

ASSEMBLY WOMEN AND CHILDREN COMMITTEE

STATEMENT TO

ASSEMBLY, No. 660

with committee amendments

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

DATED: MAY 19, 2022

The Assembly Women and Children Committee reports favorably and with committee amendments Assembly Bill No. 660.

As amended by the committee, 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 or contract with one or more third party mental health care providers, 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. The student assistance counselors or the mental health care providers 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.

This bill was pre-filed for introduction in the 2022-2023 session pending technical review. As reported, the bill includes the changes required by technical review, which has been performed.

COMMITTEE AMENDMENTS

The committee amended the bill to require each participating school district to either appoint one or more student assistance counselors or contract with one or more third party mental health care providers, instead of simply appointing student assistance counselors as originally provided in the bill, to facilitate the mental health assistance program, act as a resource for the entire school community, and work with individual students or groups of students in a confidential setting to carry out the work of the program.

The committee amendments also require that the mental health care providers, under contract with the school district to facilitate the program, receive the same specialized prevention and intervention training, and participate in ongoing professional development as the student assistance counselors appointed by the school district as required under the provisions of the bill.