

Good afternoon honorable members of the US Senate and House of Representatives.

My name is Wilmer Chavarria. I am the proud Superintendent of Schools of the Winooski School District in Vermont.

I was born inside a refugee camp during the Nicaraguan Sandinista-Contra war. I grew up homeless for a time and in extreme economic misery, often struggling to find food or shelter. I worked in the streets since I was six years old and I became an advocate for working children's rights around the country even before finishing elementary school.

My memories of school are flashes of embarrassment for not having shoes or not having a notebook. But unless I had a fever so high that I would lose consciousness, my mother would not let me skip school. She had only been allowed to go to school until 5th grade, so she took it upon herself to ensure that her children made it all the way to high school no matter what.

The resilient spirit of my mother gave me an obsessive commitment to excellence and hard work despite poverty and deprivation.

I graduated as Valedictorian at age 15 and won the highest academic merit achievement award in my region. I was granted a full scholarship to a national university in Managua and subsequently more full scholarships to schools in Canada and the US. After completing my bachelor's at a historic Quaker college in Richmond, Indiana, I was awarded the prestigious Thomas J. Watson fellowship and earned graduate degrees from the University of New Mexico and Harvard.

After a long journey, I finally became a US citizen in 2018.

When I held my US passport for the first time, I felt an enormous sense of pride and I was deeply inspired to give my new country the best of me, my talent, my work, and my dreams. I felt loved by my community and I believed with all my heart that the American Dream was me.

My mother's high expectations had propelled me to unlikely places, and I had to make a difference in the land that welcomed me.

But I have never stopped going to Nicaragua to visit my mother.

I understand the requirements agencies place on travelers coming into the country and I have always cooperated without hesitation in the two decades since my mother first said goodbye to me at age 16.

This past summer, however, I was separated from my spouse for hours, taken into a detention area with several officers in plain clothes, and all my devices along with their pins and passwords were demanded. I verbally asserted my rights as a US citizen and requested a

lawyer or a phone call, all of which were denied. I was told that I have no constitutional rights at a port of entry and that I should be grateful that they were bothering to ask me nicely.

As a superintendent, it is my duty to protect the information of our students and families contained in some of those devices, and I was not to simply release this data to third parties without a warrant. To this, the officers responded with threats including referring me to the FBI, a warning that they could make me lose my job if they wanted to or destroy my reputation so as to damage my prospects for future employment.

My devices were taken and searched out of view, and I was never given a reason for my detention. Several hours later, and after interrogations that questioned everything from my marriage to my work, I was finally released to find my spouse in the baggage claim area, still shaken from the verbal assaults he had suffered when asking for my whereabouts.

Since this incident, I do not feel free to travel. I am fearful that a visit to my mother could mean extended detention or a fabricated plot to destroy my life, like they threatened to do.

If the goal is to make some citizens feel like they are of a second class, with only some of the rights but not others, then they have succeeded. But I choose to believe that the pendulum will swing the other way, and that our collective disgust for these abuses will catalyze into a powerful backlash against overreach.

I thank you for being here to support me and my fellow Americans as we ride out a dark time in our history.

Thank you.