

March 2, 2021

The Honorable Grace F. Napolitano
United States House of Representatives
1610 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable John Katko
United States House of Representatives
2428 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representatives Napolitano and Katko:

On behalf of the Mental Health Liaison Group (MHLG), a coalition of national organizations representing consumers, family members, mental health and addiction providers, advocates, payers and other stakeholders committed to strengthening Americans' access to mental health and addiction care, we are writing to express our strong support for the Mental Health Services for Students Act. We applaud your continued commitment to this legislation and your leadership in addressing the mental and behavioral health needs of individuals throughout the country, including that of students. Supporting children's mental health is critical to their psychological well-being, social and emotional development, academic achievement, and long-term success.

Even prior to COVID-19, the need for mental and behavioral health care in schools was great, while shortages of professionals existed across the country.ⁱ There is growing evidence that the mental health of children and youth is deteriorating in the current environment.ⁱⁱ Remote learning and lack of social interaction due to the pandemic have caused varying levels of trauma and emotional distress,ⁱⁱⁱ with particularly deleterious results for the most vulnerable students, including students of color, those with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ students.^{iv} At the same time, we are seeing an unprecedented level of learning loss, which has further exacerbated disparities in educational attainment among racial and socioeconomic groups.^v

As educators and policymakers work to mitigate impacts on academic achievement, doing so without also addressing the mental and emotional well-being of students will be increasingly challenging. Furthermore, comprehensive mental health services are a way to address children's behavioral issues without taking more punitive disciplinary measures, which often tend to disproportionately fall on students of color and students with disabilities.^{vi} Schools—especially those that are under-resourced and serve high numbers of low-income and BIPOC students—must receive more support to address these needs by increasing and retaining diverse, culturally competent school-based providers.

By taking a public health approach to mental health services, both in schools and in the community, the Mental Health Services for Students Act would help achieve this goal. The bill provides \$200 million in competitive grants through SAMHSA's Project AWARE for public schools across the country to partner with local mental health professionals to establish on-site mental health care services for students. These

partnerships would also train teachers, families, and community members to recognize signs of social, emotional, mental, and behavioral health concerns and provide evidence-based, culturally appropriate best practices for the delivery of mental health care in school-based settings.

As Congress continues its work to address the impacts of COVID-19, responding to exacerbated mental health challenges, including those of school-aged children, is vital. The Mental Health Services for Students Act would help meet these growing needs. We were glad to see this important legislation pass the House in the 116th Congress, and we look forward to working with you and your colleagues to ensure that it pass both the House and Senate and gets signed into law as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

American Academy of Pediatrics
American Art Therapy Association
American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy
American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work
American Association of Suicidology
American Counseling Association
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
American Mental Health Counselors Association
American Psychiatric Association
American Psychiatric Nurses Association
American Psychoanalytic Association (APsaA)
American Psychological Association
Anxiety and Depression Association of America
Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare
Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies
Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness
Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
Clinical Social Work Association
College of Psychiatric and Neurologic Pharmacists
Confederation of Independent Psychoanalytic Societies
Consortium Representing Eating Disorders Care
Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance
Girls Inc.
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health & Social Justice
Inseparable
International OCD Foundation
International Society for Psychiatric Mental Health Nurses
The Kennedy Forum
Mental Health America
NAADAC, the Association for Addiction Professionals

National Alliance on Mental Illness
National Association for Children's Behavioral Health
National Association of Counties (NACo)
National Association of County Behavioral Health & Developmental Disability
Directors
National Association for Rural Mental Health
National Association of School Psychologists
National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors
National Council for Behavioral Health
National Federation of Families
National Register of Health Service Psychologists
Postpartum Support International
Psychotherapy Action Network (PsiAN)
Sandy Hook Promise
School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA)
Schizophrenia and Related Disorders Alliance of America
SMART Recovery
The Trevor Project
Trust for America's Health
Well Being Trust

ⁱ National Association of School Psychologists. (2017). Shortages in school psychology: Challenges to meeting the growing needs of U.S. students and schools. Retrieved from: <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-psychology/shortages-in-school-psychology-resource-guide>.

ⁱⁱ Leeb RT, Bitsko RH, Radhakrishnan L, Martinez P, Njai R, Holland KM. Mental Health–Related Emergency Department Visits Among Children Aged <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.mm6945a3external icon>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leeb RT, Bitsko RH, Radhakrishnan L, Martinez P, Njai R, Holland KM. Mental Health–Related Emergency Department Visits Among Children Aged <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.mm6945a3external icon>; Loades, M. E., Chatburn, E., Higson-Sweeney, N., Reynolds, S., Shafran, R., Brigden, A., Linney, C., McManus, M. N., Borwick, C., & Crawley, E. (2020). Rapid Systematic Review: The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the Context of COVID-19. Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 59(11), 1218–1239.e3. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2020.05.009>.

^{iv} Hannah Natanson and Laura Meckler, "Remote school is leaving children sad and angry: A rising emotional toll is hitting the youngest students hard" The Washington Post, November 26, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/11/27/remote-learning-emotional-toll/?arc404=true>; Government Accountability Office. (2020). Distance Learning: Challenges Providing Services to K-12 English Learners and Students with Disabilities during COVID-19. Retrieved from: <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-21-43>; Harvard Medical School Center for Primary Care. (August 2020). LGBTQ Youth Face Unique Challenges Amidst COVID-19. Retrieved from: <http://info.primarycare.hms.harvard.edu/blog/lgbtq-youth-challenges-covid-19>.

^v McKinsey & Company. (December 8, 2020). COVID-19 and learning loss—disparities grow and students need help. Retrieved from: <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help>.

^{vi} Government Accountability Office (2018). Discipline Disparities for Black students, boys, and students with Disabilities. Retrieved from: <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/690828.pdf>.