

ASSEMBLY BUDGET COMMITTEE

STATEMENT TO

[First Reprint]

ASSEMBLY, No. 5235

with committee amendments

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

DATED: JUNE 28, 2026

The Assembly Budget Committee reports favorably and with committee amendments Assembly Bill No. 5235 (1R).

As amended, the bill would require the Commissioner of Children and Families (the commissioner), in consultation with the Commissioner of Education, to establish guidelines for development of a comprehensive mental health support and partnership program by a school district. The guidelines would: provide information on laws and regulations governing patient privacy, clarify the procedures for requesting a mental health evaluation by an outside provider, promote consistency across school districts, and encourage school districts to develop written plans for students returning to school after a mental health crisis.

Within 90 days, the department would issue a request for proposals for a State contract for a mobile mental health application to deliver universal, age-appropriate mental health information and resources.

The bill establishes the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) pilot program (the pilot) in the department to evaluate models for increasing student and family utilization of, and access to, SPARK program services. The bill specifies that that pilot program would begin on January 1, 2027, would conclude after 18 months, and would operate in up to ten school districts, as selected by the commissioner, in consultation with the Commissioner of Education and the navigator.

At the conclusion of the 18-month pilot program, the SPARK program would be implemented in all school districts, Statewide.

SPARK program services would be available upon referral by a teaching staff member or school mental health professional, and only with written authorization by the student's parent or guardian.

School districts participating in the pilot would develop, based on the commissioner's guidelines, a comprehensive mental health support and partnership program to connect students, identified as needing longer-term mental health care or having high-acuity mental health needs, with the pilot's clinical navigator. Each school district would have either designated staff to deliver school-based mental health care

services for students, a formal arrangement with a community-based mental health provider, or a formal arrangement with the NJ4S program for services.

The contracted service provider for the department's Child Collaborative Mental Health Care Program would serve as SPARK pilot program's clinical navigator and would administer the pilot collaboratively with a participating health system.

The navigator would provide: psychiatric consultation and assessment, referrals and linkages to care, family outreach and engagement, short-term medication management and bridging services, a secure technology portal, school district onboarding, training, psychiatric clearance and re-entry services following student mental health crises, and consultation for State and local school leaders.

The SPARK program's participating health system would support clinical capacity and escalation for participating school districts.

The navigator's secure technology portal would be used to collect, document, and transmit information between the navigator, the participating health system, and participating schools regarding student behavioral health incidents, screening results, behavioral threat assessments, and safety planning.

The department would develop metrics for the pilot, including: service utilization rates, service wait times, any waitlists for services, and the time required to obtain parental or guardian service authorizations. The department would report these data, and its recommendations regarding the continuation or Statewide expansion of the pilot, to the Governor and the Legislature within 60 days of the pilot program's conclusion. Absent a negative recommendation from the department, all school districts in the State would be required to participate in the SPARK program at the conclusion of the pilot.

To ensure timely implementation of the pilot and the Statewide SPARK program, providers that already deliver behavioral, physical, or mental health services to school districts, as of the bill's effective date, or which received State grant funding during the preceding fiscal year, and which demonstrate the capacity to deliver expanded behavioral, physical, or mental health services, would be eligible to participate in the pilot and the Statewide SPARK program. Priority would be given to providers demonstrating a commitment and ability to provide culturally-responsive services.

Participating school districts would be required to report annually to the department and the Department of Education on the number of: students accessing SPARK services, student and family referrals to community-based providers, school personnel given guidance or consultation, and any other information required by the commissioners. The commissioner would establish a public-facing data platform on the department's website to display these data in a searchable format.

Within 90 days of the conclusion of the pilot program, the commissioner would report to the Governor and to the Legislature concerning the data collected by the navigator, including information on: student outcomes, waitlists for services, and whether the pilot program has begun integrating into and complementing the NJ4S program.

COMMITTEE AMENDMENTS:

The committee amendments provide that the Commissioner of Children and Families (commissioner), in consultation with the Commissioner of Education, will establish guidelines for the development of a comprehensive mental health support and partnership program by school district, and require that a request for a mental health evaluation by a provider outside of a school district will be at the expense of the school district.

The committee amendments delete references to charter schools and renaissance school projects throughout the bill.

The committee amendments provide that the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK program would initially operate as a pilot program (pilot) to evaluate models to increase student and family utilization of, and access to, SPARK program services.

The committee amendments provide that the pilot program would begin on January 1, 2027 and conclude 18 months later.

The committee amendments provide that the pilot program would operate in up to ten school districts, as selected by the commissioner, in consultation with the Commissioner of Education and the navigator.

The committee amendments require participating school districts to engage with the SPARK program navigator and enter requisite information into the navigator's secure technology portal.

The committee amendments stipulate that the pilot would be administered collaboratively by the navigator and a participating health system.

The committee amendments provide that the contracted service provider for the department's Child Collaborative Mental Health Care Program will serve as the pilot program navigator, and remove language stipulating that the SPARK program will be administered by the New Jersey Pediatric Psychiatry Collaborative under contract to the department.

The committee amendments add that the navigator will also provide: referrals and linkages to care with school-based psychiatric providers and therapists, including the NJ4S; outreach to students and families to facilitate engagement with SPARK services and manage parental and guardian authorizations to reduce delays in accessing care; a secure technology portal for reporting and managing student behavioral health incidents, screenings, and behavioral threat assessments to conform with State statutory and regulatory

requirements and national best practices; onboarding for participating school districts, workflow configuration, integration with school districts' information systems, and training; and tracking and reporting of program data and outcomes.

The committee amendments stipulate that the navigator may contract with a third-party vendor to provide the secure technology portal, and onboarding, workflow configuration, information system integration, training, and data reporting functions for participating school districts.

The committee amendments provide that the SPARK program's participating health system will support clinical capacity and escalation for participating school districts.

The committee amendments specify that school re-entry and transition planning following a student's behavioral health crisis, hospitalization, or emergency department visit will be the shared responsibility of the participating school district, the navigator, and the participating health system, with the navigator's technology platform facilitating communication and documentation of the student's re-entry plan, the navigator's psychiatric clearance, and any student supports.

The committee amendments provide that the commissioner will establish metrics to report for the pilot, which will include, at a minimum: service utilization rates, the time between student referral and first services, any service waitlists, and the time to secure parental or guardian service authorizations.

The committee amendments add that, within 60 days of the pilot's conclusion, the department will report on the data metrics, and any recommendations regarding the continuation or Statewide expansion of the pilot; absent a negative recommendation, all State school districts will participate in the SPARK program upon the conclusion of the pilot program.

The committee amendments provide that, to promote efficiency and the timely implementation of the pilot and the Statewide SPARK program, providers that already deliver mental or physical health services to school districts as of the bill's effective date, or received State grant funding during the preceding fiscal year, and demonstrate the capacity to deliver expanded mental or physical health services to students, will be eligible to participate as a provider for the pilot and the Statewide SPARK program. Priority may be given to providers that show a commitment and ability to provide culturally responsive services including, but not limited to, the use of bilingual providers, multilingual resources, and other strategies to support English language learners and their families.

The committee amendments add a requirement that the commissioner establish a searchable, public-facing data platform on the department's website to display SPARK pilot program data.

The committee amendments provide that within 90 days of the expiration of the pilot program, the commissioner will report to the Governor and to the Legislature concerning the information collected by the navigator, including information on student outcomes, waitlists, the extent to which the pilot integrated and complemented the NJ4S program, and recommendations for future service delivery.

The committee amendments revise the bill's effective date from a staggered start date for the various bill provisions to an immediate effective date.

The committee amendments eliminate a provision that would appropriate \$44.0 million from the General Fund to the department to administer the SPARK program.

The committee amendments combine the provisions of certain sections of the bill, and omit certain sections that were subsequently made redundant.

The committee amendments change the bill title to reflect the shifting of certain requirements from the Department of Education to the Department of Children and Families and to remove a reference to an appropriation, to correct a statutory citation, and to update the synopsis of the bill to reflect the removal of language appropriating funds to the Department of Children and Families to implement the provisions of the bill.

FISCAL IMPACT:

Fiscal information for this bill is unavailable.