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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION,
LABOR, AND PENSIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6300

WARREN GUNNELS, MAJORITY STAFF DIRECTOR
AMANDA LINCOLN, REPUBLICAN STAFF DIRECTOR

www.help.senate.gov

May 3, 2023

VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION

Dear Superintendent ____:

Like others in our state, I have become increasingly concerned about the risks associated with use of the social media platform, TikTok.¹ While data privacy and potential security concerns associated with the platform, which is owned by a Chinese company, are well-known, studies have shown that certain aspects of TikTok's functionality may also have serious consequences for the physical and mental health of children and young adults.² As such, I am investigating these matters thoroughly. To that end, I would like to better understand the impact that TikTok is having on schools and students in your district and any steps that you and other school officials are taking to address related concerns.

According to reports, TikTok is designed to analyze users and present them with content that they find highly engaging.³ This is a potentially dangerous formula when it comes to vulnerable youth who demonstrate an interest in unhealthy content. TikTok's algorithm can reportedly identify and present users with content that reinforces unhealthy body image and eating habits, substance abuse, depression, and/or thoughts of committing self-harm or suicide.⁴

Some TikTok videos even feature challenges that have reportedly encouraged young users to engage in substance abuse, as well as dangerous and destructive behaviors in our

¹ Greg Hilburn, *Louisiana officials escalate TikTok bans as concerns grow over China's influence*, DAILY ADVERTISER (Jan. 3, 2023), <https://www.theadvertiser.com/story/news/2023/01/03/heres-why-louisiana-is-escalating-tiktok-ban-on-government-devices/69772987007/>.

² *DEADLY BY DESIGN: TikTok pushes harmful content promoting eating disorders and self-harm into users' feeds*, CENTER FOR COUNTERING DIGITAL HATE (Dec. 2022), https://counterhate.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/CCDH-Deadly-by-Design_120922.pdf; Tawnell D. Hobbs et al., *'The Corpse Bride Diet': How TikTok Inundates Teens With Eating-Disorder Videos*, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (Dec. 17, 2021), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-tiktok-inundates-teens-with-eating-disorder-videos-11639754848>.

³ *Inside TikTok's Algorithm: A WSJ Video Investigation*, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (Jul. 21, 2021), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/tiktok-algorithm-video-investigation-11626877477>.

⁴ Hobbs, *supra* note 2; Sarah Kaufman, *'It's not worth it': Young women on how TikTok has warped their body image*, NBC NEWS (Jul. 19, 2020), <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/it-s-not-worth-it-young-women-how-tiktok-has-n1234193>; *Inside TikTok's Algorithm: A WSJ Video Investigation*, *supra* note 3; Rob Barry et al., *How TikTok Serves Up Sex and Drug Videos to Minors*, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (Sept. 8, 2021) <https://www.wsj.com/articles/tiktok-algorithm-sex-drugs-minors-11631052944>; *DEADLY BY DESIGN: TikTok pushes harmful content promoting eating disorders and self-harm into users' feeds*, *supra* note 2.

schools, including assault and acts of vandalism.⁵ According to reports, some Louisiana schools have experienced incidents traced to TikTok, including a case of assault in Covington, and cases of reported vandalism in Lafayette Parish.⁶

As I represent Louisiana in national discussions surrounding TikTok, I would like to better understand the nature and extent of any problems that you, administrators, teachers, and other school personnel in your district are dealing with on a daily basis. Accordingly, I request that you consider responding to the following questions. Please also consider sharing this letter with interested school administrators, teachers, and other personnel in your district who have information they would like to share directly with my office. All feedback that you and others choose to provide will inform my investigation and help me to better understand the impact that TikTok is having on schools and students in Louisiana.

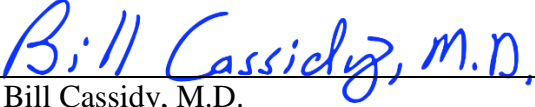
1. Please describe local policies in your district and at the individual school level relating to social media use by students. If you have adopted specific policies relating to TikTok, please provide details on those policies, their effectiveness, and how they have worked in practice.
2. Have schools or teachers in your district used TikTok for informational or educational purposes? Please explain any relevant background.
3. Have schools in your district experienced safety concerns or acts of vandalism or violence that have been traced to students' use of social media platforms, including TikTok? Please explain any relevant background.
4. Have teachers, guidance counselors, or administrators in your district observed students struggling with unhealthy habits, self-image problems, or signs of anxiety or depression that have been traced to students' use of social media applications, including TikTok? Please explain any relevant background.
5. Have parents in your district expressed concerns to teachers or school administrators relating to problems stemming from students' use of social media platforms, including TikTok? Please explain any relevant background.

⁵ *A Recipe for Danger: Social Media Challenges Involving Medicines*, U.S. FOOD AND DRUG ADMIN., <https://www.fda.gov/consumers/consumer-updates/recipe-danger-social-media-challenges-involving-medicines> (last visited Apr. 14, 2023); *Lafayette Parish High School Cracking Down on TikTok Challenge*, 99.9KTDY (Oct. 1, 2021), <https://999ktdy.com/lafayette-parish-high-school-cracking-down-on-tiktok-challenge/>; Leigh Guidry, *Lafayette school leaders address 'destructive' TikTok Challenges*, DAILY ADVERTISER (Oct. 6, 2021), <https://www.theadvertiser.com/story/news/local/education/2021/10/06/lafayette-school-leaders-address-destructive-tiktok-challenges/6013618001/>; *Louisiana student who attacked wheelchair-bound teacher to serve one year in prison*, FOX 8 LOCAL FIRST (Sept. 22, 2022), <https://www.fox8live.com/2022/09/22/louisiana-student-who-attacked-teacher-tiktok-challenge-pleads-guilty/>.

⁶ *Louisiana student who attacked wheelchair-bound teacher to serve one year in prison*, *supra* note 5; *Lafayette Parish High School Cracking Down on TikTok Challenge*, *supra* note 5.

School administrators, faculty, and any other personnel wishing to share feedback with my office may contact TikTokTips@help.senate.gov. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bill Cassidy, M.D." is written over a horizontal line.

Bill Cassidy, M.D.

Ranking Member

U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and
Pensions