



EDC Applauds Bicameral Introduction of the Improving Mental Health and Wellness in Schools Act with Celebratory Congressional Briefing

WASHINGTON, D.C. (October 14, 2021) The Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action (EDC) is excited to announce the bipartisan Improving Mental Health and Wellness in Schools Act ([H.R. 5526/S. 2930](#)) has been introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. The EDC would like to thank Representatives Kathy Manning (D-NC-06) and Vicky Hartzler (R-MO-04) and Senators Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) and Cynthia Lummis (R-WY) for championing this legislation. The EDC is honored to have partnered with The Alliance for Eating Disorders Awareness and Be Real USA to promote the necessity of mental health education, including education on eating disorders, in schools to support our nation's youth.

The Improving Mental Health and Wellness Act would integrate mental health promotion and education within existing local school wellness policies to provide a comprehensive approach to teaching children and adolescents about the interconnectedness of physical and mental health. After the past year and a half, there is no greater time to focus on mental health, especially for children and adolescents.

“Too often we focus on physical health without considering mental health and well-being,” said **Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-MN)**. “This legislation will implement a new approach to wellness in schools that will ensure our students have access to the resources they need to thrive. As a longtime advocate on this issue, I’ll continue working to promote and normalize mental health care and education.”

“As a mother and former teacher, I understand the impact school has on our children’s mental and physical development,” said **Representative Vicky Hartzler (R-MO-04)**. “Unfortunately, the pandemic has interrupted this progress and negatively impacted our students’ physical, mental, and social wellbeing. In fact, our nation has seen a 25 percent increase in pediatric emergency room admissions for mental health issues since COVID-19 began impacting our communities. The Improving Mental Health and Wellness in Schools Act provides critically needed mental health resources to our educational institutions, giving our children the tools they need to transform into our future leaders. I am proud to support this legislation in a bipartisan fashion in Congress.”

“I’m proud to introduce the Improving Mental Health and Wellness in Schools Act to build on the existing wellness systems in schools and to ensure that students of all ages have access to resources and education that promote mental health,” said **Representative Kathy Manning (D-NC-06)**. “Throughout the last year and a half, students have experienced great difficulties because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It’s more important than ever that we prioritize mental health resources for young people.”

“I am pleased to help introduce this bill to improve access to mental health services and resources to combat eating disorders,” said **Senator Cynthia Lummis (R-WY)**. “As a senator from Wyoming, I know that rural children often have trouble accessing the critical care they need. This bill will raise awareness about mental health and eating disorders, and help schools in Wyoming, and across the country, provide their students with the support they need.”

“The EDC is thankful to Representatives Hartzler and Manning and Senators Lummis and Klobuchar for leading these bills and recognizing the need for mental health education and awareness in our nation’s schools,” said **Chase Bannister, MDiv, MSW, LCSW, CEDS, Board President of the EDC**. “We must work together to change the narrative that values physical health over mental health. This legislation will help increase people’s openness and comfort on talking about it.”

To celebrate the formal introduction of the bill and educate congressional staff, the EDC, Alliance for Eating Disorders Awareness, and Be Real USA, in conjunction with the Congressional Mental Health Caucus, hosted a virtual briefing on October 6, 2021, titled “Back to School: Policy Solutions to Connect Mental & Physical Health.” The briefing focused on the emerging youth mental health crisis, the relationship between mental health and nutrition, and highlighted bipartisan policy solutions to keep youth safe and thriving, which includes EDC-led initiatives, the Nutrition CARE Act ([H.R. 1551/S. 584](#)) and the Improving Mental Health and Wellness in Schools Act ([H.R. 5526/S. 2930](#)). The link to the recording can be found [here](#).

"I'm really excited that this bill is being introduced in our federal government because it is one step closer to the freedom from mental illness stigma and the normalization of treatment" said **Kelsey Wu, High School Activist and Founder of For You**. “This bill would revolutionize the way youth today and the youth to come will learn about the importance of prioritizing their own wellbeing. Being a part of a generation that has set record high mental illness mortality and hospitalization rates, it's critical to me that lawmakers, educators, and adults know that a bill like this is a necessary solution to a problem that plagues youth from every corner of the nation."

“The mental health needs of children, adolescents, and young adults are not being met, and this problem has been exacerbated by the pandemic. In our clinic in Laramie, I’ve seen firsthand the challenges young people face when trying to access services, how their problems can go undetected for long stretches, and how the ongoing pandemic added additional stressors to their lives and introduced more barriers to accessing mental health resources,” said **Dr. Kyle De Young, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Wyoming**. “The rural landscape of Wyoming often compounds the problems faced by young people with disordered eating problems, as they may lack of regular access to nutritious foods, owing either to living in “food deserts” and/or experiencing financial stress that leads to reliance on inexpensive, but less nutritious food. With the support of Senator Lummis, the Improving Mental Health and Wellness in Schools Act would make meaningful impacts on the lives of countless young Wyomingites.”

“The Missouri Eating Disorders Council applauds Representative Hartzler for co-leading the effort to bring this important child mental health bill law into the 21st century,” said **Annie Seal, Chairman of the Missouri Eating Disorders Council**. “Eating disorders disproportionately affect our young people, yet these illnesses are highly stigmatized and frequently go undiagnosed. We believe that by giving teachers, coaches and nurses the right tools, we can drive earlier interventions for eating disorders and better pathways to treatment.”

“It’s critical that the mental health of students is being addressed in schools and this bill represents real advancement of those efforts,” said **Christine M. Peat, PhD, FAED, LP, Director of National Center of Excellence for Eating Disorders & Associate Professor of Psychiatry at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of addressing not just the physical, but also mental health of students and it’s great to see that this bill acknowledges the connection between the two. Integrated well-being programs that include mental health promotion and having dedicated multidisciplinary teams to fulfill these policies will help ensure that students are receiving truly

comprehensive wellness programming that can have a meaningful impact on reducing mental health disorders, including eating disorders, in our nation’s young people.”

“It has always puzzled me why schools offer so few resources to youth who struggle with mental health issues and why wellness programs in schools focus almost exclusively on physical health”, said **Kitty Westin, International Eating Disorders Advocate and Mother of Anna Westin of the Anna Westin Act**. “I can’t help but wonder if my daughter, Anna Westin, had been taught that there is no shame in experiencing a mental health issue might she have talked more openly about her developing eating disorder and found her way into treatment sooner? I cannot know the answer to my question, but I am confident that the Improving Mental Health and Wellness Act will go a long way in normalizing and destigmatizing mental health issues and open the door for more of our young people to recognize and seek help early.”

The Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action (EDC) is a Washington, DC-based, federal advocacy organization comprised of advocacy organizations, academics, treatment providers, family/loved ones of children with eating disorders and people experiencing eating disorders nationwide. The EDC advances the recognition of eating disorders as a public health priority throughout the United States. Additional resources can also be found at eatingdisorderscoalition.org.

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Media Contact: Emily Rosenberg: erosenberg@eatingdisorderscoalition.org