October 4, 2023

| The Honorable Debbie Stabenow, Chair | The Honorable John Boozman, Ranking Member |
| Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry Committee | Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry Committee |
| 328A Russell Senate Office Building | 328A Russell Senate Office Building |
| Washington, DC, 20510 | Washington, DC, 20515 |

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

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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](http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6945a3e).
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