

H.817

Introduced by Representatives Berbeco of Winooski, Bos-Lun of Westminster,
Holcombe of Norwich, and McFaun of Barre Town

Referred to Committee on

Date:

Subject: Health; mental health; education; peer supports; literacy

Statement of purpose of bill as introduced: This bill proposes a mental health
and substance use disorder literacy curriculum for schools. This bill further
proposes to establish a pilot peer-to-peer mental health support program in
schools.

An act relating to mental health support and substance use disorder
prevention in schools

It is hereby enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Vermont:

* * * Mental Health and Substance Misuse Literacy * * *

Sec. 1. 16 V.S.A. § 914 is added to read:

§ 914. MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE MISUSE LITERACY

(a) Each supervisory union or school district shall select a curriculum to
increase awareness about mental health and substance misuse challenges
facing youth throughout the State. Each selected curriculum shall include
information on:

1 (1) the connection and importance of mental health to an individual's
2 physical health and overall well-being;

3 (2) resources and tools for maintaining mental wellness, including
4 evidence-based practices used to overcome mental health and substance misuse
5 challenges;

6 (3) signs and symptoms of common mental health and substance misuse
7 challenges and strategies for responding to those signs and symptoms;

8 (4) the prevalence of mental health and substance misuse challenges
9 across all populations;

10 (5) common mental health and substance misuse conditions and
11 evidence-based treatments for common conditions; and

12 (6) how to seek assistance or support for a mental health or substance
13 misuse challenge in school and the community at large.

14 (b) The Department of Mental Health shall post guidance for identifying
15 evidence-informed curricula and best practices that supervisory unions and
16 school districts may use in selecting a curriculum pursuant to this section.

17 (c) Each supervisory union or school district shall make its selected
18 curriculum available to parents and guardians and shall share the curriculum
19 with any organizations serving youth in the community.

* * * Peer-to-Peer Mental Health Support in Schools * * *

Sec. 2. PEER-TO-PEER MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT PROGRAM

(a) It is the intent of the General Assembly to:

(1) define best practices and develop statewide standards for youth peer-to-peer support programs; and

(2) strengthen protective factors among Vermont youth and prevent future mental health challenges and substance misuse.

(b) The Department of Mental Health shall establish a four-year pilot program for the distribution of grants that fund peer-to-peer mental health support programs in public and approved independent schools. Peer-to-peer mental health support programs shall enable students to provide and receive peer support and coaching from other students in relation to mental health challenges. Each program shall have the oversight of a certified peer support provider and guidance from a school-based mental health service provider.

(c) The Department shall:

(1) execute a subcontract for youth outreach;

(2) host at least two listening sessions to engage children and youth;

(3) convene an advisory board to inform the design of the peer-to-peer pilot program established by this section;

1 (4) develop a request for proposals on or before January 1, 2027, to
2 identify secondary schools in Vermont for participation in the peer-to-peer
3 pilot program established by this section; and

4 (5) accept grant applications for the peer-to-peer program established by
5 this section on a rolling basis beginning on February 1, 2027.

6 (d) In awarding grants pursuant to this section, the Department shall give
7 priority to applications submitted by a public or an approved independent
8 school that:

9 (1) propose using the grant for a peer-to-peer mental health program
10 with a suicide prevention component; or

11 (2) are located in an area of the State that has had high rates of suicide
12 or has experienced a recent traumatic event.

13 (e) School employees assisting with a peer-to-peer mental health support
14 program that is awarded a grant pursuant to this section shall receive training
15 in the following:

16 (1) empathetic listening;

17 (2) enhancing protective mental health factors;

18 (3) recognizing and appropriately responding to risk factors and warning
19 signs associated with mental health and substance misuse challenges, including
20 co-occurring challenges;

- (1) student participation in the program;
- (2) the efficacy of the training provided to participating certified peer support specialists and school employees assisting with the program;
- (3) the percentage of students participating in the program who reported improved mental health outcomes; and
- (4) the number of participating students connected with professional mental health services due to program participation.

This act shall take effect on July 1, 2026.