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SB 14, Aimed at Addressing California’s Growing Youth Mental Health Crisis, Passes Assembly Education Committee Amid Amendments and CTA Opposition

SACRAMENTO, CA – Today, SB 14, introduced by Senator Anthony Portantino, passed the Assembly Education Committee with a bipartisan 7 – 0 vote. The bill now moves to the Assembly Appropriations Committee. SB 14 would require the California Department of Education to identify best practices, including training programs for school staff and students, by 2023. The training programs must provide instruction on how school staff can best provide referrals to mental health services, substance use disorder services, or other support to individuals in the early stages of developing a mental illness or substance use disorder. SB 14 would also ensure that youth absences from school for a mental health issue or appointment will be considered an excused absence in the same fashion absences for physical health ailments or appointments are treated.

Although the bill passed unanimously, advocates and legislators alike were visibly frustrated by what they see as debilitating amendments that weaken the intent of the bill. The bill originally mandated 50% of all classified and certificated employees in every school be trained by 2023 to ensure struggling students have more trained adults to turn to for help and support. This mandate was removed by the Committee Chair after concerns expressed from the California Teachers Association. Threatened that his bill would not move forward without the amendments, Senator Portantino reluctantly took the Chair’s amendments to give the rest of the policy a chance to be heard. Assemblywoman Sharon Quirk-Silva (D-65), who sits on the Assembly Education Committee, expressed her frustration with the removal of training mandate language from SB 14 and another one of Senator Portantino’s bills that was substantially amended, SB 224, “We are missing the boat and kids are dying on our watch, and I’m tired,” said Quirk-Silva, a former schoolteacher.

SB 14 has garnered widespread support from student groups, advocacy organizations, healthcare provider groups, and current and former teachers from across the state. **Zachary Patterson**, a member of the San Diego Board of Education and President of the California Student Board Member Association, shared a personal testimony of losing a classmate, “I know I could have done better to support John if I had been given the knowledge and education. And now, I am here because SB 14 is my chance. It’s our chance. To provide the resources so school districts like John’s teach students to know warning signs and how to react to a mental health crisis, to value mental health with legitimate excused absences, to train teachers on what they need to not only help students, but also to help each other as teachers face their own mental health concerns.”



Corky O'Rourke, a general education and special education teacher for 37 years, also testified in support of the bill. "As teachers, we are mandated to do several trainings at the beginning of each school year. The teachers I have spoken to believe that we definitely need more mental health awareness training. Just this month, in California Educator magazine, EdWeek Research Center reports that 92% of educators said teaching is more stressful now than prior to the pandemic. 92%! How do you think students feel?"

California is in the midst of a youth behavioral health crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. With distance learning, our youth are increasingly isolated and disengaged, with depression symptoms at an all-time high for high school students. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, nearly 1 in 3 California high school students surveyed reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for two or more weeks in a row. Nearly 1 in 5 reported that they have seriously considered attempting suicide. We, as student advocates, are deeply disappointed by the amendments in the bill and are dismayed and frustrated by the continued opposition from the California Teachers Association (CTA), despite *their own amendments* having already been included in the bill. *At GENup and CSBMA, we base our work on the lived experiences of students and their struggles with mental health. We are disappointed that CTA's preemptive fears have driven them to prioritize avoiding hypothetical inconveniences rather than confront the very real crisis students presently face.*

Teachers and school staff on the frontlines of this crisis *must* be trained to identify and help students who are suffering. Research shows that the sooner people get help for mental health and substance use concerns, the more likely they are to have positive outcomes. On behalf of California's 6.3 million students, we thank Senator Portantino for his leadership in advocating on our behalf and for school communities and look forward to working with the state to strengthen access to behavioral health care for our fellow students.