

ASSEMBLY APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

STATEMENT TO

ASSEMBLY, No. 5235

with committee amendments

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

DATED: JUNE 23, 2026

The Assembly Appropriations Committee reports favorably and with committee amendments Assembly Bill No. 5235.

The amended, bill would require school districts, charter schools, and renaissance school projects, according to guidelines to be established by the Commissioner of Education, to establish a comprehensive mental health support and partnership program for students. The program would rapidly connect students, identified as requiring ongoing mental health care or having high-acuity behavioral health needs, with community-based behavioral health services via the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program.

The SPARK program, which would be established in the Department of Children and Families, would be operated and administered by the New Jersey Pediatric Psychiatry Collaborative (collaborative) under contract to the department. The collaborative would serve as the SPARK program navigator, and would provide:

- same-day psychiatric consultation, assessment, and triage support for schools;
- referrals and linkages to outpatient psychiatry and community-based therapists;
- behavioral health care navigation, coordination, and family engagement;
- short-term medication management, stabilization, and bridging services;
- school re-entry planning, psychiatric clearance, and transition coordination following behavioral health crises, hospitalizations, or emergency department visits;
- educational support and consultation for school personnel; and
- consultation and guidance for State and local school leaders to implement evidence-based student mental health policies.

All SPARK services would be available for students in kindergarten through grade 12, upon a referral by school personnel, and only with written authorization from the student's parent or legal guardian.

Each school district, charter school, and renaissance school project would be required to have either a designated staff member to provide

school-based counseling services for students, or a formalized arrangement with a community-based mental health provider or with the New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services program.

Within 90 days of the bill's effective date, the Commissioner of Children and Families would issue a request for proposals for a mobile mental health application that delivers universal mental health information and resources for students in Kindergarten through Grade 12 and their families.

To access SPARK services, schools would be required to report annually to the department and the Department of Education: the number of students accessing SPARK services during the most recent school year; the number of students and families referred by the SPARK navigator to community-based providers; the number of school personnel receiving educational support, guidance, and consultation; and any other information required by the commissioners. The commissioner would provide this information via a searchable, public-facing data platform on the department's website, and would be required to report these data annually to the Governor and the Legislature..

The bill appropriates \$44.0 million to implement the provisions therein.

As amended and reported by the committee, Assembly Bill No. 5235 is identical to Senate Bill No. 4413 (1R).

COMMITTEE AMENDMENTS:

The committee amendments provide that certain provisions of the bill would first only apply to certain school districts, charter schools, and renaissance school projects selected by the Commissioner of Education in consultation with the Commissioner of Children and Families for a period of time specified by the bill. Thereafter, those provisions would apply to all school districts, charter schools, and renaissance school projects in the State.

The committee amendments revise the bill's effective date to reflect these changes.

The committee amendments make a technical change to the bill's synopsis concerning usage.

FISCAL IMPACT:

The Office of Legislative Services (OLS) concludes that the Department of Education may experience some administrative cost increases to comply with the bill's requirement to establish guidelines for the development of comprehensive mental health support and partnership programs by school districts, charter schools, and renaissance school projects. The department would only experience cost increases to the extent that additional staff members are needed to produce the guidance required by the bill.

Public schools may incur additional costs to comply with a requirement that each school either designate a staff member to provide school-based counseling services for students, have a formal arrangement with a community-based mental health provider, or have a formal arrangement with the New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services program. A public school may experience cost increases if the school decides to hire additional staff to provide school-based counseling services to satisfy this requirement.

Although the bill appropriates \$44.0 million to the Department of Children and Families to implement the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program in its first year of operation, the OLS concludes that the State's ongoing behavioral health workforce shortages may complicate the department's efforts to scale the SPARK program to such an extent that it is unlikely that the full amount of the appropriation will be expended in first year following the bill's enactment. Any residual funds still remaining at the end of the first year will be spent in subsequent fiscal years until the full \$44 million is exhausted.

State costs to operate the SPARK program in future fiscal years will largely be driven by student and family demand for the mental health services available through the program, the program's ability to hire, train, and retain a sufficient number of mental health professionals to meet students' needs for the mental health services available through the program; and the annual appropriations process.

To the extent that the mental health services provided through the SPARK program help prevent certain students' needs for more intensive and costly mental health interventions in the future, NJ FamilyCare costs, and associated federal revenue in the form of service reimbursements under Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program, may be slightly reduced, albeit by an indeterminate amount.