools and childcare centers has disproportionately impacted women, most notably our moms. An analysis from the National Women’s Law Center found that 275,000 women left the workforce in January alone, with many staying home to care

for their kids and often becoming their de facto teachers and tutors.

Women across the country have made enormous strides in all fields of service, and our moms shouldn't be forced to put their careers on hold because our schools, at the direction of this administration, are failing to do their jobs.

In Iowa, because of Governor Reynolds' bold leadership, many of our kids have safely been back at school since August. The Iowa General Assembly passed and the Governor signed legislation to require safe in-person learning in our State's public school system. Now the rest of the country needs to follow Iowa's lead and get our kids safely back in the classroom.

At the Federal level, I am helping lead an effort that would require schools to offer a safe in-person learning option to students by April 30, 2021.

It is increasingly clear that the Biden administration, one that prides itself on following the science, is actually more loyal to leftwing special interests than the well-being of our kids. Science, not special interests, should be guiding these decisions, and that means Washington should not be locking students out of the classroom.

This type of meddling is precisely why I have always been leery of the overinvolvement of the Federal Government in education. So to get our bureaucrats and special interests out of way and to put students first, I am helping lead that effort to require schools to offer safe in-person learning to our students by April 30, 2021.

To guide us through this pandemic, I suggest we follow these revised and updated three r's of education: first, respect the science; second, reopen our schools safely; and third, return students, teachers, and learning to the classroom.

It is long past time schools across the country follow the science and the data. Let's do the right thing by safely getting our kids back in the classroom and help get our parents back to work. The well-being of our children, our working moms and dads, and our Nation's economy depend on it.

Thank you.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from West Virginia.

Mrs. CAPITO. Mr. President, I want to thank my colleague from the great State of Iowa for bringing forth her three r's. I think they are very succinct. They are the message that certainly I want to convey with my colleague from the great State of Florida here today: respect the science, reopen the schools safely, and return students, teachers, and learning to the classroom.

A year ago, we were only just starting to realize what COVID-19 was about, almost a year to this date practically. Yet no one could have foreseen that many children would leave their classrooms in 2020 and still not have returned in March of 2021.

Fortunately, during these past few months, we have come a long way in our knowledge of COVID-19. We knew little about how the virus spread when most schools closed last March, but now experts have had the opportunity to learn more about the spread of the disease, specifically as it would spread in a K-12 school environment.

At the end of January, the CDC, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, published data showing that in-person learning for K-12 students with limited in-school COVID-19 spread is, indeed, possible. The schools studied adhered to the public health practices many of us have followed—wearing a mask, social distancing, washing hands, avoiding large groups, and quarantining after exposure to the virus.

Since this data was released, CDC has gone on and issued additional guidance for reopening our schools. This guidance focuses on many of the same public health strategies as well as cleaning facilities and additional ventilation.

In addition to the improved knowledge of how COVID-19 affects our schools, we also have safe and effective vaccines. By enabling our teachers and other education professionals to have the vaccine on a priority basis, we continue to forge ahead with reopening our schools.

Yesterday, Dr. Clay Marsh, who is our State's coronavirus czar—he has done an incredibly great job. He has also led our efforts in our successful vaccine efforts. And I want to remind the Nation that West Virginia is No. 1 in vaccine distribution per capita. We have done a fantastic job.

Dr. Marsh said yesterday:

The classroom is a safe place to be.

He continued by saying:

The K-8 classroom—there is a tremendous amount of really good data to suggest that it is even a safer place to be than staying in your community.

Following these comments, our State's board of education voted in favor of our students in kindergarten through eighth grade returning to a full 5-day, in-person learning. It had some blended, some in class, and some at home.

While data we have seen makes a very compelling case for why we can get children safely back into the classroom with the right mitigations, other realities make it even more necessary.

With the option of remote learning at home, there are still many children—especially in States like mine, West Virginia—who struggle with connectivity. Despite robust funding from Congress to attempt to address these issues, the digital divide is very real, and it begins to exacerbate the have-and-have-not phenomenon. As a result, these children can be affected for years.

I hear concerns from parents all over my State. Last year, I had a Mercer County principal tell me that many of the students' parents in their class had to drive their students to a parking lot of a fast food restaurant so they could

get Wi-Fi so they could do their homework.

A constituent from Lewis County recently wrote to my office expressing her frustration with balancing her work with also the remote learning that her children are doing. To make matters worse, they can't get on the internet at the same time in their home.

Another parent from Berkeley County wrote to me with a heartbreaking story about how her daughter cries at the computer because she requires extra help on certain assignments. Parents helping their children on schoolwork can only go so far. In-person attention is absolutely necessary and something that the internet can't solve through a Zoom meeting or a video meeting or what a lot of this is—going to certain assignments on your computer where there is nobody to interact with whatsoever.

These are very real concerns that parents have, a fear that their children will fall behind and are falling behind without access to their schoolwork.

Even more disturbing are the concerns I have heard from child abuse advocates throughout our State. The heightened stress, school closures, loss of income, and social isolation from this pandemic have increased the risk of child abuse and neglect. Yet, without the safe space of the school and the watchful eyes of our teachers and other caring professionals, I fear too many children are falling through the cracks and would have nowhere to turn.

Last week, our West Virginia DHHR deputy secretary said there were 8,000 fewer referrals to child protective services this year in our State. Sadly, we know it is not because it is not occurring; it is because teachers and school employees aren't there to notice the abuse and neglect and report it. This is where our teachers are so incredibly caring and invaluable.

According to data from the CDC, between April and October of 2020, emergency departments nationwide have experienced a rise in the share of total visits from children with mental health needs. In my State of West Virginia, our State board of education has reported a spike in attempted suicides in Cabell County.

In addition, parents have had to make hard decisions as they attempt to balance their careers with their children's education, especially more difficult for those parents of younger children who can't leave their child at home for any period of time as they are doing their schoolwork.

As more workers are being asked to physically return to their workplaces, the lack of in-person learning and adequate childcare is hindering many from returning to work. This is especially true for many women who work outside the home. In fact, many women are having to quit their jobs as a result.

According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the January jobs report showed that some 275,000 women

left the workforce, while about 71,000 men left the workforce. Overall, approximately 2.4 million women have left the workforce since last February. This has been a common and unfortunate trend we are seeing as a result of the pandemic, and I know for certain it is definitely tied to the fact that schools have not reopened.

West Virginia's State superintendent said recently:

There is absolutely no substitution for a teacher in the lives of a child.

He continued by saying:

There is no substitution for what that means to the community and the families—not just for the academics but for the social, emotional, [and] physical well-being.

He is absolutely right, and this is just another reason why it is so important for our children to return to school safely.

At the same time, I know there is no one-size-fits-all solution. State leaders, local governments, school administrators, and parents must take this data and these recommendations and apply them to the realities they see in their own communities.

Congress has provided \$68 billion in resources for K–12 schools that they could use last year, which schools could use to implement these strategies. For these, this may mean continuing some form of remote learning. For others, including my State of West Virginia, it means bringing every K–8 student to a 5-day school week.

Before I conclude, I want to take a moment to thank the teachers, the parents, and the students who have adjusted and readjusted over the past years.

Despite the many challenges—whether they are technical, logistical, or emotional challenges—you have tried to make it work the best you can, and for that we are all very grateful. But now we have to do the three r's. We must look at the data, listen to the stories, and look at the realities in our classrooms and in our communities.

Get our children back to school. Respect the science. Reopen the schools safely, and return students, teachers, and learning to the classroom, where it should be.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. DURBIN). The Senator from Florida.

Mr. SCOTT of Florida. Mr. President, I first want to thank my colleague from West Virginia and my colleague from Iowa for their focus on getting our kids back in school.

I agree with the three r's: respect the science, reopen our schools safely, and return our teachers and our children to our classrooms.

It has been almost a year since schools first shuttered due to COVID-19. In many States across the Nation, unfortunately, schools remain closed. The consequences are devastating. Being forced to stay at home is taking a significant social and emotional toll, and it also directly impacts our children's future.

Continuing to subject kids to this unnecessary virtual-learning system is not backed by science or facts. I applaud my State of Florida for getting schools reopened quickly and safely.

The science is overwhelming and clear about reopening our Nation's schools. It is safe, and it is necessary for the well-being and the future of students. The CDC confirmed last month that in-person instruction does not pose an increased risk of community transmission. Schools can and should be open, and they can do so safely.

We need to be honest about why we are even having this conversation today. The only reason schools across the Nation remain closed is because my Democratic colleagues and the Biden administration are standing with teachers unions instead of standing up for our children.

For months, we have heard Democrats preach about following the science, but now Democrats don't want to acknowledge the scientific evidence that school reopenings are safe. They are blindly following the teachers unions because they are afraid of losing campaign contributions, and they are pushing a lie that schools can't reopen without more taxpayer money.

Here is the truth: The funding they claim is absolutely necessary for schools to reopen would not even be allocated for 2 or 3 years. According to the Congressional Budget Office, Biden's COVID spending bill would distribute only \$6.4 billion to K–12 schools this year. The remaining \$122 billion would be spent between the years 2022 and 2028.

Here is another fact: Congress has already provided \$68 billion for K–12 schools, but so far States have spent just \$4 billion of that money. Schools don't need more money to open safely. Yet the Biden administration keeps clinging to this lie and doing everything possible to keep schools closed.

Last week, Speaker PELOSI said:

We want as many kids to be back in school as possible. For that to happen, it takes some money.

Also last week, Vice President HARRIS would not directly answer whether it is safe for teachers to go back to school if they are not vaccinated, despite clear CDC guidelines that it is not a prerequisite if other safety measures are in place.

And earlier this month, all 50 Senate Democrats voted against students safely returning to classrooms even after teachers have been vaccinated. We all agree that teachers should be able to receive vaccinations. I will work with any of my colleagues on a way to get vaccines to teachers more quickly.

We all agree that schools should have additional resources to ensure our students and teachers have safe, clean, and healthy classrooms, and we have allocated \$68 billion to do just that right now. But keeping schools closed doesn't make sense. It is hurting our children and America's poorest families the most.

I grew up in a poor family that struggled to make ends meet, and education was life-changing for me, just as it is for families across our great country. Every student in this Nation deserves the option of in-person learning.

It is time for the Biden administration to acknowledge that the best place for children to learn is in the classroom, and it is time for my Democratic colleagues and the President to stop putting union bosses ahead of America's students and families.

Let's get our schools open now.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Ms. ROSEN). The majority leader.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, I move to proceed to legislative session.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion. The motion was agreed to.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, I move to proceed to executive session to consider Calendar No. 8.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion. The motion was agreed to.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the nomination.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of Gina Marie Raimondo, of Rhode Island, to be Secretary of Commerce.

CLOTURE MOTION

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, I send a cloture motion to the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The cloture motion having been presented under rule XXII, the Chair directs the clerk to read the motion.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

CLOTURE MOTION

We, the undersigned Senators, in accordance with the provisions of rule XXII of the Standing Rules of the Senate, do hereby move to bring to a close debate on Executive Calendar No. 8, Gina Marie Raimondo, of Rhode Island, to be Secretary of Commerce.

Charles E. Schumer, Sherrod Brown, Sheldon Whitehouse, Benjamin L. Cardin, Robert Menendez, Patrick J. Leahy, Alex Padilla, Jacky Rosen, Richard J. Durbin, Tammy Baldwin, Jack Reed, Chris Van Hollen, Richard Blumenthal, Tim Kaine, Martin Heinrich, Christopher Murphy, Maria Cantwell.

Mr. SCHUMER. I ask unanimous consent that the mandatory quorum call for the cloture motion be waived.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, I move to proceed to legislative session.