**A** **BILL**

TO AMEND THE CODE OF LAWS OF SOUTH CAROLINA, 1976, TO ENACT THE “SOUTH CAROLINA SCHOOL SAFE SPACE ACT” BY ADDING SECTION 59‑66‑50 SO AS TO CREATE THE “SOUTH CAROLINA SAFE‑SPACE SENTINEL PROGRAM” TO ENHANCE THE SAFETY AND MENTAL HEALTH IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS BY ENSURING EACH PUBLIC SCHOOL SHALL HAVE ONE EMPLOYEE TRAINED IN CERTAIN MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING AND RELATED SKILLS FOR EVERY TWO HUNDRED STUDENTS IN THE SCHOOL; TO PROVIDE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE TRAINING, CERTIFICATION, AND DUTIES OF THESE EMPLOYEES, AND TO REQUIRE RELATED MINIMAL, BUT VITAL, TRAINING FOR ALL PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS, AMONG OTHER THINGS.

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina:

SECTION 1. This act must be known and may be cited as the “South Carolina School Safe Space Act”.

SECTION 2. Chapter 66, Title 59 of the 1976 Code is amended by adding:

“Section 59‑66‑50. (A) There is created the ‘South Carolina Safe‑Space Sentinel Program’ to enhance the safety and mental health in public schools.

(B) Beginning with the 2020‑2021 School Year, each public school shall ensure that its staff has at least one ‘safe‑space sentinel’ from among its current staff for every two hundred students enrolled in the school. Each semester a school must demonstrate its compliance with the requirements of this subsection by providing a report of its total student population and the number of safe‑space sentinels on staff with the State Department of Education. If during the school year a school ceases to be in compliance due to personnel changes or otherwise, it shall notify the department of the status change and has sixty days to remedy the deficiency.

(C)(1) The role of safe‑space sentinels is to facilitate the improvement of the safety and mental health of the student population by:

(a) being a know source of advice and support for students seeking help with mental or emotional problems;

(b) being a known source students or other school personnel may contact with concerns about mental or emotional issues potentially being experienced by another student or other school personnel; and

(c) being a proactive advocate for the identification of students or school personnel who might pose a risk to themselves or the school population due to emotional or mental health issues.

(2) In carrying out their responsibilities under the provisions of item (1), safe‑space sentinels shall serve as front‑line informal counselors and a means for connecting students and school personnel with certified guidance counselors, school resource officers, school safety coordinators, and other appropriate sources of assistance based on the particular needs of a given situation as identified by the safe‑space sentinel.

(D)(1) Before December 1, 2019, the State Department of Education shall develop a process that school personnel must complete to apply for certification as safe‑school sentinels.

(2) Before January 1, 2020, the State Department of Education shall develop an online training program that public school employees who have applied to serve as safe‑space sentinels first must complete. The training program must include comprehensive training on the following topics:

(a) identifying and assessing mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, among others, and precipitators of safety and mental health issues such as bullying, domestic violence, and trauma, among others.

(b) appropriate responses to the determinations of such mental health issues;

(c) basic counseling techniques; and

(d) other related topics that the superintendent considers appropriate.

(3) The department also shall develop an online test, which must be offered at no cost and must be administered by school guidance counselors, that school personnel who are not certified guidance counselors must successfully complete to serve as safe‑space sentinels. Students who pass the test automatically are registered with the State Department of Education as safe‑space sentinels for two years after completion of the test and submission of an application to the department. Once a person is registered as a safe‑space sentinel, he may serve in that capacity at a public school, at the discretion of the principal of that school, and only may serve as a safe‑space sentinel at one school at a time. A public school shall notify the department if the registered safe‑space sentinels are serving at the school each school year before the safe‑space sentinel may serve at the school. A principal who authorizes a safe‑space sentinel to serve in that capacity at the principal’s school has sole authority to rescind that authorization at any time for any reason. The decision of a principal to rescind such an authorization is not subject to appeal.

(E) All teachers during their annual in‑service training would have a five‑minute overview of the safe‑school sentinel program so that they will be better able to avail themselves of the services of safe‑school sentinels by understanding who they are and what they do.

(F) The names and cellphone contact information of each safe‑school sentinel in a school must be given to all school personnel, students, and families, and must be posted at various appropriate locations around the school campus so as to improve access to safe‑school sentinels.”

SECTION 3. This act takes effect upon approval by the Governor.

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