



To: Pennsylvania House of Representatives
From: Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA)
Re: Support Amendment A04126 (Ortitay) to House Bill 2022

On behalf of the more than 5,000 school directors and administrators governing the state's school districts, intermediate units and career and technology centers, PSBA is writing to express **support for amendment A04126 (Ortitay) to House Bill 2022 (Kaufer)**. PSBA is very appreciative of the General Assembly's interest in and response to the mental health needs of the Commonwealth's school children and applauds Representative Kaufer for continuing the conversation.

The need for mental health supports in public schools has never been greater. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, school leaders were reporting that students were experiencing issues related to mental health at an increasing rate. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified this trend. Isolation, grief and anxiety created by deaths, loss of family income, changes to their educational model, and other factors have led to even steeper increases in mental health issues.

In the recent 2022 State of Education report, the most commonly reported challenge to student learning was student mental health issues. The fact that 86% of school districts identified student mental health issues as one of their biggest challenges speaks volumes about the widespread need for mental health supports. Amendment A04126 would ensure that all public school entities with full-time enrolled students would receive much needed grant funding to address those needs.

A pilot program like the one in the current version of House Bill 2022 is intended to apply to a small (35 in this case) number of participants to see if the program works in the small scale and then expand it if it is found to be successful. However, we know that providing additional mental health supports and services to students has a positive impact, and we know that the students of the approximately 700 public school entities who would receive funds under the amendment need this support. With the undeniable and immediate need for additional mental health programs and services in every public school in the state, children across the Commonwealth do not have the time to wait on the usual pilot program process.

Many public schools are already providing additional mental health supports and services with the federal pandemic relief funding they received. In the 2022 State of Education Report, 87% of school districts reported using federal relief funding to address social-emotional learning. Schools reported providing a variety of different additional supports. However, schools need additional state resources in order to continue or expand their current mental health programs and services as one-time federal pandemic relief dollars are exhausted.

Amendment A04126 would also provide schools with additional needed flexibility in the allowable uses for mental health grant funds that would permit schools to utilize those funds in the way that would best meet the needs and circumstances of their students and local communities. While there may be a shortage of mental health service professionals in some parts of the state, a narrowly focused grant program would not do enough to meet the monumental need for mental health services in schools in these areas. The amendment's broader grant program with more allowable uses for grant funding would permit schools in these areas to better train their existing mental health service professionals, contract for a wider array of services such as crisis intervention services which can be provided remotely, or provide any other innovative program that is likely to have a positive impact on student mental health. Training and compensation of in-house mental health service professionals would also be an allowable use for schools which have the opportunity to recruit such individuals.

Grant funding under the amendment would be driven out utilizing the current School Safety and Security Grant program housed at PCCD. The amendment follows the exact same pattern set by the Legislature in June of 2020, when the existing grant program was amended to focus exclusively on responding to COVID-19, by amending the program again to focus solely on addressing student mental health.

PSBA thanks Representative Ortity for offering this flexible and more comprehensive grant program proposal and urges all legislators to support his amendment.