

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

June 23, 2017

The Honorable Betsy DeVos
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave. SW
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary DeVos:

As you begin to craft the priorities of the U.S. Department of Education, we ask you to consider an issue of great importance: protecting young people from sexual and dating violence. As you know, K-12 schools have a responsibility under Title IX to take measures to prevent sexual violence and harassment in schools and to promptly investigate these instances when they occur. We request that you prioritize efforts to combat sexual violence and harassment at K-12 schools by maintaining the 2011 Title IX guidance document issued by the Department and to supporting other critical programs that combat sexual violence in our schools.

All children deserve a learning environment in K-12 schools that is free from sexual violence and harassment. While sexual violence and harassment has received great attention at the collegiate level, we know that most of the behavior we see on our college campuses didn't begin there. Many of the attitudes and behaviors begin much earlier, and if addressed early might prevent more serious incidents of rape and sexual assault. Sexual harassment and assault, including cyber bullying that often accompanies assaults, can have a profound effect on victims, forcing many to drop out of school and in some of the most devastating instances drive a student to take her or his own life.

The numbers illustrate this point far too well. Sexual and family violence are two of the biggest drivers of youth suicide, and are also unseen drivers of absenteeism and drop-out, particularly for girls. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 40 percent of rape victims were first raped before the age of 18, and youth suicide is increasing, with the rate of suicide among 10-14 year olds doubling since 2007. In a study conducted by the National Women's Law Center in January of 2017, more than 1 in 5 girls ages 14 to 18 reported being kissed or touched without their consent. The same study found that 68 percent of survivors had difficulty concentrating in class and another 30 percent reported being absent from school because they felt unsafe at school. Continued strong focus of Title IX programs would decrease these numbers.

As you know, under Title IX schools have a responsibility to address and prevent sexual violence and harassment. In 2011, the Department of Education issued guidance to K-12 schools – in response to their request for more information – regarding how they can meet their Title IX obligations. This guidance document provides clear guidelines to schools on how to respond to reported incidents of sexual violence and harassment. By providing clarity to schools on how to respond, the guidance has driven a more thorough and fair process for all involved. We believe it is vital this guidance be maintained and ask you to preserve it throughout your tenure as Secretary.

In addition to maintaining the guidance document, we ask that you support training and education for Title IX coordinators and school personnel in K-12 schools. Schools need this targeted technical assistance to ensure they have the training to fairly and adequately enforce the intent of the law. Having a knowledgeable and well-trained faculty is essential to ensuring our K-12 schools are free from sexual harassment and violence, and we hope the Department will continue to provide this support.

Finally, as you continue your work as Secretary of Education we ask you to engage in active outreach and dialogue with survivors of sexual assault in K-12 schools and their advocates. This is essential to ensuring the Department is hearing from all voices and is crafting policies that are responsive to the needs of victims. This is an important part of ensuring that our K-12 schools are safe spaces for all.

We believe you share our commitment to these issues and were encouraged by your comments in March of this year when you said, "We all have a common responsibility to ensure every student has access to a safe and nurturing learning environment."

We ask the Department to preserve the 2011 Title IX guidance for K-12, schools, support Title IX coordinators at K-12 schools, and engage the voice of victims of assault as the Department moves forward in these areas. We look forward to working with you to ensure that our K-12 schools are free from sexual assault and violence.

Sincerely,



Debbie Dingell
Member of Congress



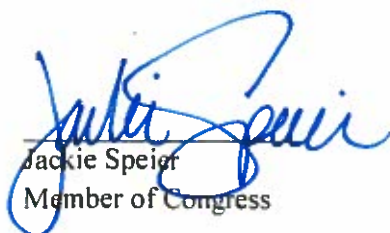
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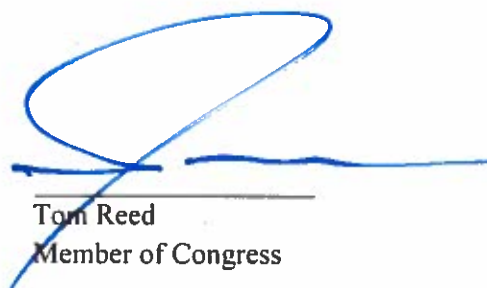
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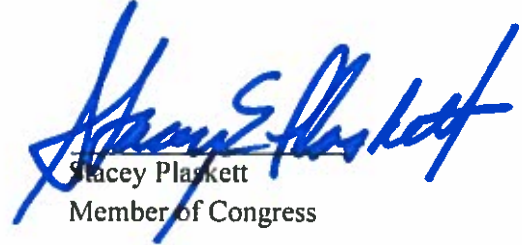
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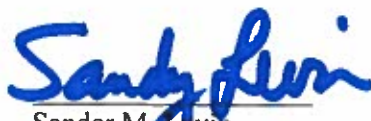

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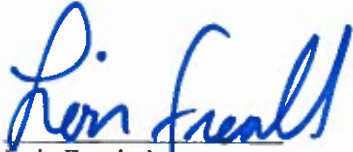

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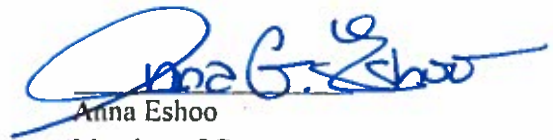
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