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Pa. House bills address mental health services, education in public schools

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Apr 25, 2022

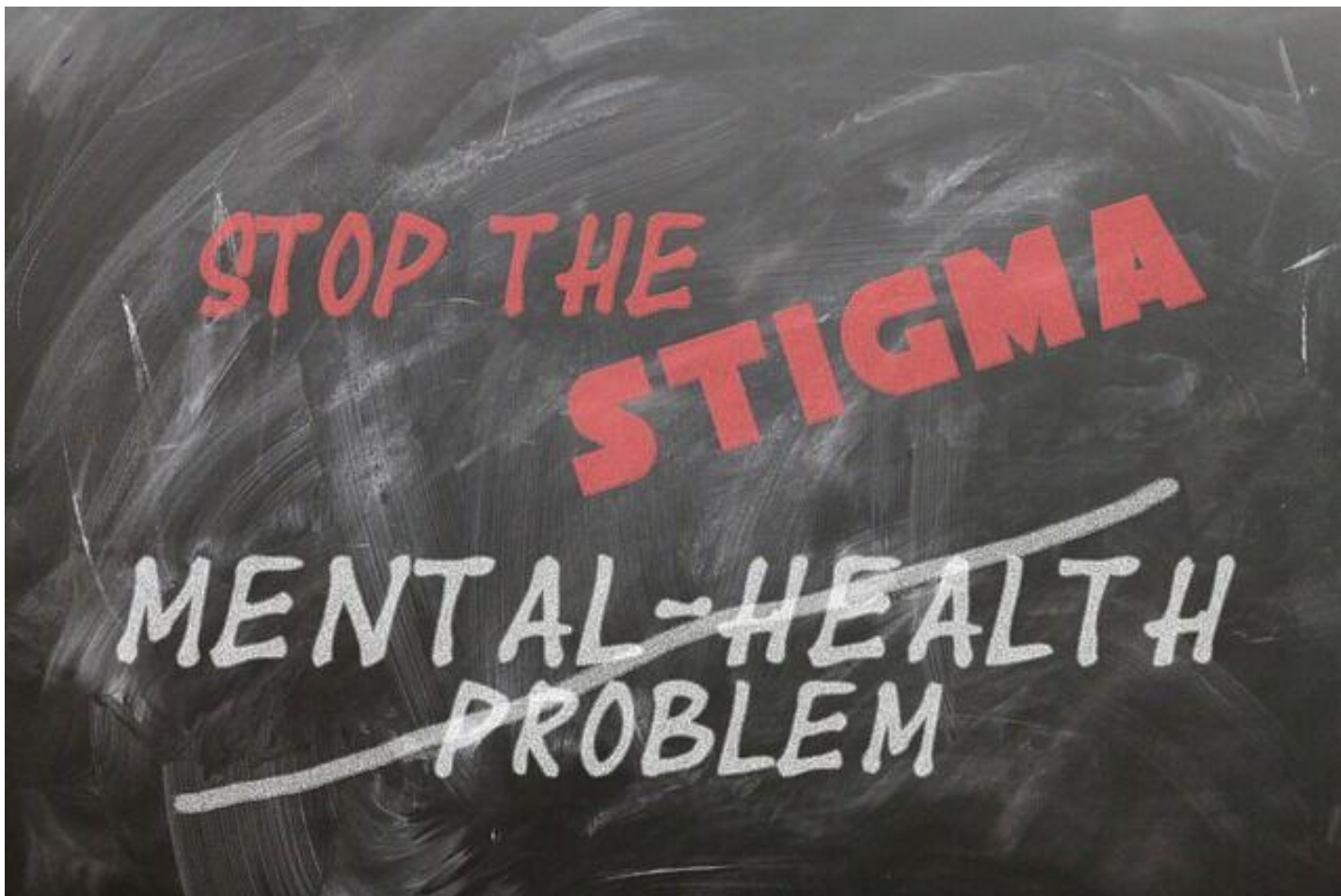


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HARRISBURG — A package of bills aimed at improving mental health services and education at public schools moved to the House floor on Monday.

One bill permits school districts to contract with a third-party licensed provider for mental health counselors based inside school buildings, and establishes a grant program to help fund this initiative.

The second task Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) to develop a model mental health curriculum, while the third calls on the department to initiate a study on how mental health education is currently offered in public schools.

The bills moved out of the House Education Committee with near unanimous support.

State Rep. Aaron Kaufer, R-Luzerne, proposed the legislation. He cited study results published in a report by the American Psychological Association (APA) that showed the number of school-aged kids seeking help at emergency departments for mental health crises jumped in the first eight months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another survey of 3,300 high school students conducted in spring 2020 found that nearly a third of them felt unhappy and depressed much more than usual, according to the APA report.

“When there aren’t sufficient mental health staff in the district, educators don’t have a place to refer kids who need support,” Kaufer told committee members.

Citing data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention found that for 2020, suicide was the third leading cause of death for people ages 10-24 in Pennsylvania.

Kaufer’s proposal for licensed third-party providers and grant funding requires evidence-based programming to include fostering a positive school climate, crisis management, communication skills and suicide prevention.

The providers, working inside the schools in established offices, would interact directly with students. Among their duties, they’d be asked to conduct early intervention when students exhibit grief, anxiety and anger or suffered trauma.

PDE would establish the School-Based Mental Health Services Pilot Grant Program. It would award up to 35 grants annually beginning next school year. The funding must be used to supplement, not supplant, existing mental health services.

The curriculum would be instituted in all grades, kindergarten through 12th. Mental health training, four hours every five years, would be rolled into a district’s professional development plans. Nonpublic schools could acquire the curriculum on request.

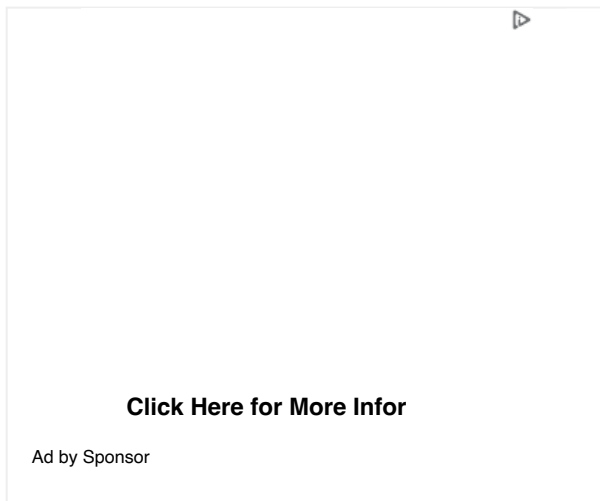
Since the grant funding might not be enough to cover an entire school district, state Rep. Mark Longiotti, D-Mercer, suggested he'd submit a floor amendment to ensure notice of services are directed to families in the specific buildings in which they're offered, seeking to avoid district-level confusion.

Rep. Andrew Lewis, R-Dauphin, voted against the curriculum bill, saying he felt it needed more work. He sought more information as to how it was determined to be a K-12 program rather than beginning in a later grade. Lewis said he fully supports providing such care in school settings but wanted to learn more.

"We see these behaviors in preschool. For the public school system and for this to be in place, starting at kindergarten, it is absolutely the best decision," said Rep. Gina Curry, D-Delaware, a former behavioral health professional.

Rep. Barbara Gleim, R-Cumberland, too, said legislation on the in-school mental health supports as well as a new curriculum needed further exploration. She voted against both.

No other dissenting votes were cast. All three bills move to the House floor for further consideration.



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