

2022 -- H 8334

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STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

IN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

JANUARY SESSION, A.D. 2022

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A N A C T

RELATING TO EDUCATION -- SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH ACT OF 2022

Introduced By: Representatives Vella-Wilkinson, Williams, Casimiro, Fenton-Fung, C
Lima, Serpa, O'Brien, Noret, Solomon, and Casey

Date Introduced: June 09, 2022

Referred To: House Finance

It is enacted by the General Assembly as follows:

1 SECTION 1. Title 16 of the General Laws entitled "EDUCATION" is hereby amended by
2 adding thereto the following chapter:

3 CHAPTER 21.8

4 SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH ACT OF 2022

5 **16-21.8-1. Short title.**

6 This chapter shall be known as the "School Mental Health Act of 2022."

7 **16-21.8-2. Legislative findings.**

8 (a) Growing up in an education system with school violence has led to loss of life, lifetime
9 disorders, lack of education, lower incomes, and unsafe workplaces for faculty and staff.

10 (b) According to the American Psychiatric Association, "exposure to media violence
11 increases aggressive behavior in children." The American Pediatric Association agrees. The
12 National Association of School Psychologists maintains mentally healthy children are more
13 successful in school and life.

14 (c) Furthermore, the widespread use and popularity of "first person shooter" videogames
15 could put certain users at greater risk of developing neuropsychiatric illnesses such as depression
16 as well as "statistically significant" grey matter loss in the hippocampus.

17 (d) According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, one in five (5)
18 children and adolescents experience a mental health difficulty during their school years. Examples
19 include stress, anxiety, bullying, family problems, depression, learning disability, and alcohol and

1 substance abuse. Serious mental health complications, such as self-injurious behaviors and suicide,
2 are on the rise, particularly among youth.

3 (e) Schools are crucial for early detection and interruption of persistent aberrant behavior
4 in our youth.

5 (f) Comprehensive school mental health services are essential to creating and sustaining
6 safe schools.

7 (g) Culturally responsive school mental health support that incorporates social emotional
8 learning, mental wellness, behavioral health, resilience and positive connections between students
9 and adults are necessary to create a school culture where students feel safe and empowered to report
10 safety concerns. This is proven to be among the most effective school safety strategies.

11 (h) The state must provide funding for schools to promote mental wellness for all students,
12 identify and address problems before they escalate or become chronic, and provide increasingly
13 intensive, data-driven services for individual students as needed.

14 (i) Access to adequate staffing of school-employed mental health professionals, like school
15 psychologists, is essential to the quality and effectiveness of these services.

16 **16-21.8-3. Site assessment - Development of security plans.**

17 All schools are required to conduct a site assessment and work with their local law
18 enforcement agency to develop security plans to identify existing vulnerabilities and enhance
19 overall school security. While "active shooter" drills are paramount for continued school safety, it
20 is equally important for students to "out-brief" the drill and openly discuss their fears and concerns
21 in a constructive manner with a trained professional or there could be unintentional consequences.

22 **16-21.8-4. Cyberbullying.**

23 (a) Many children and teenagers spend more time engaged with various forms of media
24 than they do in school.

25 (b) According to the website StopBullying.gov: "Cyberbullying' is bullying that takes
26 place over digital devices like cell phones, computers, and tablets. Cyberbullying can occur through
27 SMS, Text, and apps, or online in social media, forums, or gaming where people can view,
28 participate in, or share content. Cyberbullying includes sending, posting, or sharing negative,
29 harmful, false, or mean content about someone else. It can include sharing personal or private
30 information about someone else causing embarrassment or humiliation."

31 (c) It is highly recommended that pediatricians and teachers take a more detailed media
32 history with children or teenagers who demonstrate aggressive behavior; are overweight or obese;
33 use tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs; or have difficulties in school.

34 (i) A US Secret Service study found: "Most students who committed deadly school attacks

1 over the past decade were badly bullied, had a history of disciplinary trouble and their behavior
2 concerned others but was never reported."

3 **16-21.8-5. Improving school mental health programs.**

4 (a) First person shooter video games must not be sold to children under the age of eighteen
5 (18). Parents must be instructed, through meetings and notices as to the detrimental effects of these
6 games on a child's mental health.

7 (b) All pediatricians are required to ask and document the responses to the following
8 questions during the child's or teenager's annual physical exam:

9 (1) How much recreational screen time does your child or teenager consume daily?; and

10 (2) Is there a television set or an Internet-connected electronic device (computer, tablet,
11 cell phone) in the child's or teenager's bedroom?

12 (c) All school committees, governing bodies of charter schools, and school administrators
13 shall receive training about evidence-based health risks associated with unsupervised, unlimited
14 media access and use by children and adolescents, as well as ways to mitigate those risks, such as
15 violence prevention, sex education, and drug use-prevention programs.

16 (d) Delivering mental health services through the school system can address key financial
17 and structural barriers that often prevent children from receiving needed services for mental health
18 problems.

19 (e) Implementing high quality school-based evidence-based mental health programs are
20 critically needed.

21 (f) Teacher in-service trainings, parent meetings, and community/stakeholder focus groups
22 should be regularly conducted to build awareness of the problems being targeted and their impact
23 on students. The importance of student mental health must be addressed on multiple levels.

24 (g) When a full time school clinician is not an available resource, partnerships between
25 mental health/community agencies and schools should be explored.

26 (h) Community partnerships between clinicians, school staff, community organizations and
27 parents will increase buy-in for school driven mental health programs, including mind-body
28 connections.

29 (i) All schools are required to provide multi-lingual parent training and handouts
30 explaining/with age-appropriate tips how to discuss mental health issues such as bullying and
31 suicidal thoughts with their children.

32 **16-21.8-6. Establishment of a state youth advisory council.**

33 (a) There is hereby established a state youth advisory council. The council shall consist of
34 nine (9) members with a background in education, youth sports, pediatric medicine, youth

1 counselling, criminal justice or judicial administration. The council shall be appointed by the
2 governor, with the advice and consent of the senate.

3 (b) The council will pair formerly justice-involved young people with municipal and state
4 officials over an eight (8) week period.

5 (c) The two (2) groups will work to develop joint policy proposals on issues affecting
6 young people, such as coping with trauma, school discipline, and racial and gender inequity.

7 (d) An authentic partnership between youth and adults that facilitates challenging
8 conversations and shared problem solving is a crucial link in the continuum for mentally healthy
9 students.

10 SECTION 2. This act shall take effect on August 1, 2023.

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EXPLANATION
BY THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
OF

A N A C T

RELATING TO EDUCATION -- SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH ACT OF 2022

1 This act establishes the School Mental Health Act of 2022 which would provide resources
2 and establish a youth advisory council to improve safety in our schools.

3 This act would take effect on August 1, 2023.

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