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**SENATE BILL 5126**

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**State of Washington 69th Legislature 2025 Regular Session**

**By** Senators Nobles and Cortes; by request of Superintendent of Public Instruction

AN ACT Relating to establishing a statewide network for student mental and behavioral health to maintain, expand, and provide oversight to Washington's school-based mental and behavioral health system for children and adolescents across the state; adding new sections to chapter 28A.300 RCW; adding a new section to chapter 28A.310 RCW; and creating a new section.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  The legislature recognizes that many children and students struggle with mental health, substance use, and behavioral health challenges that impact their ability to engage in learning and develop pathways to wellness and success. The mental and behavioral health crisis for children and youth in the United States has reached a critical point. The legislature also recognizes that behavioral health and wellness supports for K-12 students in Washington are fragmented, with roles and responsibilities assigned across several local and state agencies. The department of health, the Washington state health care authority, and the office of the superintendent of public instruction all play significant but distinct roles, as do regional educational service districts, local school districts, and community partners. Nonetheless, schools are often community hubs making them a natural setting for prevention, early intervention, and service delivery related to mental and behavioral health so that students can fully access their right to a basic education.

The legislature also recognizes the investments made to support student behavioral health and well-being and that despite those investments, school districts lack the dedicated funding and coordinated supports necessary to deploy comprehensive supports and direct services across the behavioral health continuum for their students.

Therefore, it is the intent of the legislature to create a connected statewide network for student mental and behavioral health to maintain, expand, and provide oversight to Washington's school-based mental and behavioral health system for children and adolescents across the state.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 28A.300 RCW to read as follows:

(1) Subject to the availability of amounts appropriated for this specific purpose, the office of the superintendent of public instruction, in collaboration with local education agencies, the Washington association of educational service districts, and other state agencies as applicable, including the health care authority, the department of health, and the department of children, youth, and families, shall (a) establish strategic direction and goals for statewide programming to strengthen the capacity of local education agencies to meet the recognition, initial screening, and response requirements outlined in RCW 28A.320.127 and (b) provide state-level coordination to help schools better promote mental well-being as well as identify and connect students to behavioral health supports in school and interconnected community settings.

(2) At a minimum, the state-level coordination and strategic direction and goals mandated in subsection (1) of this section must include:

(a) In alignment with the Washington integrated student supports protocol, tools, guidance, and supports for school districts to offer coordinated student supports related to behavioral health, including prevention and awareness, student engagement, and student access to the full continuum of school-based behavioral health services;

(b) Guidance and streamline processes to maximize access to state and federal resources;

(c) Coordination with training and technical assistance entities who support local education agencies in designing, funding, and implementing comprehensive student behavioral health supports based on the tools, guidance, and supports established in (a) of this subsection;

(d) Evidence-based practices, including practices aligned with the Washington integrated student supports protocol that support mental and behavioral health services in school districts;

(e) Coordination with organizations representing school board members, district and building-level leadership, educators, and other school staff to support school district implementation of chapter 129, Laws of 2021;

(f) Support of local education agencies through guidance and technical assistance in facilitating student access to mental and behavioral health supports and reduction of barriers to school-based behavioral health services;

(g) Resources to support local education agencies in deploying student school-based substance use and behavioral health screening, intervention, and referral activities in alignment to promising and evidence-based practices;

(h) Foundational school substance abuse prevention and intervention resources to address the health and well-being impacts of drug use, including education to promote behaviors that positively influence student behavioral health; and

(i) A review process for continuous improvement of services and monitoring of the impact and alignment of statewide efforts related to student behavioral health, including the regional school safety centers established in RCW 28A.310.510 and the regional school-based mental and behavioral health student assistance program established in section 3 of this act.

(3) Subject to funds appropriated, the office of the superintendent of public instruction shall support and implement elements from the strategic plan developed by the strategic plan advisory group established by section 1, chapter 76, Laws of 2022.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 28A.310 RCW to read as follows:

(1) Subject to the availability of amounts appropriated for this specific purpose, the regional school-based mental and behavioral health student assistance program is established. The purpose of the program is to support the office of the superintendent of public instruction through increased regional deployment of behavioral and mental health supports, including substance abuse prevention and intervention services in communities with limited access to behavioral and mental health services across Washington state. The Washington association of educational service districts shall provide overall coordination of the program across the regions.

(2) At a minimum, each regional program must:

(a) Work in conjunction with the office of the superintendent of public instruction as prescribed in section 2 of this act and permitted under RCW 28A.310.470 to form a statewide network for student mental and behavioral health;

(b) Provide aligned student behavioral health assistance prevention and intervention services in schools by:

(i) Supporting multidisciplinary school teams for referral and systems improvement coordination;

(ii) Conducting screening, referral, and care coordination activities;

(iii) Conducting internal capacity and fidelity assessments to support systems improvement and continued sustained implementation efforts at the local education agency level;

(iv) Providing individual and group intervention services using evidence-based practices;

(v) Delivering and supporting the local education agency in adoption and development of mental health and substance use classroom education inclusive of prevention topics, such as opiates, vaping, and mental health promotion;

(vi) Supporting behavioral health awareness campaigns;

(vii) Providing and/or supporting parent and community learning events; and

(viii) Providing behavioral health treatment services in regions where available;

(c) Support school districts in providing direct student screening in both mental health and substance abuse;

(d) Collaborate as necessary and appropriate with regional school safety centers required by RCW 28A.310.510 by sharing information and student assistance resources to ensure alignment of behavioral health supports across the region; and

(e) Support behavioral health career pathways through hiring new nonlicensed staff who receive training, supervision, and internship opportunities to explore career pathways in behavioral health. For educational service districts that are licensed as behavioral health agencies this may include hiring licensure candidates and licensed staff that would like to pursue a career in school-based behavioral health.

(3) Educational service districts that are licensed as behavioral health agencies may pilot the integration of telehealth services and provide in-person treatment services to support students in need of more focused mental health treatment support.

(4) The Washington association of education service districts shall support the regional programs by:

(a) Establishing consistent criteria for school participation in the program;

(b) Establishing an overall evaluation and reporting of program outcomes from across the regions;

(c) Engaging with regional programs and providers in the administration of validated capacity assessments to measure action plans for the ability to sustain implementation efforts;

(d) Supporting the office of the superintendent of public instruction in coordinating statewide data collection and progress monitoring; and

(e) Submitting an annual report to the office of the superintendent of public instruction summarizing:

(i) Services provided by each regional program;

(ii) Other related mental and behavioral health services provided by each educational service district, including fees for service schedules; and

(iii) Barriers and opportunities for deployment of behavioral and mental health supports including, but not limited to, student impacts, local workforce needs, and other recommendations to support greater state-level coordination.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 28A.300 RCW to read as follows:

(1) Subject to the availability of amounts appropriated for this specific purpose, the office of the superintendent of public instruction shall establish a grant program to support school districts in developing and implementing a plan for recognition, screening, and response to emotional or behavioral distress in students as required by RCW 28A.320.127.

(2) To the greatest extent possible, the office of the superintendent of public instruction shall pair grantees with the state and regional support structures established in sections 2 and 3 of this act, the state school safety center established in RCW 28A.300.630, and the regional school safety centers established in RCW 28A.310.510 to support local education agency planning, connect local education agency staff to effective training and technical assistance, and ensure community-center implementation.

(3) Funds may be used to support training, develop model school safety policies and procedures, and identify and implement best practices in school-based mental and behavioral health.

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