
AB 2508: Reimagining Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services in Schools

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The COVID-19 pandemic certainly exacerbated, and in some ways highlighted, the challenges posed by student mental health issues. The problem has received national attention, with many commenters characterizing it as a crisis. In California specifically, over 284,000 young people cope with major depression, and suicide rates increased significantly between 2019 and 2020. To combat this crisis, Governor Gavin Newsom announced California’s “Master Plan for Kids’ Mental Health” to make it easier for children to access mental health and substance abuse services. The ambitious plan includes a commitment to invest billions of dollars in funding to increase comprehensive mental health and substance abuse services in California schools. The plan also includes the enactment of AB 2508, signed into law on August 18, 2022, which amends several provisions of the California Education Code to update the statutory role and responsibilities of school counselors.

The Governor’s Master Plan for Kid’s Mental Health can be found [here](#).

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted student academic opportunities and connections with both peers and educators, leading to an uptick in anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues in children. For many children, school may be the only available source of mental health services.

Existing California law, Education Code section 49600, authorizes the governing board of a school district to provide a comprehensive educational counseling program for all students. The primary goal of AB 2508 is to encourage and facilitate, rather than simply authorize, governing boards to provide counseling services for all students.

In support of the bill, the Legislature noted that school counselors often serve as “first responders” for students who are depressed or suffering from trauma. Updating the law to align with the work school counselors are already doing is intended to have a positive impact on equity, access, absenteeism, student behavior, tardiness, and safety.

To that end, AB 2508 makes the following changes to the Education Code:

1. Amends Statement of Legislative Intent regarding School Counselor Duties

AB 2508 includes language stating the legislative intent that the duties of school counselors include direct services to students, such as individual and group counseling, risk assessments, crisis response, and postsecondary educational services, as well as indirect services including positive school climate strategies, consultations, and referrals to public and private services.

The statute also emphasizes the need to provide high-quality career guidance at all grade levels.

2. Amends Definition of “Educational Counseling”

The former definition of “educational counseling” was: “specialized services provided by a school counselor possessing a valid credential with a specialization in pupil personnel services (PPS) who is assigned specific times to directly counsel pupils.”

AB 2508 amends the definition by recasting the school counselor role as follows: “specialized services provided by a school counselor possessing a valid credential with a specialization in pupil personnel services (PPS) who **directly counsels pupils and implements equitable school programs and services that support pupils in their academic development, social emotional development, and college and career readiness.**”

The emphasis in the changed language is on the direct provision of services as well as equitable programming.

This bill also adds optional educational counseling duties to include advising pupils on promotion and graduation requirements, satisfying A-G requirements for admission to the University of California and California State University systems, providing financial aid information, providing mental and behavior health services to reduce the stigma of such services, and providing training to staff in the recognition of mental health warning signs.

This new and broadened definition of “educational counseling” better aligns with the current practices of school counselors as well as the Legislature’s expectations regarding equitable services and programming for all students.

Takeaways

By urging governing boards to provide expanded educational counseling services, including direct services and equitable school programs for all students, as addressed in AB 2508, the Legislature seeks to better address the mental health crisis being faced by California students. School districts should evaluate their current programs and policies to ensure they are aligned with this guidance.

If you have questions about AB 2508 or need more information regarding student mental health or educational counseling services, please contact the authors of this Client News Brief or an attorney at one of our [eight offices](#) located statewide. You can also visit our [website](#), follow us on [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#) or download our [mobile app](#).

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