

**Opening Statement of Republican Leader Bilirakis**  
**CPAC Subcommittee Hearing on “Kids Online During COVID: Child Safety in an**  
**Increasingly Digital Age”**

**March 11, 2021**

*As Prepared for Delivery*

Thank you Madame Chair for holding this important hearing.

I know we share a similar view that while technology can be amazing in keeping us all connected, when it becomes a substitution for interpersonal communications, we are all at a loss.

My dad served on this committee back when we could talk amongst the dais, write each other notes, communicate more directly on what’s happening in our lives, both personally and professionally.

Unfortunately, here we all are, in a virtual hearing.

While we have gotten a bit better from the early days of virtual hearings, I expect there will still be missed cues today like when someone is ready to talk, or providing the kind of attention our witnesses deserve for their statements.

Now think about what it is like to be our kids. This is their new reality, and it is a sad one.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused so many Americans to become isolated in their homes, especially our kids.

Without opportunities for children to interact in person with their friends directly, many turn to social media to fill the void.

Sadly, this has led to a cascade of negative effects for them.

I believe this hearing can serve as an important alarm bell for safely reopening our schools and getting students and teachers back in the classroom and reverse this trend.

To be fair, at the beginning of the pandemic there was much unknown about the virus, and virtual school was a seemingly viable bridge to educating students.

Distance learning can certainly be a positive tool for some students – but the facts now make clear that as a primary means of instruction, it just doesn’t work for advancing our kids’ education, especially those with disabilities.

There is good news. A number of schools have shown they can safely open up including in Florida, and so I hope we can find avenues for all students to have the same accessibility to educational opportunities.

The alternative is catastrophic. This was on full display in Clark County, Nevada last year.

In that case, more than 3,000 alerts about students with suicidal thoughts flooded the inbox of district officials.

The school district since re-opened to in person schooling, but tragically, too late.

By December of last year, 18 students took their own life. 18 families lost their children.

We all have a Clark County where history can repeat itself.

That's why I was pleased that earlier this year President Biden pledged to reopen schools by his 100th day in office and CDC Director Walensky relayed that data indicated schools can begin to safely reopen.

Still, we are all alarmed by recent contradictory statements to the science behind these commitments, so it will be interesting to find out what changed. Hopefully the panel will have some insight there.

I also want to note as privacy protections are on the agenda today that I want to be part of a real solution.

Committee Republicans have been and remain committed to this, and to speak more on this topic, I would like to yield to my good friend, Congressman Tim Walberg, for his efforts to reach a bipartisan deal on a bill to improve upon the Child Online Privacy Protection Act.

Thank You.