

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.<sup>1</sup> Adolescent eating disorder diagnoses have increased 30 percent year over year.<sup>2</sup> Food insecurity skyrocketed, which increases the risk of anxiety and depression by 257 percent and 253 percent respectively.<sup>3</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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>.

<sup>2</sup> 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>

<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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

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

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> 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