

STUDENT HEALTH

New law on mental health curriculum goes into effect with start of the new year



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3 COMMENTS



Mental health education would be a required part of health classes under a new law that went into effect Jan. 1, 2022.

Alison Yin for EdSource

Health classes in California high schools will soon cover more than nutrition and exercise. Thanks to a new law that went into effect Jan. 1, students will learn about depression, schizophrenia, mood disorders and other serious mental health conditions.

Senate Bill 224 requires all school districts that offer health classes to include mental health as part of the curriculum. The California Department of Education has until Jan. 1, 2023 to incorporate mental health into the state standards, and districts have until Jan. 1, 2024 to begin teaching the new material.

“Hopefully this will change lives,” said State Sen. Anthony Portantino, D-La Canada Flintridge, sponsor of the bill. “That ninth-grader who’s inspired by a health class may go on to save a peer’s life. Everyone one of us touches so many people in our lives, we see this as having an exponential benefit.”

Health classes are not mandatory in California high schools, but about 60% of districts offer a health course that includes lessons on nutrition, exercise, substance abuse, sexual health, injury prevention, healthy relationships and other health-related topics.

The standards also include mental health, but the new legislation takes the subject a step further, to cover more serious conditions such as schizophrenia, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and bipolar disorder. The curriculum will explore causes and symptoms of mental illness, as well as treatment and how to advocate for friends or family members who need help. Substance abuse and its relationship to mental health will also be part of the curriculum.

No additional funding is available through the bill, but the financial impact is expected to be minimal. The California Department of Education will create the new curriculum, and schools that don't already offer health classes will not be required to add them.

Portantino, whose brother died of suicide a decade ago, has long advocated for mental health education. The new law, he said, will empower young people to talk about mental illness, recognize the signs and provide help for those who need it.

“Teenagers are much more likely to listen to someone at school than a lecture from mom or dad,” he said. “Our hope is that this encourages that peer-to-peer advocacy and support, and it will have wide-reaching effects.”

Even before the pandemic, young people were facing myriad mental health challenges due to social media, school shootings, social injustice, racial inequity and increasing uncertainty about the future. In 2019, a third of high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, according to the [Centers for Disease Control](#). After nearly two years of Covid, those feelings have intensified for many students, especially those who've felt isolated or struggled with distance learning and economic hardship.

A California youth advocacy group called Generation Up was a strong supporter of SB 224. Alvin Lee, the group's executive director, said mental health is a priority for young people and education is a good way to help students cope with their own and their friends' emotional struggles.

“Mental health is one of the biggest conversations happening right now,” said Lee, a freshman at Claremont McKenna College. “The research is pretty clear. The more mental health education early on, the better the outcomes later. ... Our hope is that this prepares the next generation of students to talk about and deal with mental health issues, their own as well as others’”

Last month, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issued a stark warning about the mental health of young people, urging schools, health care companies and other institutions to do a better job supporting young people's emotional health and self-esteem.

Access to high-quality counseling, instruction on stress management and emotional regulation, limits on social media and video games, and access to physical health care are among the surgeon general's recommendations. Supporting families who are struggling with poverty and inequities is also key, he said.

“Mental health challenges in children, adolescents, and young adults are real, and they are widespread,” Murthy said. “But most importantly, they are treatable, and often preventable.... Our obligation to act is not just medical — it's moral.”

The California Association of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance instructors strongly supported the bill, saying that even though mental health is part of existing curriculum, it's not consistent across school districts and sometimes teachers aren't adequately prepared to teach it.

Hopefully, this bill will help fix that, said William Potter, the group's president.

“Many (of our) members instruct mental health topics in schools, and we know how important this education is for young people. It can literally save lives,” he

said. “However... many school districts do not have qualified health teachers who are trained to teach this content and it would be great to see that change.”

Jessica Cruz, executive director of the California chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, said SB 224 is a good start in reducing the stigma of mental illness and encouraging students, teachers and families to talk about the issue.

“We’re happy this isn’t one-and-done,” she said. “We wanted to make sure it’s robust, ingrained in the curriculum and cumulative over time, so students really get a chance to understand and identify mental health disorders and know how to access resources.”

Ideally, she said, it’s the beginning of more comprehensive and substantial mental health education in schools, beginning in kindergarten.

“My hope is that eventually, this curriculum will get into every school in California and the nation,” she said. “It’s not just for the benefit of students, but their families and teachers, too. It’s for the entire community.”

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