

ASSEMBLY APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

STATEMENT TO

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE FOR ASSEMBLY, No. 398

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

DATED: FEBRUARY 23, 2023

The Assembly Appropriations Committee reports favorably Assembly Bill No. 398 ACS.

This committee substitute establishes the position of Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery Ombudsperson and establishes the “School Disconnection Prevention Task Force.”

The committee substitute specifically establishes a Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery Ombudsperson. The ombudsperson is to be appointed by the Governor, serve at the pleasure of the Governor, and report directly to the Commissioner of Education. Pursuant to the committee substitute, the duties of the ombudsperson include:

- collaborating with school districts to develop and implement a Statewide strategic plan of action;
- collaborating with a variety of governmental agencies to address the challenges facing student dropouts;
- developing best practices consistent with the recommendations of the School Disconnection Prevention Task Force; and
- advising the commissioner on ways to prevent students from disconnecting from school and strategies for reengaging students who have disconnected from school.

The committee substitute requires the ombudsperson to annually submit a report summarizing services provided, progress in reducing disconnected youth, and recommendations on services and support for disconnected youth to the Commissioner of Education, the Secretary of Higher Education, the Governor, and the Legislature.

This committee substitute also establishes the “School Disconnection Prevention Task Force.” The task force consists of 25 members including: the Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery Ombudsperson, who will serve as the chair of the task force; the Commissioners of the Departments of Education, Corrections, Labor and Workforce Development, Human Services, and Children and Families; the Secretary of Higher Education; the Executive Director of the Juvenile Justice Commission; and 17 members appointed by the Governor. Pursuant to the committee substitute, the duties of the task force include:

- examining current data on disconnected youth;

- researching programs and initiatives addressing school disconnection;
- examining possible contributing factors for students leaving school;
- identifying effective ways to reduce the number of disconnected youth; and
- advising the Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery Ombudsperson on the task force's findings.

The committee substitute requires the task force to issue a final report to the Commissioner of Education, the Secretary of Higher Education, the Governor, and the Legislature no later than nine months after the task force organizes.

Additionally, the committee substitute requires the Governor to appear before a legislative reference committee if a Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery Ombudsperson is not appointed within one year after the effective date of this bill. Finally, the Commissioner of Education is required to appear before a legislative reference committee one year after the issuance of the final report of the School Disconnection Task Force.

As reported by the committee, this committee substitute is identical to the Senate Committee Substitute for Senate Bill No. 3080, as amended and reported by the committee on this same date.

FISCAL IMPACT:

The Office of Legislative Services (OLS) concludes that this bill will lead to an indeterminate increase in State costs. The increase in State costs will primarily stem from expenditures related to the salary and benefits of the newly-created position of a Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery Ombudsperson. While the OLS does not have information on which to base a salary of this position, the average annual salary for a full-time employee in the Department of Education, according to the Civil Service Commission's "State Government 2022 Workforce Profile," is \$93,559. Given that the ombudsperson position established in the bill will report directly to the Commissioner of Education, it is likely that the salary for the position will exceed that of the average annual salary for a full-time employee in the department.

The bill may cause an additional, minimal State expenditure increase to reimburse members of the School Disconnection Prevention Task Force for expenses incurred in the performance of their duties. There may be additional expenditures associated with the department providing staffing services to the task force.