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COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR

COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

October 19, 2020

The Honorable Betsy DeVos
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary DeVos:

I write to you as the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic continues to upend our education system, requiring immense sacrifices by our educators, students, and families. Before COVID-19 arrived, schools were already struggling to properly support the growing mental health needs of students. If we fail to act, the stress, trauma, and isolation brought on by the pandemic will accelerate this long-simmering crisis and have devastating effects on students. I urge the Department of Education to take action to support K-12 schools, colleges, and universities in their efforts to address the explosion of mental health challenges facing students, families, and staff as they adapt to the incredibly difficult circumstances posed by the pandemic.

Across the country, tens of millions of students, including more than one million young Illinoisans, have had to adapt to some form of remote learning.¹ Due to the virus's persistent presence in our communities and the Administration's failure to implement a national plan to contain it, widespread remote learning is likely to continue well into 2021.² While these restrictions are necessary to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and preserve health system capacity, we cannot afford to ignore the enormous toll this has taken on our students, especially those who were already more vulnerable and those in communities disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

Students of all ages are experiencing unprecedented levels of stress and trauma, as many families cope with the loss of loved ones to COVID-19 or financial insecurity as a result of the economic downturn. Additionally, social isolation is exacerbating pre-existing mental health conditions and giving rise to new ones, while cutting many students off from the critical support systems present

¹ Illinois State Board of Education, *Fall 2020 Learning Plans for Districts Responding to the ISBE Survey* (Sep. 21, 2020) (<https://isp.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/fceeacb37da04de4b237ed941dd7d5c4>)

² *Coronavirus could worsen in winter, remain major threat through 2021, Fauci says*, Los Angeles Times (Oct. 9, 2020) (<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-10-09/coronavirus-likely-to-worsen-this-winter-will-remain-major-threat-through-the-end-of-2021-fauci-says>)

in a normal school environment. Prior to the pandemic, the prevalence of mental and behavioral health disorders among students was a longstanding challenge facing our nation's schools—each year, an estimated one in five U.S. children experience a mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder.³ Undoubtedly, the pandemic's impact on young people's mental health has already been profound—a recent survey published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that 75 percent of young adults aged 18 to 24 reported experiencing adverse mental or behavioral health symptoms and 25 percent reported having seriously considered suicide in relation to the pandemic.⁴

Our schools need resources and support to adequately address the increased mental health needs of students and prevent a looming crisis that risks damaging students' learning and development for years to come. As Secretary of Education, you are charged with promoting student achievement and ensuring equal access to education for all students, and the Department's failure to properly support educators and students or to facilitate clear guidance to schools in this regard is unacceptable. As such, I request that you issue guidance to both K-12 schools and institutions of higher education that includes recommendations on how they can best address the mental health challenges presented by the pandemic. This guidance should be formed through collaboration with federal partners and experts in mental health, behavioral health, and social-emotional learning and include recommendations for remote, hybrid, and in-person education models.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to working with you to support students, educators, and families as they persevere through this crisis.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lauren Underwood". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Lauren" and last name "Underwood" clearly distinguishable.

Lauren Underwood

³ Kirsten Weir, *Safeguarding student mental health*, Monitor on Psychology - American Psychological Association (Sep. 1, 2020) (<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2020/09/safeguarding-mental-health>)

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic – United States, June 24-30, 2020*, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (Aug. 14, 2020) (https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm?s_cid=mm6932a1_w)