

October 4, 2023

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, 20515

The Honorable Virginia Foxx, Chair
House Education & Workforce Committee
2176 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC, 20515

The Honorable “Bobby” Scott, Ranking Member
House Education & Workforce Committee
2176 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC, 20515

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

On behalf of the Mental Health Liaison Group (MHLG) – a coalition of national organizations representing consumers, family members, mental health and addiction providers, advocates, and other stakeholders write today to express support for the bipartisan, bicameral *Improving Mental Health and Wellness in Schools Act* ([H.R.3331/S.754](#)).

The youth mental health crisis will be a defining characteristic of our time as youth mental health outcomes continue to worsen. Between 2007 and 2018, the youth suicide rate increased by 57 percent, and considering the consistent instability and social isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, youth mental health outcomes are expected to decline.¹ Specifically, pediatric emergency room admissions for mental health conditions have increased 25 percent.² Adolescent eating disorder diagnoses have increased 30 percent year over year.³ Food insecurity skyrocketed, which increases the risk of anxiety and depression by 257 percent and 253 percent respectively.⁴ We know that food insecure households also have higher rates of disordered eating behaviors, which can heighten the risk for an eating disorder.⁵ It is clear the pandemic will have lifelong effects on our nation’s children.

The interdependence of mental health and nutrition plays a vital role in child development. As Dr. Lee

1 Curtin, Sally C. (2020). State suicide rates among adolescents and young adults aged 10–24: United States, 2000–2018. 69(11).

2 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>.

3 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>

4 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>

5 University Relations News Service, “Research Brief: Food Insecurity Raised Risk for Disordered Eating in Low-Income Adolescents,” University of Minnesota Twin Cities (University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, August 13, 2020), <https://twin-cities.umn.edu/news-events/research-brief-food-insecurity-raised-risk-disordered-eating-low-income-adolescents>.

Savio Beers, Past President of the American Academy of Pediatrics stated within her testimony in front of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry in 2021, food insecurity and scarcity can lead to increased risk for disordered eating.

In previous congressional testimony, Dr. Savio Beers of the American Academy of Pediatrics commented that her colleagues have seen an increase in severe eating disorders that start at even younger ages given the strains of the pandemic. Physical and mental health can no longer be addressed in silos within school programming and although the emergency declaration has ended, the mental health consequences will continue.

The bipartisan, bicameral *Improving Mental Health and Wellness in Schools Act* seeks to update the current mental health gap in Local School Wellness policies 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 the 118th Congress to advance this legislation.

Sincerely,

American Academy of Adolescent and Child Psychiatry

American Academy of Pediatrics

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy

American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work

American Counseling Association

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

American Mental Health Counselors Association

American Psychological Association

Anxiety and Depression Association of America

Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare (AABH)

Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness

Children's Hospital Association

Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

Crisis Text Line

First Focus Campaign for Children

Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice

Inseparable

International OCD Foundation

International Society for Psychiatric Mental Health Nurses

Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance

Mental Health America

National Alliance on 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 Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC)

National Council for Mental Wellbeing

National Eating Disorders Association

National Federation of Families

National League for Nursing

National Register of Health Service Psychologists

Nemours Children's Health

Postpartum Support International

Psychotherapy Action Network

REDC

Sandy Hook Promise

SMART Recovery

The Kennedy Forum

The National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health

The Trevor Project