

United States Senate

March 16, 2018

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

Dear Secretary DeVos,

Opioid abuse in the United States is a national crisis. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in 2016 more than 11.5 million Americans misused prescription opioids, and 116 people died every day from opioid-related drug overdoses.¹

President Trump has made combatting the opioid crisis a top priority, and I share his desire to solve this devastating epidemic. In October 2017, the President declared the opioid crisis a national public health emergency. A year ago, he signed an executive order establishing the President's Commission on Combating Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis. The commission laid out policy recommendations on a range of topics, including opioid addiction prevention in schools through education and student assessments.² Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of education in preventing opioid addiction.

The impacts of the opioid epidemic are not limited to any one age group. Children, teenagers, and young adults are all significantly affected. A study published this month in *Pediatrics* found pediatric opioid-related hospitalizations have risen sharply, with hospitalizations amongst children aged six to 17 nearly doubling from 2004 to 2015.³ According to a report from the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA), the rate of overdose deaths from prescription drugs and opioids quadrupled among children aged 15 to 24 from 1999 to 2015.⁴ Another report, the 2016 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, found that, on average, almost 1,200 12- to 17-year-olds abuse pain relievers for the first time every day.⁵

The Louisiana Department of Education (DOE) recently conducted an informal review of programs and resources used in Louisiana schools, as well as schools across the country, to combat the opioid epidemic. The review identified a number of challenges hindering the use of education to solve the opioid crisis, including poor implementation of evidence-based programs, a lack of coordinated response at the state level, and an absence of a national education model.

¹ <https://www.hhs.gov/opioids/sites/default/files/2018-01/opioids-infographic.pdf>

² https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/images/Final_Report_Draft_11-3-2017.pdf

³ <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2018/03/01/peds.2017-3335>

⁴ <https://teens.drugabuse.gov/sites/default/files/overdose-data-youth-1999-2015.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUH-DetTabs-2016/NSDUH-DetTabs-2016.pdf>

Although informal, the review done by the Louisiana DOE highlights the need for national leadership in effectively implementing opioid addiction prevention education in our schools. States around the country are finding ways to combat this epidemic, and we must harness that innovation to ensure our children are aware of the dangers of opioid abuse. A comprehensive review by the Department of Education can assist states by giving an overview of the programs currently in use and specify which programs are most effective. In addition, considering the estimated cost of the opioid crisis was \$504 billion in 2015,⁶ a detailed review could save states money by ensuring programs with the highest return on investment are implemented in order to decrease future treatment costs.⁷

I am pleased this administration and my colleagues in Congress are urgently attacking the opioid crisis, but I believe we must do more. A review of education initiatives around the country will assist states with patchwork or nonexistent opioid prevention policies. Subsequent guidelines can efficiently assist states in discerning what the most effective policies are while allowing them to implement the programs that best fit their needs. I respectfully ask that the Department of Education review the actions being taken by states and provide guidelines as to how schools can best prevent opioid addiction.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bill Cassidy, M.D." in a cursive style.

Bill Cassidy, M.D.
U.S. Senator

⁶<https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/images/The%20Underestimated%20Cost%20of%20the%20Opioid%20Crisis.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/BenefitCost?topicId=9>