

**UNC System President Peter Hans**  
**Remarks to the UNC Board of Governors**  
**February 23, 2023**

Last Friday, I met with chancellors and student health officials from across the UNC System to talk about one of the most important challenges facing parents and educators everywhere: the soaring rates of anxiety, depression, and loneliness among young people. For more than a decade now, we've witnessed a troubling trend among America's youth. Since 2010, the percentage of American teenagers who experience major depression has more than doubled. The percentage of American undergraduates diagnosed with anxiety or depression has more than doubled. And rates of self-harm and suicide have all risen sharply.

I am strongly persuaded by the work of social scientists like Jonathan Haidt and Jean Twenge, who trace much of the problem to this [holds up phone]. Many of our young people now live through their screens, with social life mediated through intentionally addictive apps that are designed to devour attention and sell advertising.

Surveys by the firm Common Sense Media have found that American teens spend more than nine hours a day on screens — and that was *before* the pandemic. Too much of that time comes at the expense of in-person socializing, time outdoors, exercise, sleep — all the things we know are good for mental health. In less than fifteen years, there has been a sea change in the very nature of American childhood, and it would be remarkable if that *weren't* having a profound effect on happiness and health. It's neurologically re-wiring people's brains and often isolating them.

This generational decline in wellbeing is not just concentrated among college students. It's true for young people from all walks of life, and by many measures it's even more pronounced for young Americans who don't have the opportunity to attend college. And there are similar effects on many adults. But there's no question that it's having a deep impact on our campuses.

We are called to address this on three levels:

- First, by doing all that we can to support our students in building resilience against life's inevitable adversities to create thriving lives. This involves, among other elements, identifying catastrophic thoughts and redirecting them toward more healthy responses.
- Second, through our public mission of research and service to the wider world. Our state's public universities have a key role in helping to equip the teachers, parents,

counselors, and clinicians who are working every day to help our state's young people find a healthy path through the world.

- And finally, in our role as leaders and citizens, doing our part to create a better, more hopeful civic culture for a rising generation of North Carolinians.

Our responsibility to students has always been much broader than academic preparation alone. College life is built to help you meet friends, cultivate mentors, to develop the skills and habits that lead to meaningful work and an engaged life. But college also presents some unique challenges, with many students moving away from home for the first time and figuring out how to navigate new social and academic pressures. That's why our campuses provide an array of support services, from mentoring programs to free counseling sessions to crisis hotlines.

We've redoubled those efforts over the last two years, in part to combat the pronounced decline in mental wellbeing that accompanied the covid pandemic and the social distancing policies that disrupted life for everyone. The UNC System has used covid recovery funding to offer Mental Health First Aid for faculty, staff, and students across the state, giving many more people the tools to recognize when someone is struggling and to connect them with help.

We've launched a telepsychiatry program that is helping students on six of our campuses find care that may not be readily available in their local communities, a service that's particularly important in rural areas with fewer mental health clinicians.

We've launched peer support groups, funded a round-the-clock emergency helpline available to every student in the UNC System, and awarded grants to help students access off-campus care. We're also surveying students across the System to learn more about the scope of mental health challenges and identify promising interventions.

Last week, Governor Roy Cooper provided us with another \$7.7 million in pandemic relief funds to expand those initiatives and test others. In many ways, we're still at the early stages of this crisis in wellbeing, and it's important that we try and assess many different approaches to addressing it. I'm grateful for the support of the Governor and our legislators to take on this vital work.

But it's important to remember that the crisis in adolescent mental health is not a campus issue, but a society-wide challenge. Our responsibility as a university is not just to our own students but to the whole state.

Our universities make a difference in this fight through research, with faculty in education, psychology, public health, and countless other disciplines working on strategies to build healthier lives for young people. Just last year, UNC-Chapel Hill received a \$10 million donation from the Winston Family Foundation to create more tools for parents, caregivers, and teens to

make better informed choices about how they interact with technology and social media. They understand the impact on child brain development is profound.

We also contribute through our enormous investment in the state's health care infrastructure, including both UNC Health and ECU Healthcare, who prepare the next generation of doctors, nurses, school counselors and clinical psychologists to serve on the front lines of this crisis. We contribute through the basic act of education itself, which has been shown to strengthen resilience against hardship and lead to greater life satisfaction.

This brings me to my final point, about what all of us can do to combat this issue. Every one of us, but especially those in leadership positions, plays a role in setting the tone of our public life and civic culture. The truest measure of any society is the sense of optimism and possibility it offers a rising generation. On that vital measure, I feel as though we are falling short.

This includes the media who sometimes cover these difficult and sensitive issues in ways that can lead to more harm than good. A broader awareness of struggles is important, and I'm glad to see more openness in our culture to speaking about mental health. But sensational coverage of tragedy — especially suicide among young people — can actually increase the likelihood of the well documented contagion effect. There's also some concern among researchers that too much focus on struggle can end up pathologizing the everyday stress of life, unintentionally contributing to the problem. Clinical experts, including right here throughout the UNC System, have done great work establishing guardrails and guidelines for talking about suicide and self-harm in a measured and responsible way.

Our words influence others. For too long now, the rhetoric in public life — and certainly on our screens — has been trending toward cynicism, toward suspicion and outrage, toward anger and alarmism. That has an impact on the young people who are looking to us for direction, for a model of how to live with integrity and satisfaction. The answer to despair is hope. And all of us can offer a sense of purpose and meaning to help fill this current void.