

The senior assistant executive clerk read the nomination of Katharine MacGregor, of Florida, to be Deputy Secretary of the Interior.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Louisiana.

EDUCATION

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, with me today is one of my colleagues, Mr. Connor Domingue, from my office.

High school seniors throughout our country are looking forward to graduation, which is going to happen here in the next few months—in some cases, weeks. The sad reality, though, is that some of these high school seniors won't be able to read. They won't be able to read their diplomas.

In fact, students in several States have actually filed lawsuits against their schools for failing to teach them basic skills like reading and math. One student plaintiff actually alleged in his petition that he can't spell his name, and he is a high school senior.

And it brings me no pleasure to point this out. We all know we have a problem with elementary and secondary education in America, but the truth is that some—not all, but some—of our schools here in America have become failure factories, and our kids are falling behind their global competitors in just about every category—not just reading, not just writing, not just math, also science.

We live in the freest, most prosperous country in all of human history, and yet American kids rank 22nd—22nd—not in all 195 countries in the world, but 22nd among developed nations in terms of our education achievement. It is embarrassing, and the American people deserve better, and so do American kids.

In 1979, President Carter established the Department of Education. As you know, Mr. President, it is a Cabinet-level Agency. Its purpose was to improve education outcomes throughout the country. I want to read you what the Department's mission is supposed to be. I am quoting here. The Department of Education is supposed to "promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access."

Pretty words. Pretty words. That is all they are. Just empty, pretty words. The results have been anything but excellent.

This chart represents reading skills among our kids in America. Down here, mathematic skills.

This is when we started the Department of Education way back here in 1979. This is where we are today. The line—we are doing a little better in math, but the line for reading is basically flat, and the line for mathematics is not exactly steep.

The truth is that our scores, both for reading and math, have not improved appreciably in decades, and any progress that we have seen from the Department of Education's long tenure—which is very low. You can see the

numbers; they speak for themselves—they disappeared during the pandemic when people in power decided to close down our schools.

Funding for the Department of Education has far outpaced spending in the rest of Federal Government. If you compare spending just for the Department of Education to spending in the rest of the Federal Government, the difference is dramatic. Since the 1980s, the Department of Education's spending has increased by 370 percent—370 percent. All other forms of spending have increased, on average, about 195 percent.

Yet the scores remain stagnant, both for reading and for math. Now, looking at these numbers, I think it is pretty clear why President Trump is calling for us to shut down the Department of Education altogether. He wants to—as we know, he wants to return education to our States, and Louisiana provides a perfect example of why that is a good idea.

I want to be clear. I am not saying that Louisiana public education and secondary education is perfect. We are not well, but we are doing much better.

Over the past few years, Louisiana has actually outpaced the rest of the country in several measures of academic improvement and academic achievement in our K through 12 schools. According to the Nation's report card—that is what everybody looks to. The Nation's report card is put out every year by the Department of Education, grading our States on progress in elementary and secondary education. It might be the only decent thing that the Department of Education does. I forget the formal name of it, but we all refer to it as "the Nation's report card."

And according to that report card, Louisiana led the country in reading growth in 2024, and I want to show you that here in a second in a chart. But, first, I want to go back.

I should have emphasized this. Once again, these are the average reading and math scores for all the kids in America since the Department of Education was established—flat line, mostly flat line. But look what happened here—a dramatic drop in both math and education scores. That is the pandemic. That is what happened when people in power decided to shut down our schools.

It was more than one person, I understand that, but for all the people who made this decision—they should hide their heads in a bag. I mean, look what happened. We shut down our schools. We had the largest learning loss in modern history. That is just a fact.

Now, some people are going to disagree with me, and I am not saying that if they disagree with me, they are dumb. But I am saying that if they disagree with me, they better hope the dumbest person in the world doesn't die because they are going to take their place.

I want to come back. Let me go to Louisiana for a second. We didn't shut

down our schools but for a short period of time. You can see the results on this chart. Between 2019 and 2024, Louisiana's fourth graders went from ranking dead last in the country for reading proficiency—here we are, 48th—to ranking 16th. I am very proud of that. Math scores also steadily increased. Louisiana climbed from being ranked 50th to 38th. We went from 50th to 38th and 48th to 16th best in our country. Louisiana made this growth happen during the pandemic and afterwards.

The pandemic was probably one of the most challenging educational periods in our country's history. Parents remember. I remember. Even if your kids are grown, you remember. It was difficult for kids to try to learn from home. It was a disaster. Shutting down these schools was a disaster, and American kids suffered because of it.

According to the Education Recovery Scorecard, which measures how much of the loss we were able to gain back, American students—I am talking about all kids throughout America—are still one-half of a grade behind where students were when they were tested before the pandemic. On average, we lost half a grade. In many States, the academic loss was a full year. That means that fourth graders today can only read as well as third graders prior to the pandemic.

This is an entire generation of kids who fell behind because our people in power decided to shut down our schools. And many of our States, despite the billions of dollars we appropriated to help them, have failed to catch up.

I am going to say it again. The people who insisted on shutting down our schools during the pandemic are responsible for the largest learning loss in modern history. It was dumb, dumb, dumb. And again, I am not saying the people that made that decision to shut down the schools in America are the dumbest people in the world, but they better hope the dumbest people in the world don't die.

Louisiana, though, managed to thrive during this period and afterwards. Why is that? We looked around at what our friends and our neighbors were doing in America and across the world, and we didn't go with the flow. Only dead fish go with the flow. We didn't go with the flow. We said: Let's look at what other countries are doing and working and what other States are doing and working, and that is what we did.

First, we started giving our teachers the tools they needed to teach, and that is important.

In 2021—I remember it like it was yesterday—our State legislature passed a law mandating that all K through 3 teachers receive advanced training in the very best methods of teaching reading. Reading is fundamental. If you can't read, nothing else matters in terms of educational progress. So we sought out the best methods for teaching kids from kindergarten to the third

grade, the best methods to teach reading. We found them, and we educated our teachers in those methods, and it worked.

We tried to make it the case that no kid makes it to graduation day in Louisiana without being able to read. In fact, we passed another law a couple of years ago. I worked very hard on this. It says: If you are in the third grade, at the end of the third grade, you are going to be tested for reading. If you can't read at a third-grade level, we are going to test you again. If you can't read at a third-grade level at the end of the third grade, we are going to test you one more time. If you still fail, you are not going to the fourth grade. You are going to stay in the third grade until you learn how to read. You might be 16 years old in the third grade, but, by God, you are not going to the fourth grade until you can learn how to read.

Now, we don't just leave the kids on their own if they can't read at the end of the third grade after being tested a couple of times. We give them what we call high-dose tutoring. We tutor them and tutor them and tutor them until they can read, and then they can move on. Because do you know when kids drop out of school? Kids don't drop out of school in the 10th, 11th, and 12th grade; they drop out of school in the 2nd grade, the 3rd grade, when they can't learn how to read and nobody cares. They are just socially promoted. We stopped doing that in Louisiana.

We also started giving parents a choice in public education.

You know, competition makes us better. It makes you better. It makes me better. Competition makes all of us better. Most parents—not all—most parents are far more invested in their kids' academic success than any teacher—I don't care how well-meaning the teacher is—than any teacher, any school administrator, or any Federal bureaucratic.

Most parents—not all, unfortunately, but most parents in America do not want their kids to be stuck in a school where violence is common and learning is rare. They don't.

Several States throughout the country—I am going to mention four in particular, but they are not the only ones. I am going to mention Florida, Iowa, North Dakota, and Utah. Congratulations to them all. They have implemented successfully school-choice programs. Utah may be the best, Mr. President. This gives parents the ability to do just what it says—gives parents a choice. They can send their kid to a public school. They can send their kid to a private school. They can send their child to a charter school.

Charter schools are tuition-free. Charter schools are public schools. They are tuition-free. But they are not run by the education bureaucracy; they are almost always run by parents and caring adults. They don't have to follow all the redtape in their local school district. They can experiment. They are independent, they are free, and they work.

Every one of these States that I mentioned—their programs are different, but each State that I mentioned—and I want to mention them again because they deserve praise—Utah, North Dakota, Iowa, and Florida. They all have a few things in common. They all allow parents to decide which school will get their kids' share of State and Federal tax dollars.

As you know, Mr. President, we fund our public schools through three sources of revenue. The largest is usually local government. In my State, about half of the money comes from local government, about 40 percent comes from the State government, and about 10 percent comes from the Federal Government. So it is mostly local money, but it is also State money to a large extent and some Federal money. But these are all tax dollars.

In these States that I just described, if parents are happy with the current public school their child is enrolled in, they can tell the State: OK, spend that money per child—that I just described—in my child's school. I am happy with my current school.

But if the parents aren't happy, they can seek another school that is a better fit and move that money. They can choose to take their child's funding to a different school to give that kid a better outcome.

This gives parents a choice, but it also—do you know what else it does? It gets some of our schools off their ice-cold, lazy butts. It makes schools compete, and competition makes all of us better.

There have been a number of studies on school-choice States, and almost all of them have found that these programs, this program of choice—you get to choose which public school you want your child to go to or you can send your child to a private school—this choice results in higher test scores, higher parental satisfaction, and higher student safety.

Last year, Louisiana joined the choice move. I am very proud of that. Our legislature passed a school-choice program. We call it the GATOR Act. Starting this fall, certain students—not all of our kids; we are going to eventually ramp it up so that it does impact all of our kids—but certain of our kids will be able to tap into State-funded education savings accounts that parents can use to pay for their child to attend a different public or a different private or a different charter school. Our goal is 3 years. In 3 years, every student in Louisiana will be eligible to participate in this choice program.

I want to say it again. I am not saying Louisiana's scores are perfect. I am not saying that. But it is undeniable that we are on the right track. We are. We stayed open for the most part during the pandemic. We trained our teachers. We have established standards. You can't go to the fourth grade until you can read. We have implemented parental choice.

I think President Trump—and I don't want to just limit this to Republicans. Many of my Democratic colleagues believe in choice as well. Sometimes they can't be as vocal about it, but I know; I talked to them. They understand, as does the White House, that America's future is sitting in these classrooms every day throughout the country.

I have said it a zillion times, a squillion times in Louisiana. The key to Louisiana's future is not the price of oil. It is not what the unemployment rate is. It is not who the Senator is or who the Governor is. It is education.

The status quo in America isn't working. We didn't make it any better as a result of our behavior with respect to the pandemic, and we are behind, but we can catch up if we just do the right things.

One of those things is returning education to the States. I hope we do dismantle the Department of Education. It is basically a conduit for money—except that money goes through the Department of Education and the 4,000 employees there, and they all put a condition on the money as if they knew what was best for each State. They don't. We ought to dismantle the Department of Education and send that money directly to the States.

Thank you, Mr. President, for your courtesy. Congratulations on the progress that the wonderful State of Utah has made in elementary and secondary education.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Vermont.

BUDGET RECONCILIATION

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, the American people, whether they are Democrats, Republicans, or Independents, understand that we have a corrupt campaign finance system which allows billionaires and their lobbyists to play an extraordinarily powerful role in electing candidates and defeating candidates and in crafting legislation. This is through both parties—the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. Money talks. But, today, with Republicans in control of the White House, of the U.S. Senate, and of the U.S. House, we are seeing day by day how this corrupt process plays out for the priorities of the Republican Party and for their billionaire campaign contributors.

Their so-called reconciliation bill—President Trump's "big, beautiful bill"—that the Republicans are putting together right now in the House—is a rather extraordinary piece of legislation. In many respects, given the crises facing our country, this legislation does exactly the opposite of what should be done. It is rather remarkable. You have got a problem, and instead of addressing the problem, they make the problem worse.

It is no secret that we have more income and wealth inequality in our Nation today than we have ever had. It is a serious problem. Today, the wealthiest person in the world—Mr. Elon