

The Honorable Gavin Newsom  
Governor of California  
California State Capitol, First Floor  
Sacramento, California 95814



**RE: Senate Bill 274 (Skinner), Suspensions and Expulsions: Willful Defiance, Interventions and Support– Request for Signature**

Dear Governor Newsom:

On behalf of the California Youth Empowerment Network (CAYEN), I am writing in **strong support** of **Senate Bill (SB) 274**, which seeks to improve student success rates, create a more supportive academic environment, eliminate suspensions and expulsions for tardiness, truancy, or students otherwise absent, and encourage schools to consider alternatives to suspensions and expulsions by extending the “willful defiance” sunset for students (grades 6-8th) and extending the prohibition of those suspensions to students (8-12th) through 2029. SB 274 aims to keep California students in schools while protecting the most vulnerable student populations from harmful and discriminatory school climates.

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. One area of interest is how we support and engage youth with mental and behavioral health needs in learning institutions.

“Willful defiance” is broadly defined as defying the authority of school staff. Some examples of “defiance” include wearing a hat, not having a belt, or falling asleep in class. Defiance suspensions contribute to racial inequality in schools and are detrimental to the academic and personal development of our transitional age youth.

Students of color, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ students are disproportionately suspended for low-level subjective behavioral disruptions, classified as “willful defiance”. These suspensions cause students to lose significant instruction time. Data made available by the California Department of Education shows Black students are suspended 3 times more than White students for defiance. Black and Latino boys in special education are 6% of students in California, yet they account for 16% of defiance suspensions across the State.

The simple act of ending willful defiance suspensions for all public-school children recognizes the unique developmental vulnerabilities of youth, especially youth of color and youth with disabilities, by creating a school environment where every child can learn, thrive, and succeed. Our education system is meant to challenge our youth to think critically,

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independently, and seek truth. To suspend our youth for willful defiance such as “talking back” does not provide learning opportunities. In fact, research demonstrates that suspending students for any reason increases the likelihood that the student will have future involvement with the justice system. Research also shows that positive behavior intervention, support models, and restorative justice are more effective than suspension at managing behavioral expression.

For these reasons, we respectfully request your signature for **SB 274**. If you or your staff have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at [dthirakul@mhac.org](mailto:dthirakul@mhac.org), or Mental Health America of California’s Interim Director of Public Policy, Karen Vicari at [kvicari@mhacofca.org](mailto:kvicari@mhacofca.org).

In Community,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'D Thirakul', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Danny Thirakul  
Public Policy Coordinator  
California Youth Empowerment Network