

September 4, 2019

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and
Pensions
455 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and
Pensions
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20002

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray:

We, the undersigned, appreciate the committee's commitment to school safety and look forward to what actions may come from future hearings. In response to open requests for suggestions on ways to prevent the next mass shooting and to develop safer school environments, we offer the following suggestions to the Senate HELP Committee.

First, we urge the committee to prioritize social-emotional learning (SEL) supports for young people, because social-emotional learning is an evidence-based method of violence prevention that's accessible for all young people across various learning settings. As a cost-efficient prevention method with numerous positive benefits that extend well beyond the security and safety of schools, SEL is especially deserving of federal focus and investment. Self- and social management and regulation plus responsible decision-making—core components of social-emotional learning—are repeatedly pointed to as key in preventing school violence.

Both the National Commission on School Safety¹ and Florida's Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public High School Safety Commission², which were created in response to the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public High School, **separately recommended SEL as a key method for school violence prevention**. The National Commission stated that "[s]chools and districts should adopt effective social and emotional learning (SEL) strategies" and explained that:

"Recent research suggests that the development of social and emotional skills can lead to improved outcomes for educational attainment, employment, and earnings. It can also lead to a significant decrease in the likelihood of crime and delinquency, substance use, antisocial behavioral conditions, aggression, and violent behavior." (pg. 19, citing fn19)

Similarly, the Florida Commission urged that "[s]ocial-emotional learning should be included in K–12 curriculum" (pg. 21).

These commissions follow up on what the Centers on Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) previously found—evidence strongly suggesting that **student self- and social regulation and problem-solving are key to school violence prevention**.³

While social-emotional learning is not and should not be considered a cure-all, it can nevertheless help mitigate or prevent two commonalities found among mass shooters. First, mass shooters tend to have experienced trauma in their childhood, and second, many reach a crisis point in adulthood or young adulthood, such as loss or relationship rejection that triggers extreme responses.⁴ SEL provides a foundation for trauma-informed practices that help young people work through their traumas and adverse experiences. SEL frameworks can provide students and teachers with tools and strategies to

help keep trauma from “hijacking the brain.”⁵ Finally, SEL helps individuals develop emotion-identification and regulation skills,⁶ which are vital in preventing violent behavior.⁷

Still, educators writ-large do not feel highly prepared to teach SEL⁸ and struggle to exhibit SEL core competencies.⁹ Therefore, we strongly recommend as part of the HELP Committee’s ongoing efforts to secure our schools and to improve higher education, that there is an intentional focus on improvements to Title II of the Higher Education Act (HEA) in order to strengthen and expand teacher and school leader preparation programs by embedding training on SEL competencies, trauma-informed approaches and non-exclusionary behavior management practices. It is evident that educators who receive this kind of training in how to apply SEL frameworks to their own development and to that of their students are better prepared to meet the needs of all students, including English learners,¹⁰ racially and ethnically diverse students, students with disabilities and low-income students.¹¹

Consistently, social-emotional learning is looked to as an evidence-based method of preventing violence. Again, while not a cure-all, SEL competencies can help mitigate risk factors to problematic behavior before a crisis develops. It’s a primary, universal intervention, strongly supported by research and evidence as a method of preventing violence. Every child deserves a safe and welcoming learning environment. SEL fosters the skill-building needed to achieve that mission by creating school environments that are inclusive and engaging.

Sincerely,

Afterschool Alliance
Atlanta Public Schools
Atlanta Public Schools Police
Austin Independent School District
Bolton Academy
Bridging Voices in Our Community (BVC): Bullying Prevention Project
California Social-Emotional Learning Alliance
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)
Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health, University of Malta
Chicago Public Schools
Chicago Urban League
Chicago Women's AIDS Project
Committee for Children
Confident Parents, Confident Kids
CT General Assembly, Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity and Opportunity
CT. Coalition for Child Development Education
Department of Psychology, University of Illinois at Chicago
Department of Public Instruction - Exceptional Children Division
Dominicans
Engaging Schools
Equip Our Kids! Campaign
Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley
Hope for the Day

International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) Graduate School
International Observatory on School Climate and Violence Prevention
Lehigh University
LI SEL Forum
Lions Clubs International
McVeagh-Lally Consulting
Momentous Institute
NAMI NC-Peer Leadership Council, NC Collaborative for Children, Youth & Families, CFAC
National Afterschool Association
National Association of School Psychologists
National Louis University
Nevada Department of Education, Office of Safe and Respectful Learning Environment
New Century Education Consulting
North Carolina School Counselor Association
Partnership for Children and Youth
Polaris Charter Academy
Public Advocacy for Kids
Pure Edge, Inc.
REAL Prevention
REENTRY Inc.
Rogers Training Solutions, LLC
Search Institute
SEL Behavior Solutions PreK-12
SEL Consulting Collaborative
SEL4IN
SEL4OR
Six Seconds Emotional Intelligence Network
Social Emotional Learning Alliance for the United States (SEL4US)
Social-Emotional Learning Alliance for Massachusetts
South Atlanta High School
Superintendent - Boston Public Schools
Superintendent, Anchorage School District, Alaska
The LeaderShop
Tisch College Initiative on SEL & Civic Engagement at Tufts University
Transformative Educational Leadership
Turnaround for Children
University of Illinois at Chicago
University of Minnesota - Institute for Translational Research in Children's Mental Health
Youth-Nex Center, Curry School of Education and Human Development, University of Virginia

¹ US Department of Education. (2018, December 18). *Final report of the federal commission on school safety*. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/school-safety/school-safety-report.pdf>

² State of Florida, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission. (2018, December 12). *Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting Public Safety Commission draft report: Initial report submitted to the governor, speaker of the House of Representatives and Senate president*. Retrieved from <http://www.fdle.state.fl.us/MSDHS/CommissionReport.pdf>

- ³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019, June 27). *Preventing school violence*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/youthviolence/schoolviolence/prevention.html>
- ⁴ Peterson, J., & Densley, J. (2019, August 4). Op-Ed: We have studied every mass shooting since 1966. Here's what we've learned about the shooters. *The LA Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2019-08-04/el-paso-dayton-gilroy-mass-shooters-data>
- ⁵ Essex M. J., Shirtcliff, E. A., Burk L. R., Ruttle, P. L., Klein, M. H., Slattery, M. J., Kalin, N. H., & Armstrong, J. M. (2011). Influence of early life stress on later hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis functioning and its covariation with mental health symptoms: A study of the allostatic process from childhood into adolescence. *Development and Psychopathology* 23(4) pp. 1039–58. doi: 10.1017/S0954579411000484. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22018080>
- ⁶ Masten, A. S. & Cicchetti, D. (2010, June 24). Developmental cascades. *Development and Psychopathology* 22 pp. 491–495. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579410000222><https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/development-and-psychopathology/article/developmental-cascades/804AEF38E7C1C0615634966CE8E84C06>
- ⁷ Robertson, T., Daffern, M., & Bucks, R. (2012, January). Emotion regulation and aggression. *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 17(1), pp. 72–82. DOI: 10.1016/j.avb.2011.09.006 Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233753455_Emotion_regulation_and_aggression
- ⁸ McGraw Hill Education. (2018). *Social and emotional learning report*. Retrieved from <https://www.mheducation.com/prek-12/explore/sel-survey.html>
- ⁹ Greenberg, M. T., Brown, J. L., & Abenavoli, R. M. (2016). *Teacher stress and health: Effects on teachers, students, and schools*. State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University, Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.rwif.org/en/library/research/2016/07/teacher-stress-and-health.html>
- ¹⁰ Pennsylvania State University. (2018, June). *Applying an Equity Lens to Social, Emotional and Academic Development*. Retrieved from https://www.rwif.org/content/dam/farm/reports/issue_briefs/2018/rwif446338
- ¹¹ US Department of Education. (2017, September). Chapter 4: How Do We Support Newcomers' Social Emotional Needs. Newcomer Tool Kit. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oela/newcomers-toolkit/chap4.pdf>