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United States Senate

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HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

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December 16, 2020

The Honorable Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro,

Across our nation, approximately 100,000 public schools serve more than 50 million students from kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) and play an integral role in the educational, civic, and economic life of local communities. It is critical that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) review efforts by the Department of Education (Education), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and other relevant federal agencies to assist school districts in protecting themselves from cyber threats.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, schools districts were increasingly reliant on technology for grading, enhancing educational offerings, and obtaining real time feedback on student and teacher performance.

In response to the pandemic, many K-12 schools shifted to offering some form of remote education, increasing their dependence on laptops, wireless internet access, and cameras and microphones. At the same time, potential threats from cyberattacks remain serious and prevalent. For instance, school districts in New Hampshire, Nevada, Arizona, and across the country have recently reported instances of ransomware attacks.¹

In 2015, the Government Facilities Sector Specific Plan identified Education's Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools as the Sector Specific Agency (federal agency lead) for the Education Facilities Subsector.² In that role, Education is responsible for coordinating with Federal and non-Federal partners to address risk management for schools, including cyberattack risks. In addition, DHS is authorized to support Federal and non-Federal sector partners by sharing information through its dedicated 24/7 coordination and information sharing operations center.

¹Ransomware is a type of malware that targets critical data and systems for the purpose of extortion. The malware attempts to deny access to a user's data, usually by encrypting the data with a key known only to the hacker who deployed the malware, until a ransom is paid. Recent reports of school districts experiencing such attacks include <https://www.nhpr.org/post/sunapee-schools-discuss-attempted-ransomware-attack-sen-hassan#stream/0>, https://www.msspalert.com/cybersecurity-breaches-and-attacks/ransomware/las-vegas-school-district-data-breach/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=sendpress&utm_campaign, <https://www.12news.com/article/news/local/arizona/flagstaff-schools-targeted-by-ransomware-attack/75-332c0e0c-703b-4f38-98ec-361f60313f01>, <https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/cyberattack-on-mississippi-schools/>, <https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/massachusetts-school-district-shut-down-by-ransomware-attack/>, and <https://abc7.com/ransomware-attack-newhall-school-district-cyber/6424803/>.

²<https://www.cisa.gov/publication/nipp-ssp-government-facilities-2015>.

We are concerned about the extent to which K-12 schools are adequately protected from cyber threats as they expand or revise operations during the pandemic and beyond. Moreover, we would like to understand how Federal agencies coordinate school protection through information sharing, intelligence, and other resources that the Federal government has at its disposal in an effort to help schools combat cyber threats.

We seek a review by the Government Accountability Office on efforts by Education, DHS, and other relevant federal agencies to assist school districts in securing themselves from cyber threats and the effectiveness of these efforts. We also request any recommendations GAO can offer to Congress to improve federal cybersecurity support for school districts. We appreciate your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Margaret Wood Hassan
Ranking Member
Federal Spending Oversight and
Emergency Management Subcommittee



Jacky Rosen
US Senator from Nevada
Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs Committee



Kyrsten Sinema
Ranking Member
Regulatory Affairs and Federal
Management Subcommittee