

SENATE BUDGET AND APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

STATEMENT TO

ASSEMBLY, No. 4434

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

DATED: JUNE 17, 2021

The Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee reports favorably Assembly Bill No. 4434.

This bill directs the Commissioner of Education, in consultation with the Commissioner of Children and Families, to establish the Student Wellness Grant Program. The purpose of the Student Wellness Grant Program will be to provide grants that support school districts in implementing school-based programs and practices that promote mental wellness, social and emotional learning, and student resilience.

Under the bill, a grant awarded through the Student Wellness Grant Program will be used to support school districts in: (1) the provision of school-based mental health clinics or workshops for both students and families that engage the community on universal topics of student wellness and mental health; (2) the implementation and coordination of policies, practices, and programs that support the mental, emotional, and social needs of students; (3) the provision of mental health services on-site at the school to students in need of short-term counseling or crisis intervention focused on mental health or situational concerns; and (4) the timely and appropriate referral of students in need of long-term therapeutic counseling or mental health intervention with available community resources.

The bill directs a school district that elects to participate in the grant program to submit an application to the Commissioner of Education that must include: (1) a description of current school district actions to support the socioemotional needs of students in a stigma-free environment and how a grant will support the expansion of those efforts; (2) a commitment to provide staff training; and (3) the school district protocol for on-site and community referrals for targeted therapeutic interventions.

The bill directs the Commissioner of Education, in consultation with the Commissioner of Children and Families, to develop criteria for the evaluation of applications for grants and to allocate grants within the limit of available appropriations. The Commissioner of Education will give special consideration to applicants that: can demonstrate strong ties to relevant community resources; or have secured external funding for their student wellness program from community partners. The bill also directs the Commissioner of Education, in consultation with the Commissioner of Children and

Families, to develop and disseminate to all school districts model policies and best practices in school-based programs that promote mental wellness, social and emotional learning, and student resilience. Under the bill, no student will be compelled to participate in the programs and services implemented as a result of the grant, if the student or the student's parent or guardian, objects to participation.

Finally, each school district that receives a student wellness grant must prepare and submit to the Commissioner of Education a report on its experience with and the effects of the program. The Commissioner of Education, in consultation with the Commissioner of Children and Families, must submit a report to the Governor and the Legislature on the implementation of the Student Wellness Grant Program, which will include relevant information from the reports submitted by the school districts participating in the grant program.

The bill directs the Department of Education to use any available federal funds which may become available, including funds from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, to effectuate the bill's purposes. Any federal funds available to the department will first be used to provide grant awards to school districts, prior to using State funds.

As reported by the committee, Assembly Bill No. 4434 is identical to Senate Bill No. 2716, which also was reported by the committee on this date.

FISCAL IMPACT:

The Office of Legislative Services (OLS) concludes that this bill may result in an indeterminate increase in annual State expenditures, from federal or other State funds, to establish the program and provide grants to local school districts. The bill does not specify the number of grants that will be awarded annually or the amount of the grants, and it is unknown how many applications will be received and approved. The increase in State expenditures, excluding administrative costs, would correspond to a revenue gain for local school districts selected for grants under the bill.

The bill does not appropriate any State funds for the program; however, it includes a provision requiring that any federal funds made available to the Department of Education for the bill's purposes must be used first to award grants to school districts, prior to using other State funds. It is unknown what new federal funds may become available for the program's purposes at a future date.

The OLS notes that a likely source of federal funds that could currently be utilized in the provision of grants under the bill are the State set-aside funds provided under the Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief III Fund under the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021.