On Wednesday, an op-ed titled "**Children Need Natural Sources of Mental Health**," addressed the mental health crisis impacting our youth. The authors, Education Secretary Linda McMahon and Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., warned against Illinois' newly-adopted practice of holding annual mental health screenings for public school students in grades 3-12, and said the focus instead should be on promoting "strong families, nutrition and fitness, and hope for the future."

Speaking as a public servant who has worked with experts in the field of the mental health of children and teens, I agree on the importance of the loving strength of their families, having enough nutritious food in their stomachs, engaging in play and exercise, and prospects for a better future, to the well being of every child.

However, children can still encounter mental health challenges even in the best of circumstances. During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, far too many have faced social isolation, the loss of loved ones, and trauma, affecting their ability to cope. Identifying their needs through school-based screenings is not about "medicalizing the unique and sometimes unpredictable behavior of young children," or creating stigma. Professional help is truly effective when parents and caregivers are encouraged to push past stigma and engage in the process. It should never be withheld or avoided out of fear.

The fact is that our children are in crisis.

Suicide was the second leading cause of death among young people aged 10-14 in 2021, according to the CDC. More than 3 million adolescents aged 12 to 17 – over 12% of all children that age – had serious thoughts of suicide in the past year as of 2023, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Shockingly, 1.5 million made suicide plans, and 856,000 actually attempted suicide.

These trends can be reversed, aided by solid support systems and access to healthcare and community resources. Many young people will need comprehensive mental health care to heal - but that will be an uphill battle when programs and funding for mental health are being cut.

Annual school-based screenings are an important step in the right direction. The best way to connect youth to treatment is to place services where they learn and live. Longstanding research from the Montefiore Health System shows young people are 21x more likely to seek care for mental health reasons if they have access to school-based services. Yet too many schools, especially in underserved communities, have no social workers or too few.

Wednesday's op-ed brought up important issues that merit our attention, but also require more resources to be effective.

Excessive or unmonitored social media use is harming our children. That means the owners of social media companies need to be held accountable as families and communities try to get a handle on it.

Physical activity is important to students' mental health. Funding levels that leave schools with fewer after-school sports programs won't result in "sound bodies" for our children.

Every mental health professional recognizes the importance of good nutrition for supporting mood and concentration. Following through on that goal means ensuring that funding for school breakfast and lunch programs remains in place so all students can have access to enough healthy meals.

In 2019, I chaired the Emergency Taskforce on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health. The task force included 17 members of Congress, as well as a working group of 22 experts in psychiatry, psychology, education, and suicide prevention.

Through months of study and hearings in DC and throughout the country, we developed a 32-page report laying out evidence-based solutions to our crisis. It included addressing trauma, bullying and cyberbullying and harassment of LGBTQ youth, as well as fostering resilience. We noted that many communities lack access to mental healthcare when they need it, especially rural and minority communities.

We identified mental health screenings as a solution that *increases* the likelihood of connecting students with the services that they may need, mental health or otherwise. Screening can identify problems that may not be immediately apparent, but can lead to problems down the road.

Recognition of the mental health crisis in America is bipartisan. Democrats and Republicans are talking about mental health in ways that we simply did not see when we established the Task Force in 2019. Let's keep the momentum going.

The *Pursuing Equity in Mental Health Act* would support research to help identify the communities in which young people have the greatest unmet needs, build outreach programs that reduce stigma and improve the pipeline of culturally competent providers who can

effectively manage disparities in access and care. The bipartisan *Youth Mental Health Research Act* would fund social, behavioral, cognitive, and developmental research to improve how we identify and care for youth at risk, and deliver mental health interventions in clinical and community settings where youth live, play, work, and learn.

Giving our children hope for the future requires a holistic solution that embraces healthy living, but also recognizes that professional help and evidence-based solutions can help with the very real mental health challenges too many of them face.