

January 10, 2022

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow, Chair
Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry
Committee
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Boozman, Ranking
Member
Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry
Committee
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Robert Scott, Chair
House Education & Labor Committee
2176 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Virginia Foxx, Ranking
Member
House Education & Labor Committee
2101 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow, Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Boozman, and Ranking
Member Foxx,

Thank you for your bipartisan work toward developing a pathway for Child Nutrition Reauthorization this Congress as child nutrition programs play critical roles in the development of our nation's children and adolescents. On behalf of the below national, state, and local organizations, we encourage the Committee to consider the inclusion of the bipartisan Improving Mental Health and Wellness in Schools Act (H.R. [5526/S. 2930](#)) within the bill, as mental health is a vital component of overall wellbeing of our nation's K-12 students.

Over the past year, school personnel have adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic in various ways to support students continued learning. Despite their best efforts, the consistent high levels of youth stress and anxiety continue to permeate their lives. Specifically, pediatric emergency room admissions for mental health conditions have increased 25 percent.¹ Adolescent eating disorder diagnoses have increased 30 percent year over year.² Food insecurity skyrocketed, which increases the risk of anxiety and depression by 257 percent and 253 percent respectively.³ It is clear the pandemic will have lifelong affects on our nation's children.

The interdependence on mental health and nutrition plays a vital role in child development. As Dr. Lee Savio Beers, President of the American Academy of Pediatrics stated within her testimony in front of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry earlier this

¹ Leeb RT, Bitsko RH, Radhakrishnan L, Martinez P, Njai R, Holland KM. Mental Health-Related Emergency Department Visits Among Children <18 Years During the COVID-19 Pandemic-United States, January 1-October 17, 2020. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2020;69;1675;1680. DOI:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6945a3e>.

² Tanner, Lindsay. (May 23, 2021). Pandemic has fueled eating disorder surge in teens, adults. Associated Press. Retrieved. <http://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-virus-lifestyle-eating-disorders-health-27c9d5680980b1452f7e512bd4d9f825>

³ Fang, D., Thomsen, M.R. & Nayga, R.M. The association between food insecurity and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. *BMC Public Health* 21, 607 (2021) <http://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-10631-0>

year, food insecurity and scarcity can lead to increased risk for disordered eating.⁴ Dr. Savio Beers also commented that her colleagues have seen an increase in severe eating disorders that are starting at even younger ages given the strains of the pandemic.⁵ Physical and mental health can no longer be addressed in silos within school programming. The upcoming reauthorization provides the Committee the timely opportunity to mend this disconnection.

Given the rising levels of adolescent mental health conditions, the current structure of Local School Wellness Policies that solely address physical activity and nutrition education does not provide a comprehensive approach to the wellbeing of students. Studies have shown comprehensive school mental health programs help students' academic achievement, and build upon core social skills, leadership, self-awareness, and caring connections to adults in their school and communities.⁶ The Improving Mental Health and Wellness in Schools Act seeks to fill this gap by adding mental health promotion and education elements into existing policies. Additionally, the bill includes technical assistance from SAMHSA to assist USDA in the integration of mental health within Local School Wellness Policies. This will ensure school personnel are adequately equipped to meet the mental health needs of their students.

We thank you for your consideration of this request to protect our nation's students' mental and physical health through the advancement of the Improving Mental Health and Wellness in Schools Act. We look forward to continuing to work with you during this process.

Sincerely,

2020 Mom

American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work

American Association of Suicidology

American Counseling Association

American Foundation of Suicide Prevention

American Group Psychotherapy Association

American Mental Health Counselors Association

American Nurses Association

American Occupational Therapy Association

American Psychological Association

Anxiety and Depression Association of America

Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare

⁴ Child Nutrition Reauthorization: Healthy Means and Healthy Futures: Hearing before the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry, 117th Cong. (2021) (Testimony of Dr. Lee Savio Beers). https://www.agriculture.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony_Beers%2003.25.21.pdf

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D., & Schelling, K.B. (2011). The Impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of student-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82, 405-432. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x>

Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness
Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance
Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice
International OCD Foundation
International Society of Psychiatric Mental Health Nurses
Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance
Mental Health America
National Alliance for Mental Illness
National Association for Children's Behavioral Health
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
National Association of School Psychologists
National Association of Social Workers
National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors
National Council for Health and Wellbeing
National Association of County Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Directors
National Association for Rural Mental Health
National Federation of Families
National League for Nursing
Postpartum Support International
REDC Consortium
RI International
Sandy Hook Promise
School Social Work Association of America
SMART Recovery
The Jed Foundation (JED)
The Kennedy Forum
The National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health
The Trevor Project
Well Being Trust