

A 5235 -- Redline

Amended to Amended -- Establishes School-based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids program in DCF; requires school districts to develop mental health support and partnership programs.*

Deletions ~~struck~~ · Insertions underlined

A5235 ~~1R2R~~ ~~[First~~ [Second Reprint] ASSEMBLY, No.

Assemblymen Verrelli, Freiman, Assemblywomen Speight, Swain and Assemblyman Verrelli Tully

SYNOPSIS ~~_____~~ Establishes School-based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids program in DCF;

requires school districts to develop mental health support and partnership ~~programs;~~ programs.

~~makes an~~ CURRENT ~~appropriation.~~ VERSION OF TEXT As reported by the Assembly Budget Committee on June 28, 2026, with amendments.

~~CURRENT~~ An ~~VERSION~~ Act ~~OF~~ concerning ~~TEXT~~ student ~~_____~~ mental As ~~health~~ 2[,] ~~reported~~ and ~~2 by~~ supplementing ~~2[chapter 40 of Title 18A of the Assembly~~ New Appropriations ~~Jersey Committee~~ Statutes on ~~and June~~ Title ~~23, Chapter 2~~ 2026-9A ~~with~~ of ~~amendments.~~ 2Title 30 of 2 the 2[New Jersey] Revised 2 Statutes 2[, and making an appropriation]2.

~~An Act concerning student mental health, supplementing chapter 40 of Title 18A of the New Jersey Statutes and Title 9A of the New Jersey Statutes, and making an appropriation.~~

~~1._____ 1._____ a. The Commissioner of 2[Education] Children and Families2, in consultation with the Commissioner of 2[Children and Families] Education2, shall establish guidelines for the development of a comprehensive mental health support and partnership program by a 2participating2 school district 2[, charter school, and renaissance school project]2 in accordance with 2[section 2] the provisions2 of 2[P.L. _____, c. _____ (C. _____) (pending before the Legislature as this bill)] this act2.~~

~~The _____ Commissioner b. of The Education, in consultation with the Commissioner of Children and Families, shall establish guidelines for shall, the at development of a comprehensive minimum: mental health support and partnership program by a school district, charter school, and renaissance school project in accordance with section 2 of P.L. _____, c. _____ (C. _____) (pending before the Legislature as this bill).~~

~~b. (1) include information on common consent forms;~~

~~The guidelines shall, at a minimum:~~

~~(1) include information on common consent forms;~~

~~(2) (2) clarify when a school district, district 2[, charter school, or renaissance school project]2 may request a mental health evaluation by a provider employed outside of the school district; district 2, which shall be at the expense of the school district2;~~

~~(3) promote consistency across school districts, districts 2[, charter schools, and renaissance school projects, projects,]2 and reduce administrative requirements that can delay a student's return to school; and _____ (4) encourage school districts, districts 2[, charter schools, and renaissance school projects]2 to develop written transition and support plans for students returning to school from a mental health crisis that address methods of communication with families, coordination with providers, and short-term follow-up supports within the school.~~

~~2._____ 2c. a. No 1Commencing later on than the 90 six days month after following the effective date of enactment of P.L. _____, c. _____ (C. _____) (pending before the Legislature as this bill) act, until the first Commissioner day of the Children 25th and month Families next shall following establish the and date implement of a enactment process of and P.L. _____ issue, a c. _____ request (C. _____ for) proposals (pending by before which the mobile Legislature mental as health this platforms bill), may the provisions of this section shall apply to a be school awarded district, a charter State school, contract or to renaissance provide school a project mobile selected mental by health the application Commissioner that of delivers Education, universal, in age-appropriate consultation mental with health the information Commissioner and of resources Children specifically and tailored Families, to participate students in and kindergarten access through the grade School-Based 12 Partnerships for Access and Resilience their for families. Kids (SPARK) program services, as listed in subsection b.~~

~~of _____ section d. 3The Commissioner of P.L. _____ Children, and c. _____ Families (C. _____ shall) ensure (pending that before the Legislature universal, as age-appropriate this mental bill). health Thereafter, information the and provisions resources of provided this via section the shall mobile apply application pursuant to each subsection school d. district, charter school, and renaissance school project in the State.~~

~~b.1 Each school district, charter school, and renaissance school project shall develop, in accordance with guidelines established by the Commissioner of Education this pursuant to section 1 complement of P.L. _____, c. _____ (C. _____) (pending before the Legislature services as available this to bill), students a comprehensive mental health support and partnership Families program through in the schools New of Jersey the Statewide district, Student the Support charter Services school, or the renaissance school project. The purpose of~~

~~the program shall and be to connect students, who have been identified as requiring longer-term mental health care or who have high-acuity behavioral health needs, with the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) pilot program navigator, established pursuant to section 32 of P.L. this act. 2 c. (C.) 2. (pending a. before the Legislature as this bill).~~
21Commencing on 1[b.]the c.1 six No month student following shall the be date connected of enactment of P.L. , c. (C.) (pending before the Legislature as this bill) until the first day of the 25th month next following the date of enactment of P.L. , c. (C.) (pending before the Legislature as this bill), the provisions of this section shall apply to a school district, charter school, or renaissance school project selected by the Commissioner of Education, in consultation with the Commissioner of Children and Families, to participate in and access the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program navigator, services, pursuant as to listed in subsection a-b.

of section 3 of P.L. , c. (C.) (pending before the Legislature as this bill). Thereafter, the provisions of this section shall apply to each school district, charter school, and renaissance school project in the State.] Notwithstanding the provision of any law or regulation to the contrary, there is established within the Department of Children and Families the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) pilot program to evaluate models for increasing student and family utilization of, and access to, SPARK program services. The pilot program shall begin on January 1, 2027 and shall conclude 18 months thereafter.2 b.1 2[Each school district, charter school, and renaissance school project shall develop, in accordance with guidelines established by the Commissioner of Education pursuant to section 1 of P.L. , c. (C.) (pending before the Legislature as this bill), a comprehensive mental health support and partnership program in the schools of the district, the charter school, or the renaissance school project. The purpose of the program shall be to connect students, who have been identified as requiring longer-term mental health care or who have high-acuity behavioral health needs, with the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program navigator, pursuant to section 3 of P.L. , c. (C.) (pending before the Legislature as this bill).] The pilot program shall operate in up to ten school districts, as selected by the Commissioner of Children and Families in consultation with the Commissioner of Education and the SPARK program navigator.2 1[b.] c.1 2[No student shall be connected to the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program navigator, pursuant to subsection a.

1[c.] d.1 Each] schoolAll district, SPARK charter pilot school, program and services renaissance school project shall be required made to available have for either students a in designated kindergarten staff through member grade to 12, provide upon school-based a counseling referral services by for students, a formalized teaching arrangement staff with member a or community-based school mental health care professionals provider, and or only a formalized arrangement with the New written Jersey authorization Statewide of Student the Support student's Services parent program or to legal provide guardian. services with outlined criteria for when they will be utilized.

d. 3.—(1) a. Each Notwithstanding school the district provision that of participates any in law or regulation to the contrary, SPARK there pilot is program established in pursuant the Department of Children and Families the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program, which shall be operated and administered by the New Jersey Pediatric Psychiatry Collaborative under contract to the subsection department a.

of b.—this The section New shall Jersey develop, Pediatric in Psychiatry accordance Collaborative with will the serve guidelines a established pursuant to section 1 of this act by the School-Based Commissioner Partnerships of for Children Access and Families, in consultation with the Commissioner of Education, a comprehensive mental health support and Resilience partnership for program Kids in (SPARK) the schools of the district. The purpose of this initiative shall be to connect students who have been identified as requiring longer term mental health care or who have high-acuity behavioral health needs with the SPARK pilot program navigator, navigator and pursuant will to provide: subsection f.

(1) same-day psychiatric consultation, assessment, and triage support for school districts;
(2) referrals and linkages to care, as necessary, with community-based outpatient psychiatric providers and therapists;
(3) behavioral health care navigation, coordination, and family engagement;
(4) short-term medication management, stabilization support, and bridging services for students and families awaiting treatment or services from community-based providers;
(5) school re-entry planning, psychiatric clearance, and transition coordination following student behavioral health crises, hospitalizations, or emergency department visits;
(6) educational support, consultation, and behavioral health guidance for school district personnel; and
(7) consultation and guidance for State and local school leaders to craft and implement evidence-based student mental health policies.

c. All School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program services provided pursuant to subsection b.

of this section shall be made available for students in kindergarten through grade 12, upon a referral

~~by a teaching staff member or school mental health professionals and only with the written authorization of the student's parent or legal guardian.~~

~~d. The Commissioner of Children and Families, in consultation with the Commissioner of Education, shall establish a process by which public school districts, charter schools, and renaissance school projects may access services available through the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program pursuant to section 2 of P.L. _____, c. _____ (C. _____) (pending before the Legislature as this bill).~~

~~4. a. No later than 90 days after the effective date of P.L. _____, c. _____ (C. _____) (pending before the Legislature as this bill), the Commissioner of Children and Families shall establish and implement a process and issue a request for proposals by which mobile mental health platforms may apply to be awarded the State's single contract to provide a mobile mental health application that delivers universal, age-appropriate mental health information and resources specifically tailored to students in kindergarten through grade 12 and their families.~~

~~b. The Commissioner of Children and Families shall ensure that the universal, age appropriate mental health information and resources provided via the mobile application pursuant to subsection a. of this section complements the services available to students and families through the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program established pursuant to section 3 of P.L. _____, c. _____ (C. _____) (pending before the Legislature as this bill).~~

~~5. a. As a condition of participation in and accessing School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program services, as listed in subsection b. of section 3 of P.L. _____, c. _____ (C. _____) (pending before the Legislature as this bill), a school district, charter school, and renaissance school project shall report annually to the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Education:~~

~~(1) the number of students accessing School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program services during the most recent school year;~~

~~(2) the number of students and families referred by the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program navigator to community-based behavioral health providers;~~

~~(3) the number of school personnel receiving educational support, consultation, and behavioral health guidance;~~

~~and (4) any other information, as required by the Commissioner of Children and Families and the Commissioner of Education.~~

~~b. The Commissioner of Children and Families shall establish a public-facing data platform on the Department of Children and Families' website to display, in a searchable format, the information provided pursuant to subsection a.~~

(2) 6. Each The school district of 2[, Children charter school, and Families renaissance school project]2 shall report be annually required to the have Governor, either and a designated staff member to the provide Legislature school-based pursuant 2[counseling] to mental section health 2care2 of services P.L.1991, for c.164 students, (C.52:14-19.1) a concerning formalized the arrangement information with required a community-based b mental collected health by care school provider, districts, or charter a schools, formalized and arrangement renaissance with school the projects New pursuant Jersey Statewide Student Support Services program to subsection provide a services with outlined criteria for when they will be utilized.

~~of _____ section 2(3) 5 School of districts P.L. _____ that , participate c. _____ in (C. _____) (pending before the Legislature SPARK as pilot this program bill), shall -be - required 7. -to The engage Commissioner of Children and Families and the Commissioner of Education shall, in accordance with the "Administrative SPARK Procedure program Act," navigator, P.L.1968, established c.410 pursuant (C.52:14B-1 et seq.), adopt rules and regulations as necessary to implements subsection this f. -act.~~

~~8. There is appropriated from the General Fund to the Department of Children and Families the sum of \$44,000,000 to administer the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program established pursuant to section 3 of this act. section, _____ 9. The provisions 1[of section 1]1 of this act shall take effect immediately, 1[and] except that 1 the provisions of section 4 shall take effect 90 days following the date of enactment 1[. The] and the 1 provisions of 1[section] sections 1 2 1, 3, 5, and 6 of this act shall take enter effect requisite six information months into following the date secure of technology enactment. portal 1[Finally, pursuant the to provisions paragraph of (4) sections 3, 5, and 6 shall take effect on the first day of the subsection 25th f. month next following the date of enactment.]1 The Commissioner of Children and Families and the Commissioner of Education may take any anticipatory administrative action in advance of these effective dates as shall be necessary for the implementation of this act.~~

of this section;

e. The pilot program established pursuant to subsection a. of this section shall be administered collaboratively by the SPARK program navigator and a participating health system.

f. The contracted service provider for the Child Collaborative Mental Health Care Program within the

Department of Children and Families will serve as the SPARK pilot program navigator, and will:

(1) deliver psychiatric consultation, assessment, and triage support for participating school districts;

(2) provide referrals and linkages to care, as necessary, with school-based or community-based outpatient psychiatric providers and therapists, including, when appropriate, the New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services program;

(3) deliver behavioral health care navigation, coordination, and family engagement;

(4) provide short-term medication management, stabilization support, and bridging services for students and families awaiting treatment or services from community-based providers;

(5) conduct outreach to students and families to facilitate engagement with, and access to, SPARK program services, and manage parental and guardian authorizations and associated compliance under the "Health Insurance and Patient Affordability Act of 1996," Pub.L.104-191, and the "Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974," 20 U.S.C.

s.1232g, to reduce delays in accessing care;

(6) provide each participating school district with a secure technology portal and platform that will permit school personnel to report and manage student behavioral incidents, including harassment, intimidation, and bullying (HIB) incidents, suicide risk screenings, and behavioral threat assessment and management cases, structured to conform with applicable New Jersey statutory and regulatory requirements and with national best practices, including the guidance of the United States Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center, in order to minimize risk to students and districts and to ensure that complete and relevant information is captured at the point of the incident;

(7) in coordination with the participating health system, onboard participating school districts, configure school districts' workflows, integrate with school districts' student information systems, and train school personnel on the use of the portal and associated processes;

(8) capture, track, and report program data and outcomes and support the reporting required under section 3 of this act, and the Children's Mental Health Data Dashboard, as required to be established and maintained by the Department of Human Services pursuant to P.L. _____, c. _____ (C. _____) (pending before the Legislature as Assembly Bill No.

5238 and Senate Bill No.

4416;

(9) provide psychiatric clearance, school re-entry, and transition planning following student behavioral health crises, hospitalizations, or emergency department visits;

(10) deliver educational support, consultation, and behavioral health guidance for school district personnel;

and _____ (11) offer consultation and guidance for State and local school leaders to craft and implement evidence-based student mental health policies.

The navigator may contract with a third-party vendor to provide the secure technology portal described in paragraph (6) of this subsection and the student information system integration, onboarding, training, consent management, and reporting functions described in paragraph (7) of this subsection.

g. The SPARK program's participating health system shall support clinical capacity and escalation for participating school districts.

h.

School re-entry and transition planning following a student's behavioral health crisis, hospitalization, or emergency department visit shall be a shared responsibility of the participating school district, the SPARK program navigator, and the participating health system. The SPARK program navigator's technology platform shall serve as the shared coordination record through which the parties document, communicate, and track the re-entry plan, the navigator's psychiatric clearance, and the supports to be provided upon the student's return.

i. The Commissioner of Children and Families, in consultation with the Commissioner of Education, shall establish a process by which public school districts may access services available through the SPARK pilot program established pursuant to subsection a.

of this section.

j. The Department of Children and Families, in consultation with the participating entities, shall establish metrics to be reported for the SPARK pilot program, which shall include, at a minimum:

the rate of student and family utilization of SPARK services;

the time elapsed between referral and first service;

any waitlists for SPARK services;

the completeness of referral information;

the time required to obtain parental and guardian authorization;

and re-entry planning timeliness and completion.

k. No later than 60 days following the conclusion of the pilot program, the department shall report its findings and recommendations to the Governor and to the Legislature pursuant to section 2 of P.L.1991, c.164 (C.52:14-19.1), including recommendations regarding the continuation or Statewide expansion of the SPARK pilot program established pursuant to subsection a.
of this section.

l. Absent a negative recommendation from the department pursuant to subsection k.
of this subsection, all school districts in the State shall participate in the SPARK program upon the conclusion of the pilot program pursuant to subsection a.
of this section.

m. In order to promote efficiency, effectiveness, and the timely implementation of the SPARK pilot program, established pursuant to subsection a.
of this section, during the current fiscal year and the Statewide SPARK program, established pursuant to subsection l.

of this section, providers that already provide behavioral, physical, or mental health services to school districts as of the effective date of this act, or which received grant funding from the State during the preceding fiscal year, and which demonstrate the capacity to provide expanded behavioral, physical, or mental health services to students in kindergarten through grade 12 shall be eligible to participate in the SPARK pilot program and the Statewide SPARK program. Priority under the program may be given to applicants that demonstrate a commitment and ability to provide culturally responsive services that meet the needs of the populations they serve, including but not limited to the use of bilingual providers, multilingual resources, and other strategies designed to support English language learners and their families.

n. As a condition of participation in and accessing SPARK pilot program services and Statewide SPARK program services pursuant to this section, a school district shall report annually to the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Education on:

- (1) the number of students accessing SPARK pilot program services during the most recent school year;
- (2) the number of students and families referred by the SPARK program navigator to community-based behavioral health providers;
- (3) the number of school personnel receiving educational support, consultation, and behavioral health guidance;

and _____ (4) any other information, as required by the Commissioner of Children and Families and the Commissioner of Education.

o. The Commissioner of Children and Families shall establish a public-facing data platform on the Department of Children and Families' website to display, in a searchable format, the information provided pursuant to subsection j.

and subsection n.

of this section. 2 _____ 3. 2[a. Notwithstanding the provision of any law or regulation to the contrary, there is established in the Department of Children and Families the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program, which shall be operated and administered by the New Jersey Pediatric Psychiatry Collaborative under contract to the department.

b. The New Jersey Pediatric Psychiatry Collaborative will serve as the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program navigator, and will provide:

- (1) same-day psychiatric consultation, assessment, and triage support for school districts;
- (2) referrals and linkages to care, as necessary, with community-based outpatient psychiatric providers and therapists;
- (3) behavioral health care navigation, coordination, and family engagement;
- (4) short-term medication management, stabilization support, and bridging services for students and families awaiting treatment or services from community-based providers;
- (5) school re-entry planning, psychiatric clearance, and transition coordination following student behavioral health crises, hospitalizations, or emergency department visits;
- (6) educational support, consultation, and behavioral health guidance for school district personnel;
- and _____ (7) consultation and guidance for State and local school leaders to craft and implement evidence-based student mental health policies.

c. All School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program services provided pursuant to subsection b.

of this section shall be made available for students in kindergarten through grade 12, upon a referral by a teaching staff member or school mental health professionals and only with the written authorization of the student's parent or legal guardian.

d. The Commissioner of Children and Families, in consultation with the Commissioner of Education, shall establish a process by which public school districts, charter schools, and renaissance school

projects may access services available through the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program pursuant to section 2 of P.L. _____, c. _____ (C. _____) (pending before the Legislature as this bill)] No later than 90 days after the conclusion of the SPARK pilot program established pursuant to section 2 of this act, the Commissioner of Children and Families shall report to the Governor, and to the Legislature pursuant to section 2 of P.L.1991, c.164 (C.52:14-19.1), concerning the information required to be collected by the contracted administrator, including information on student outcomes, waitlists, the ability of the pilot to integrate and complement the New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services program, as well as recommendations for future service delivery2 .

4. 2[a. No later than 90 days after the effective date of P.L. _____, c. _____ (C. _____) (pending before the Legislature as this bill), the Commissioner of Children and Families shall establish and implement a process and issue a request for proposals by which mobile mental health platforms may apply to be awarded the State's single contract to provide a mobile mental health application that delivers universal, age-appropriate mental health information and resources specifically tailored to students in kindergarten through grade 12 and their families.

b. The Commissioner of Children and Families shall ensure that the universal, age appropriate mental health information and resources provided via the mobile application pursuant to subsection a. of this section complements the services available to students and families through the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program established pursuant to section of P.L. _____, c. _____ (C. _____) (pending before the Legislature as this bill)] The Commissioner of Children and Families, in consultation with the Commissioner of Education, shall, in accordance with the "Administrative Procedure Act," P.L.1968, c.410 (C.52:14B-1 et seq.), adopt rules and regulations as necessary to implement this act2 .

5. 2[a. As a condition of participation in and accessing School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program services, as listed in subsection b.

of section 3 of P.L. _____, c. _____ (C. _____) (pending before the Legislature as this bill), a school district, charter school, and renaissance school project shall report annually to the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Education:

(1) the number of students accessing School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program services during the most recent school year;

(2) the number of students and families referred by the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program navigator to community-based behavioral health providers;

(3) the number of school personnel receiving educational support, consultation, and behavioral health guidance;

and _____ (4) any other information, as required by the Commissioner of Children and Families and the Commissioner of Education. b. The Commissioner of Children and Families shall establish a

public-facing data platform on the Department of Children and Families' website to display, in a searchable format, the information provided pursuant to subsection a.

of this section] The provisions of this act shall take effect immediately2.

2[6.

The Commissioner of Children and Families shall report annually to the Governor, and to the Legislature pursuant to section 2 of P.L.1991, c.164 (C.52:14-19.1) concerning the information required to be collected by school districts, charter schools, and renaissance school projects pursuant to subsection a.

of section 5 of P.L. _____, c. _____ (C. _____) (pending before the Legislature as this bill).12

2[7.

The Commissioner of Children and Families and the Commissioner of Education shall, in accordance with the "Administrative Procedure Act," P.L.1968, c.410 (C.52:14B-1 et seq.), adopt rules and regulations as necessary to implement this act.12 _____ 2[8.

There is appropriated from the General Fund to the Department of Children and Families the sum of \$44,000,000 to administer the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) program established pursuant to section 3 of this act.12 _____ 2[9. The provisions 1[of section 1]1

of this act shall take effect immediately, 1[and] except that1 the provisions of section 4 shall take effect 90 days following the date of enactment 1[. The] and the1 provisions of 1[section] sections1 2

1, 3, 5, and 61 of this act shall take effect six months following the date of enactment. 1[Finally, the provisions of sections 3, 5, and 6 shall take effect on the first day of the 25th month next following the date of enactment.1] The Commissioner of Children and Families and the Commissioner of Education may take any anticipatory administrative action in advance of these effective dates as shall be necessary for the implementation of this act.12