

**ASSEMBLY BILL NO. 4434**  
(First Reprint)

To the General Assembly:

Pursuant to Article V, Section I, Paragraph 14 of the New Jersey Constitution, I am herewith returning Assembly Bill No. 4434 (First Reprint) with my recommendations for reconsideration.

Assembly Bill No. 4434 (First Reprint) directs the Commissioner of the Department of Education ("DOE"), in full consultation with the Commissioner of the Department of Children and Families ("DCF") (collectively, "Commissioners"), to establish the Student Wellness Grant Program ("grant program"). The grant program will provide grants to school districts to support school-based programs and practices that promote mental wellness, social and emotional learning, and student resilience.

The bill directs the Commissioners to develop criteria for the evaluation of school district applications with special consideration given to applicants that can demonstrate strong ties to relevant community resources or have secured external funding for their student wellness program from community partners. Applications will be reviewed by a team of qualified professionals assembled by both DOE and DCF.

Additionally, each school district that receives a Student Wellness Grant must prepare and submit to the Commissioner of the DOE a report on its experience with, and the effects of, the grant program. The Commissioners must submit an annual report to the Governor and the Legislature on the implementation of the grant program, which will include relevant information from the reports submitted by the participating school districts.

The bill proposes to fund the grant program by requiring the DOE to use "any available federal funds which may become available" and further requiring that any available federal funds be used prior to any State funds to effectuate its purposes.

I applaud and support the Legislature's continued efforts to respond to the mental health needs of the State's youth and empower districts to directly promote student wellness. However, the mandatory funding scheme established by the bill will hinder both current and future DOE operations and initiatives. My recommendations revise the bill's funding language to provide the DOE with necessary flexibility to fund the grant program alongside other priorities. In addition, my recommendations would allow for a pause of the grant program in the face of insufficient available funding.

Therefore, I herewith return Assembly Bill No. 4434 (First Reprint) and recommend that it be amended as follows:

<u>Page 4, Section 7, Line 4:</u>	Delete "shall" and insert "may"
<u>Page 4, Section 7, Line 4:</u>	Delete "available"
<u>Page 4, Section 7, Line 7:</u>	Delete "Any federal" and insert "Federal"
<u>Page 4, Section 7, Line 8:</u>	After "department" insert "to effectuate the purposes of this act"
<u>Page 4, Section 7, Line 8:</u>	Delete "first"
<u>Page 4, Section 7, Line 9:</u>	After "districts" insert "in amounts deemed appropriate by the Commissioner of Education"
<u>Page 4, Section 7, Line 9:</u>	Delete "under" and insert "which may be appropriated by the Legislature for"
<u>Page 4, Section 7, Line 10:</u>	After "act." insert "If sufficient funding is unavailable, the grant program shall be paused and shall resume once funding becomes available by way of legislative appropriation or other means."

[seal]

Respectfully,

/s/ Philip D. Murphy

Governor

Attest:

/s/ Parimal Garg

Chief Counsel to the Governor