

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 19, 2020

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

Dear Secretary DeVos:

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted our nation in a multitude of ways and exacerbated some of the most challenging and dangerous circumstances for children. As of May 15, 2020, 48 states, four U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia ordered or recommended to close school buildings for the rest of the 2019-2020 academic year. These orders impact approximately 45.1 million public school students.¹ Some public health experts warn that we could face a resurgent second wave of the virus. If that were to occur, school building closures could remain a reality at a time when school would ordinarily resume in the fall.

Since cities and states instituted shelter-in-place restrictions and moved to online learning, children have lost access to essential state and government functions and services that often provide opportunities to identify abuse and to offer protection. School teachers, counselors, administrators, and other mandated reporters make up the majority of reports to state child abuse hotlines. Since schools have been closed, many states saw significant drops in these reports at the state and local level. For example, in Florida, the number of reports of suspected child abuse declined by 11% in March from the five-year average.²

Also in March, for the first time ever, the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network's (RAINN) National Sexual Abuse Hotline had half of the requests for support made by minors; historically, minors represent roughly a third of hotline requests. Of minors who discussed coronavirus-related concerns, 67% identified their perpetrator as a family member and 79% said they were living with that perpetrator.³

This data makes it abundantly clear that school closures and shelter-in-place orders, while necessary to fight the spread of this pandemic, are having dangerous unintended consequences on our nation's children. As a society and as a government, we need to rise to meet this challenge and to enact additional safeguards to identify children in need of help and to give them guidance in seeking that help.

¹ Map: Coronavirus and School Closures, Education Week, Available at <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/map-coronavirus-and-school-closures.html>

² Ryan McKinnon, *Coronavirus Florida: With schools closed, child abuse reporting declines*, Sarasota Herald-Tribune, April 26, 2020, Available at <https://www.heraldtribune.com/news/20200426/coronavirus-florida-with-schools-closed-child-abuse-reporting-declines>

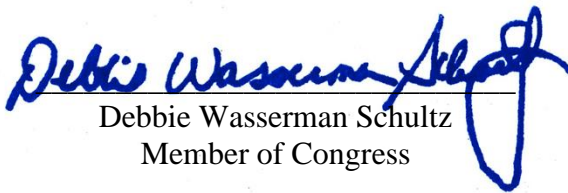
³ RAINN Press Release, April 16, 2020, Available at <https://www.rainn.org/news/first-time-ever-minors-make-half-visitors-national-sexual-assault-hotline>

The Department of Education already issued guidance on several topics to help school systems navigate this crisis and meet the needs of students. I urge you to issue additional guidance that will set clear standards for how school systems can best utilize online learning platforms to keep students safe from harm. In particular, this guidance should encourage state Departments of Education to require the addition of a reporting function (via voice, online chat, email, or other technology, based on the capacity of each state) into their online learning platforms so that children can report abuse to their state child abuse hotlines. Teachers should also be directed to remind children that a student can report abuse to them and that teachers can provide immediate assistance to children who may be experiencing abuse.

When children are no longer interacting in-person with teachers, coaches and other outside adults, the prudent order to stay at home does not always result in staying safe. This added guidance will help ensure that shelter-in-place orders protect children – not their abusers.

Thank you for your attention to these concerns, I look forward to working with you to protect children during this national crisis.

Sincerely,



Debbie Wasserman Schultz
Member of Congress

/s/ Joyce Beatty
Member of Congress

/s/ Tony Cárdenas
Member of Congress

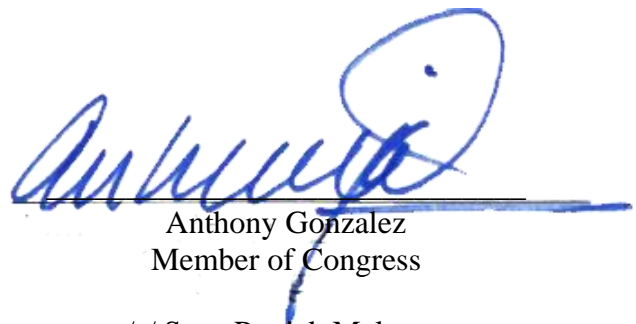
/s/ Kathy Castor
Member of Congress

/s/ Katherine Clark
Member of Congress

/s/ Ted Deutch
Member of Congress

/s/ Debbie Dingell
Member of Congress

/s/ Brian Fitzpatrick
Member of Congress



Anthony Gonzalez
Member of Congress

/s/ Sean Patrick Maloney
Member of Congress

/s/ James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

/s/ Grace Meng
Member of Congress

/s/ Gwen Moore
Member of Congress

/s/ Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress

/s/ Ilhan Omar
Member of Congress

/s/ Chris Pappas
Member of Congress

/s/ Bill Foster
Member of Congress

/s/ Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress

/s/ Deb Haaland
Member of Congress

/s/ Josh Harder
Member of Congress

/s/ Alcee L. Hastings
Member of Congress

/s/ Jahana Hayes
Member of Congress

/s/ Ann McLane Kuster
Member of Congress

/s/ Eddie Bernice Johnson
Member of Congress

/s/ Pramila Jayapal
Member of Congress

/s/ Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.
Member of Congress

/s/ David P. Joyce
Member of Congress

/s/ Marcy Kaptur
Member of Congress

/s/ Al Lawson
Member of Congress

/s/ Barbara Lee
Member of Congress

/s/ Alan Lowenthal
Member of Congress

/s/ Bobby L. Rush
Member of Congress

/s/ John H. Rutherford
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/s/ Tim Ryan
Member of Congress

/s/ Linda T. Sánchez
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/s/ Mary Gay Scanlon
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/s/ Terri A. Sewell
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/s/ Abigail D. Spanberger
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/s/ Darren Soto
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/s/ Jackie Speier
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/s/ Bennie G. Thompson
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/s/ Michael R. Turner
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/s/ Lauren Underwood
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/s/ Nydia M. Velázquez
Member of Congress

/s/ Jennifer Wexton
Member of Congress

/s/ Frederica S. Wilson
Member of Congress

