

**United States Senate**  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 13, 2023

**VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION**

Dr. John Heim  
Executive Director & Chief Executive Officer  
National School Board Association

Paolo DeMaria  
President and CEO  
National Association of State Boards of Education

Dear Director Heim and President DeMaria:

On December 6, 2021, the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Protecting Youth Mental Health noted that mental health challenges among young people have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Some of those challenges include anxiety, depression, and other health disorders.<sup>2</sup> The advisory stated, in part, "[i]n recent years, there has been growing concern about the impact of digital technologies, particularly social media, on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people."<sup>3</sup> It also stated, "[s]everal studies have linked time spent on social media to mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression."<sup>4</sup> We are in the midst of a healthcare crisis of significant magnitude due to pandemic induced isolation combined with increased access to social media platforms. As social media use among young people increases, I'm concerned about the effect it will have on our children's safety and their long-term mental health.<sup>5</sup>

By way of example, studies have shown that nearly half of U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 report experiencing at least one of six cyberbullying behaviors.<sup>6</sup> Eating disorders for young people are

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, Surgeon General of the United States, *Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory*, UNITED STATES PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE at 9 (2021), <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> L. Elizabeth Forry, *5 Ways Social Media Affects Kids' Mental Health (And How Parents Can Help!)*, FAMILY EDUCATION (Dec. 1, 2022), <https://www.familyeducation.com/kids/health/mental/5-ways-social-media-affects-kids-mental-health-and-how-parents-can-help>; Cory Turner, *10 things to know about how social media affects teens' brains*, NPR (Feb. 16, 2023), <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/16/1157180971/10-things-to-know-about-how-social-media-affects-teens-brains>.

<sup>6</sup> Emily A. Vogels, *Teens and Cyberbullying 2022*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Dec. 15, 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/12/15/teens-and-cyberbullying-2022/>.

also surging across the U.S. and they often come with other issues such as depression or anxiety, which have only worsened as children spend more time on screens in isolation.<sup>7</sup> For example, the University of Michigan's C.S. Mott Children's Hospital in Ann Arbor had 125 hospitalizations for eating-disorder patients ages 10 to 23 during the first 12 months of the pandemic, more than double the average for the previous three years.<sup>8</sup> Most alarmingly, in 2020, reports of online child predator incidents spiked more than 97%, according to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and reports of all forms of suspected child sexual exploitation increased by 35% from 2020 to 2021.<sup>9</sup>

During this year's State of the Union Address, President Biden said, "When millions of young people are struggling with bullying, violence, trauma, we owe them greater access to mental health care at their schools." He further stated, "We must finally hold social media companies accountable for [the experiment] they're doing – running [on] children for profit."<sup>10</sup> I agree.

In addition to holding social media companies accountable, we must educate our children, their caregivers, and teachers with respect to the risks and dangers surrounding their online activities, especially as it relates to social media. Education could help them avoid these risks and dangers; however, there is very little taught in schools on the topic.

Today, children throughout elementary are taught how to be a good citizen and, more specifically, a good digital citizen. In conjunction with this teaching, we should also find a way to teach our children about the risks and dangers relating to the use of social media. I believe that school districts and state-level educational professionals can lead the charge to get this done.

Accordingly, I am writing to better understand what steps your organization has taken to collaboratively work with school districts and other state-level educational professionals to combat the dangers associated with social media, to include child exploitation and mental health.

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<sup>7</sup> Tawnell D. Hobbs et al., *'The Corpse Bride Diet': How TikTok Inundates Teens With Eating-Disorder Videos*, WALL STREET JOURNAL, (Dec. 17, 2021), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-tiktok-inundates-teens-with-eating-disorder-videos-11639754848>

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> Hillary Beck, *8 Common Threats to Kids on Social Media*, EXPERIAN (June 7, 2021), <https://www.experian.com/blogs/ask-experian/common-threats-to-kids-on-social-media/>; Gretta L. Goodwin et al., *Online Exploitation Of Children: Department of Justice Leadership and Updated National Strategy Needed to Address Challenges*, GAO (Dec. 14, 2022), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-105260.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> President Joseph R. Biden, 2023 State of the Union (Feb. 7, 2023), available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/state-of-the-union-2023/>.

If you have any questions, please contact my Committee staff at (202) 224-0642.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chuck Grassley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Charles E. Grassley  
Ranking Member  
Committee on the Budget