TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES:

The Committee on Health Care to which was referred House Bill No. 817 entitled "An act relating to mental health support and substance use disorder prevention in schools" respectfully reports that it has considered the same and recommends that the bill be amended by striking out all after the enacting clause and inserting in lieu thereof the following:

Sec. 1. 18 V.S.A. § 7209 is added to read:

§ 7209. MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY AND PEER SUPPORT INITIATIVES

(a) Purpose. This section aims to strengthen protective factors among Vermont's youth, increase mental health literacy within school communities, and expand access to developmentally appropriate peer-to-peer initiatives that promote early identification of mental health challenges.

(b) Mental health literacy training.

(1) To the extent funds are available, including through federal block grants, a public school may apply to the Department of Mental Health or designee for a grant to provide mental health literacy training to educators and other school personnel. Mental health literacy training shall include topics related to working with youth in an educational setting, such as:

(A) information about mental health conditions and symptoms;

(B) understanding common youth mental health and substance use challenges;

(C) reducing stigma and promoting supportive school environments;

(D) strengthening protective factors and help-seeking behaviors;

(E) recognizing risk factors and warning signs;

(F) responding to students with empathy and appropriate boundaries;

(G) information about mental health treatments; and

(H) accessing mental health resources or services throughout the State.

(2) This section shall not be construed to require the adoption of a specific curriculum or instructional content.

(c) Peer-to-peer mental health support.

(1) A school may establish a peer-to-peer mental health program that:

(A) provides structured opportunities for student peer connection in a supervised school setting;

(B) is overseen by a designated educator or school personnel member, who is not required to be a licensed, certified, or rostered mental health professional under title 26; and

(C) emphasizes school and community-based resources and how to access professional services when additional support is needed.

(2) The Department of Mental Health shall provide oversight and guidance to any school seeking to establish or maintain a peer-to-peer mental health program pursuant to this subsection.

(3) A peer-to-peer program established pursuant to this subsection shall be supportive and nonclinical. It shall not replace mental health services provided by a mental health professional licensed, certified, or rostered pursuant to title 26.

(d) Developmentally appropriate guidance. For any mental health literacy or peer-to-peer support programs established pursuant to this section, the Department of Mental Health shall develop age-appropriate guidance that:

(1) in an elementary school setting, emphasizes social and emotional development, peer connection, and strengthening protective factors; and

(2) in a middle and high school setting, emphasizes protective factors, reducing stigma, and supporting students in recognizing and appropriately responding to risk factors and warning signs associated with mental health and substance use challenges, including co-occurring challenges.

(e) Reporting. Annually, on or before January 15, the Department of Mental Health shall submit a written report to the House Committee on Health Care and to the Senate Committee on Health and Welfare evaluating the effectiveness of programming established pursuant to this section, including aggregated information on:

(1) the number of schools requesting and receiving the Department's support;

(2) the number of students, educators, and school personnel participating in programming pursuant to this section; and

(3) findings and recommendations regarding mental health literacy and peer-to-peer programming.

Sec. 2. EFFECTIVE DATE

This act shall take effect on July 1, 2026.

and that after passage the title of the bill be amended to read: "An act relating to mental health literacy and peer-to-peer supports in schools"

(Committee vote: _____)

_____

Representative _____

FOR THE COMMITTEE