

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 21, 2022

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Chairman
Senate Committee on Appropriations
Washington, DC, 20510

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Vice Chairman
Senate Committee on Appropriations
Washington, DC, 20510

The Honorable Rosa L. DeLauro
Chair
House Committee on Appropriations
Washington, DC, 20515

The Honorable Kay Granger
Ranking Member
House Committee on Appropriations
Washington, DC, 20515

Dear Chairman Leahy, Chair DeLauro, Vice Chairman Shelby, and Ranking Member Granger,

Thank you for your leadership and efforts to advance appropriations bills for the 2022 fiscal year. As you work toward a final package, we urge you to help ensure that federal programs targeted to address the severe shortages of school-based mental health professionals are funded at the maximum possible level.

The trauma, disruption, stress, and isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have acutely impacted the mental wellbeing of our nation's youth. On December 7, 2021, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy issued an advisory sounding the alarm on the mental health crisis facing our young people.¹ America's growing youth mental health crisis has been exacerbated by the pandemic and could have wide-ranging, long-term effects on an entire generation, posing significant public health challenges that require the American people's immediate attention.

We are seeing the crisis described in the Surgeon General's advisory reflected in our own communities, where we are witnessing unprecedented increases in mental and behavioral health concerns among our young people. We are hearing more than ever before from parents, students, and educators about the urgent need for greater mental health supports, particularly for increased numbers of school-based mental health service professionals, a key recommendation in the Surgeon General's advisory.

Prior to the pandemic, significant need already existed among students for mental health services, while schools have continuously faced critical shortages of qualified practitioners, including school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers. National mental

¹ Office of the Surgeon General, U.S., *Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory* (December, 7, 2021) (<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>)

health organizations recommend a ratio of one school counselor and one school social worker for every 250 students, and a ratio of one school psychologist for every 500 students. Currently, however, the national ratio is close to or well over double the recommendation for each profession.^{2,3,4} In many school districts facing acute shortages, these ratios are even worse.

Integrating mental health services in schools helps both students and staff succeed by addressing issues such as bullying, self-esteem, substance use, and suicide, while improving the school's capacity to identify, refer, and provide services to help students in need. School-based mental health professionals have been proven to improve staff retention, help keep students in school, and promote learning environments where students feel safe, supported, and ready to learn.⁵

In August 2021, the House of Representatives passed its Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies FY2022 Appropriations bill, which included over \$1 billion in combined funding for the Department of Education's Mental Health Services Professional Demonstration Grants program and School-Based Mental Health Services Grants program. Together, these programs address the critical shortage of school-based mental health service professionals in two distinct and essential ways: by increasing the available workforce, and by helping school districts support increased positions to improve access to services.

The significant investment in school-based mental health services passed by the House is reflective of the urgency of the crisis facing American students. We must rise to meet the calls to action in the Surgeon General's advisory and from our constituents. We have a critical opportunity to build safer, healthier school environments to better support the academic, social, and emotional development of our youth and give them a stronger foundation as they grow into adulthood.

We urge you to include the maximum possible funding for the Department of Education's Mental Health Services Professional Demonstration Grants and School-Based Mental Health Services Grants programs in the final conference agreement.

Sincerely,

² American School Counselor Association, *Student-to-School-Counselor Ratio 2019–2020* (<https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/cd689f6a-252a-4e0a-ac8b-39b9b66d700d/ratios-19-20.pdf>)

³ National Association of School Psychologists, *Shortage of School Psychologists* (<https://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/policy-priorities/critical-policy-issues/shortage-of-school-psychologists>)

⁴ American Civil Liberties Union, *Cops and No Counselors* (March 4, 2019) (https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/030419-acluschooldisciplinereport.pdf)

⁵ National Association of School Psychologists, *Comprehensive School-Based Mental and Behavioral Health Services and School Psychologists* (<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/mental-health/school-psychology-and-mental-health/comprehensive-school-based-mental-and-behavioral-health-services-and-school-psychologists>)

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