

ASSEMBLY, No. 810

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

219th LEGISLATURE

PRE-FILED FOR INTRODUCTION IN THE 2020 SESSION

Sponsored by:

Assemblyman ANTHONY S. VERRELLI

District 15 (Hunterdon and Mercer)

Assemblyman ROBERT J. KARABINCHAK

District 18 (Middlesex)

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District 37 (Bergen)

Co-Sponsored by:

Assemblyman Caputo, Assemblywomen Speight, Dunn and McKnight

SYNOPSIS

Establishes pilot program to create student mental health assistance programs in selected school districts.

CURRENT VERSION OF TEXT

Introduced Pending Technical Review by Legislative Counsel.



(Sponsorship Updated As Of: 3/1/2021)

1 **AN ACT** concerning student mental health assistance and
2 supplementing chapter 40 of Title 18A of the New Jersey
3 Statutes.

4
5 **BE IT ENACTED** *by the Senate and General Assembly of the State*
6 *of New Jersey:*

7
8 1. a. The Commissioner of Education shall establish a four-
9 year pilot program in which participating school districts will
10 establish a mental health assistance program for students in grades
11 kindergarten through 12. The purposes of the pilot program shall
12 be to identify issues affecting student mental health and the possible
13 impact of those issues on academic performance, and to provide
14 intervention, support, and referral services in a confidential setting
15 to help students who may be experiencing mental health difficulties.

16 b. Under the pilot program, each participating school district
17 shall create a mental health assistance program to serve students
18 who attend the schools of the district in any of the grades
19 kindergarten through 12. A mental health assistance program
20 created by a participating school district shall include, at a
21 minimum, the following elements:

22 (1) identification of students who may be experiencing personal,
23 school, or family difficulties impacting the student's mental health,
24 regardless of whether the difficulties may be associated with
25 alcohol or other drug-related concerns;

26 (2) procedures for the referral of students who may be
27 experiencing such difficulties to the mental health assistance
28 program. Referrals may be made by a student's parent or guardian,
29 teachers or other school staff, or by student self-referral;

30 (3) voluntary participation on the part of the student and full
31 confidentiality with regard to receiving services from the program;

32 (4) the ability for students to confidentially express their
33 feelings and concerns in a safe place and to acquire personal skills
34 development leading to student success in the school setting;

35 (5) providing mental health education, support, and intervention
36 services for students served by the program in order to foster risk
37 reduction and positive asset development and to ensure an
38 environment for students that is safe and alcohol and drug-free;

39 (6) providing referrals, where appropriate, to community
40 agencies and resources that may help address the particular needs of
41 the student; and

42 (7) the goal of providing mental health support services to
43 students that promote and increase factors including, but not limited
44 to: academic achievement and good grades; positive attitudes
45 toward school; attendance and likelihood of staying in school; the
46 ability to communicate and express feelings appropriately; and
47 students' sense of self-worth and formation of positive
48 relationships.

1 A participating school district shall appoint one or more student
2 assistance counselors to facilitate the district's mental health
3 assistance program. Student assistance counselors shall act as a
4 resource for the entire school community and shall work with
5 students or groups in a confidential setting to carry out the work of
6 the program. Student assistance counselors shall also build
7 connections within the local community to enable them to act as a
8 source of information and referrals to various community agencies
9 and resources. Student assistance counselors shall receive
10 specialized prevention and intervention training to identify and
11 address the needs of the school district's students and schools, and
12 shall participate in ongoing professional development in order to
13 best serve the students and schools.

14 c. A school district that wishes to participate in the pilot
15 program shall submit an application to the Commissioner of
16 Education, which includes a description of the district's proposal
17 for creating a mental health assistance program, factors that support
18 the district's current need for such a program, the district's plans for
19 funding any costs associated with the mental health assistance
20 program following the completion of the pilot program, and any
21 other information as prescribed by the commissioner.

22 d. The commissioner shall select up to 15 school districts for
23 participation in the pilot program. To the maximum extent
24 possible, the commissioner shall select school districts in the
25 northern, central, and southern regions of the State and shall seek a
26 cross section of school districts from urban, suburban, and rural
27 areas.

28

29 2. a. At the conclusion of the pilot program, each participating
30 school district shall submit a report to the commissioner. The
31 report from each district shall include, at a minimum, information
32 on the number of students who were served by the mental health
33 assistance program, including the number of students in each grade
34 level; the number of staff who served as student assistance
35 counselors under the program; any voluntary feedback collected
36 from students, staff, and parents regarding the program; and the
37 school district's views on the success and benefits of the program.

38 b. After receiving the reports from each participating school
39 district, the commissioner shall submit a report to the Governor, and
40 to the Legislature pursuant to section 2 of P.L.1991, c.164
41 (C.52:14-19.1), on the implementation and effectiveness of the pilot
42 program. The report shall include the commissioner's
43 recommendation on the advisability of the program's continuation
44 and expansion to additional school districts in the State.

45

46 3. This act shall take effect immediately.

STATEMENT

This bill establishes a four-year pilot program in which the participating school districts will establish a mental health assistance program for students in grades kindergarten through 12. The purposes of the pilot program are to identify issues affecting student mental health and the possible impact of those issues on academic performance, and to provide intervention, support, and referral services in a confidential setting to help students who may be experiencing mental health difficulties.

A school district that wants to participate in the pilot program will submit an application and proposal to the Commissioner of Education, and the commissioner will select up to 15 school districts for participation. Each participating school district will create a mental health assistance program which, among other things: identifies students who may be experiencing personal, school, or family difficulties impacting the student's mental health, regardless of whether the difficulties are associated with alcohol or other drug-related concerns; establishes procedures for the referral of students to the program; provides mental health education, support, and intervention services for students served by the program in order to foster risk reduction and positive asset development; and provides referrals, where appropriate, to community agencies and resources that may help address the particular needs of the student.

In order to facilitate the mental health assistance program, each participating school district is required to appoint one or more student assistance counselors, who will act as a resource for the entire school community and will work with students or groups in a confidential setting to carry out the work of the program. Student assistance counselors must receive specialized prevention and intervention training, and participate in ongoing professional development, in order to best serve the needs of the school district's students and schools.

At the conclusion of the pilot program, the bill requires each participating school district to submit a report to the Commissioner of Education containing certain information on the district's mental health assistance program as well as voluntary feedback collected from students, staff, and parents regarding the program. The bill directs the commissioner, after receiving the reports from the participating districts, to submit a report to the Governor and the Legislature on the implementation and effectiveness of the pilot program and the commissioner's recommendation on the advisability of the program's continuation and expansion to additional school districts in the State.