

March 18, 2024

The Honorable James C. Ramos
State Assembly
1021 O Street, Suite 8310
Sacramento, CA 95814



Re: Support for AB 2711 (Ramos)

Dear Assemblymember Ramos:

The California Youth Empowerment Network (CAYEN) is pleased to sponsor AB 2711 (Ramos), legislation aimed at implementing a public health strategy to assist youth with substance use needs. This legislation prioritizes keeping youth engaged in their education, establishes a community support system, and facilitates access to behavioral health services and resources.

The California Youth Empowerment Network (CAYEN) is a youth-led statewide network comprised of TAY Action Teams and CAYEN Board members which engages, empowers and represents Transitional Age Youth (TAY), ages 15-26, in mental health advocacy on issues that directly affect TAY. Since CAYEN's inception in 2006, CAYEN has taken many forms of action to empower TAY in their personal lives and spark progressive change in public policy.

The I AM Collaborative, a subprogram of CAYEN, empowers LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC TAY to advocate for substance use prevention through social change campaigns and multimedia advocacy art in Sacramento and Los Angeles. The culmination of their advocacy efforts influenced the language incorporated in AB 2711. A resounding consensus among youth emphasized the significance of integrating harm reduction strategies into our spectrum of care and enhancing accessibility to behavioral health services. The current use of suspension and expulsion to address substance use is punitive in nature and is in direct conflict with what youth are asking for.

Below you'll see testimony from youth in our program. We have removed the youth's name to protect their identity.

"I hope to see workshops/counseling events that directly work with individuals who suffer from a substance use disorder. I feel that viewing their situation through a lens of empathy and care provides more help to their situation than simply punishing them for indulging in something they are not allowed to. Additionally, many of my friends who do use substances have had trouble with their families and home life, so it only makes sense to approach their situations with compassion and hope for their healing."

- San Diego Youth, 18 years old

www.CA-YEN.org



“My school does not discuss substance use very much or the supports in place for substance use, which does not allow students to feel safe to get support.”

- San Diego Youth, 16 years old

Currently, under California Education Code §48900, school officials possess the discretion to determine whether to suspend or expel a student for drug use and/or possession on school grounds. However, a standardized protocol for offering support to youth and addressing the root causes of their substance use is lacking. Moreover, administrative discretion has resulted in a disproportionate impact on certain demographics: more than 59 percent of drug-related suspensions involve boys, over 83 percent affect socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and approximately 82 percent involve youth of color.¹ These suspensions deprive youth of valuable instructional time, thereby heightening the risk of academic disengagement, dropout, and involvement in the juvenile justice system.² Education policies such as these predicated on the belief that abstinence works have failed to provide the youth the proper services and supports.

AB 2711 would require schools to use a public health framework before employing suspension and expulsion policies. By implementing this approach, this bill will help stem drug use and addiction, ensuring all students receive the help they want and need, remain in school, graduate, and thrive. For these reasons, we support AB 2711. If you have any questions, or if CAYEN can provide assistance on this bill or any other behavioral health legislation, please do not hesitate to contact me at dthirakul@mhac.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. Thirakul", is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

Danny Thirakul
Public Policy Coordinator

¹ Children Now Analysis of [California Department of Education](#) Suspension and Expulsion Data, 2021-22.

² [The Civil Rights Project](#) 2018