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Senator Portantino Continues Leadership on Mental Health Issues as Education Bill Heads to Governor's Desk

Sacramento, California – Senate Bill 224, authored by State Senator Anthony J. Portantino (D – La Cañada Flintridge), was approved by the Legislature with bipartisan support and is headed to the Governor's desk. SB 224 addresses the growing mental health crisis among California's youth by implementing mental health education in schools.

“As students return to school this month, families, teachers, and school administrators are faced with mental health challenges,” stated Senator Portantino. “California is in the midst of a youth behavioral health crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and we need to find ways to reduce the stigma around mental health. Although this bill doesn’t nearly go as far as it should and isn’t the version I wanted to send to the Governor, nevertheless, we need to keep these critical policies moving forward to give our kids the help they need,” he added.

With no state-mandated health education course at the middle or high school level in California, a vast majority of California students do not receive any instruction on mental health. Mental health education is one of the best ways to increase awareness and empower students to seek help, while reducing the stigma associated with mental health challenges.

If signed into law, SB 224 would require that local educational agencies and charter schools which currently offer one or more courses in health education to middle or high schools students also include mental health content in those courses. Educational topics would include but are not limited to the overarching themes and core principles of mental health. SB 224 would also require that the California Department of Education develop a plan to expand mental health instruction in California public schools on or before January 1, 2024.

The measure is supported by a coalition of mental health advocates, including the National Alliance on Mental Illness – California, California Alliance of Child & Family Services, California Association of Student Councils, California Youth Empowerment Network, National Center for Youth Law, and the Children’s Partnership.

“The National Alliance on Mental Illness-California strongly urges Governor Newsom to sign into law Senate Bill 224,” said Jessica Cruz, CEO of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. “Every week, we learn more about the toll that the pandemic has taken on our youth. As the Little Hoover Commission pointed out in their recent report on COVID-19 and Children’s Mental Health, in order to address COVID’s impact on children’s mental health, California needs to center schools as hubs of mental well-being. SB 224 will serve as the map that our children can use to navigate these hubs and access the help that they need. The Governor, who has always

offered compassion and support to those who live with a mental illness or developmental disability, will advance the needs of children's mental health with implementing this new law."

"California students are returning to in-person education, and with that return is the stress that still continues from the ongoing pandemic," said Christine Stoner-Mertz, CEO of the California Alliance of Child and Family Services. "With the impacts of COVID-19 still reeling, we must empower students to seek help while reducing the stigma associated with mental health challenges. The CA Alliance applauds the State Legislature for supporting SB 224 and recognizing that mental health is critical to overall well-being and academic success. We now urge Governor Gavin Newsom to prioritize student mental health and sign SB 224!"

SB 224 was introduced earlier this year and reflects the Senator's dedication to improving mental health outcomes for youth. The Senator previously authored SB 972, which required schools to print the suicide hotline on student identification cards. Additionally, the Senator dedicated three years to pass SB 328, which pushes back school start times for middle and high schools.

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