

ASSEMBLY BILL NO. 4435
(Second Reprint)

To the General Assembly:

Pursuant to Article V, Section I, Paragraph 14 of the New Jersey Constitution, I herewith return Assembly Bill No. 4435 (Second Reprint) with my recommendations for reconsideration.

Since 1988, the Department of Human Services and then the Department of Children and Families ("DCF") have contracted with school districts and non-profit organizations to provide prevention and support services for students through the School-Linked Services Program ("program"). These contracts facilitate student success by linking schools and social services to support students in need. As part of the program, DCF contracts with 90 school based youth services programs to provide a variety of critical services before, during, and after school. DCF also maintains School-Linked Services contracts with other entities such as health centers, Family Friendly Centers, and Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Initiative Programs. Recognizing the myriad challenges facing our students in returning to school following the initial phases of the Coronavirus disease 2019 ("COVID-19") pandemic, this year's budget appropriated over \$26.5 million to the program, representing an increase of approximately \$11 million over last year's appropriation. P.L.2021, c.133.

Assembly Bill No. 4435 (Second Reprint) would require DCF to prioritize certain applicant school districts when awarding grants under the program. The bill mandates that DCF prioritize districts that propose to focus on providing "clinical health counseling services to students" and consider other specified factors in determining priority.

I commend the bill's sponsors for their passionate support of comprehensive mental health services for students and for their interest in updating the program. As the bill's sponsors recognize, although the 90 school-based youth services programs currently in operation have improved the lives of countless students, the criteria used to select and evaluate these programs has changed very little over the past 34 years.

While I wholeheartedly agree that youth mental health services should be prioritized, I am concerned that the bill overly restricts DCF's discretion in awarding School-Linked Services contracts. I am therefore recommending amendments to preserve the bill's focus on youth mental health services while also expanding DCF's discretion to consider additional types of services in conjunction with youth mental health supports. For example, mental health counseling services should remain a priority, but traditional mental health counseling services alone are simply one of many services that School-Linked Services contractors should aim to offer. Other key aspects of successful youth services programs might involve active collaboration with existing community mental and behavioral health services and family supports, as well as implementation of strategies and activities that promote student wellness more broadly.

Relatedly, to best meet the needs of students and their families, DCF should have the discretion to supplement the factors that the bill instructs DCF to consider in awarding contracts. I also recommend that the last factor be amended, as a service provider may be able to provide access to "clinical mental health professional staff who specialize in a variety of mental health areas" even if the provider cannot employ such staff onsite. This will alleviate pressure on applicants in communities where services are most needed, which is especially critical given the relative scarcity of these professionals.

I am also recommending technical changes for accuracy, including clarifying that the overarching program is called the "School-Linked Services Program," administered by DCF, and that funds are awarded through contracts to both non-profit providers and school districts, not grants to just school districts.

Finally, because the support needs of youth and their families are constantly evolving, I recommend that the bill sunset in two years to provide DCF with the flexibility to revisit its approach following a period of implementation. Because the bill's requirements relate only to prioritizing applicants, a sunset date will in no way affect DCF's continued ability to award School-Linked Services contracts following the bill's expiration.

Therefore, I herewith return Assembly Bill No. 4435 (Second Reprint) and recommend that it be amended as follows:

<u>Page 2, Title, Line 1:</u>	Delete "school districts" and insert "applicants"
<u>Page 2, Title, Lines 1-2:</u>	Delete "School Based Youth" and insert "School-Linked"
<u>Page 2, Section 1, Line 8:</u>	Delete "grants under the School Based Youth" and insert "contracts to provide School-Linked Services,"
<u>Page 2, Section 1, Line 9:</u>	Delete in its entirety
<u>Page 2, Section 1, Line 10:</u>	Delete "Division of Family and Community Partnerships of"
<u>Page 2, Section 1, Lines 11-12:</u>	Delete "applicant school districts and districts" and insert "applicants and applicants"
<u>Page 2, Section 1, Line 13:</u>	After "that" insert ", at minimum,"
<u>Page 2, Section 1, Line 28:</u>	Delete "either" and insert "including"
<u>Page 2, Section 1, Lines 28-29:</u>	Delete "remotely through the use of"
<u>Page 2, Section 1, Line 29:</u>	After "as applicable" insert "and as permitted by law"
<u>Page 2, Section 1, Line 30:</u>	Delete "Office of School-Linked Services" and insert "Department of Children and Families"

<u>Page 2, Section 1, Line 31:</u>	Delete "applicant school districts and districts" and insert "applicants and applicants"
<u>Page 2, Section 1, Line 35:</u>	Delete "applicant school districts and districts" and insert "applicants and applicants"
<u>Page 2, Section 1, Line 39:</u>	Delete "Office of School-Linked Services" and insert "Department of Children and Families"
<u>Page 2, Section 1, Line 39:</u>	Delete "the following"
<u>Page 2, Section 1, Line 40:</u>	After "factors" insert "including but not limited to the following"
<u>Page 2, Section 1, Lines 41-42:</u>	Delete "grants under the School Based Youth Services Program" and insert "contracts to provide School-Linked Services"
<u>Page 3, Section 1, Line 1:</u>	After "the" insert "applicant is, currently operates in, or proposes to operate in a"
<u>Page 3, Section 1, Line 1:</u>	After "district" insert "that"
<u>Page 3, Section 1, Line 5:</u>	Delete "other" and insert "existing"
<u>Page 3, Section 1, Line 7:</u>	Delete "school district" and insert "applicant"
<u>Page 3, Section 1, Lines 12-13:</u>	Delete "school district has" and insert "applicant can ensure access to"
<u>Page 3, Section 1, Line 16:</u>	After "areas." insert "c. For purposes of this section, 'applicant' means a school district, school, or other eligible entity seeking to be awarded a contract to provide School-Linked Services. The term shall include new applicants as well as a school district, school, or other eligible entity that is seeking to expand current programs under an existing contract to provide School-Linked Services."
<u>Page 3, Section 2, Line 18:</u>	After "immediately" insert "and shall expire on the first day of the 25th month next following enactment"

[seal]

Respectfully,

/s/ Philip D. Murphy

Governor

Attest:

/s/ Parimal Garg

Chief Counsel to the Governor