

March 22, 2021

The Honorable Anthony Portantino  
Chair, Senate Committee on Appropriations  
State Capitol, Room 2206  
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Senate Bill 14 (Portantino) Excused Absences: Youth Mental and Behavioral Health - SUPPORT

**Dear Chair Portantino,**

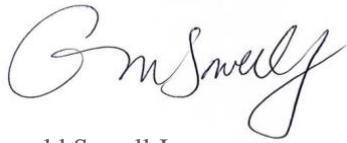
NextGen California is pleased to support your SB 14, which will add absences for the benefit of a student's mental or behavioral health to the list of excused absences, placing such absences on par with physical health excused absences. The bill also requires local educational agencies to identify evidence-based training programs to assist their school employees in helping pupils with mental and behavioral health issues. Addressing the issue of mental health is at the forefront of much of the NextGen work and we see SB 14 as a vital step to ensuring that students' mental health, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, is recognized as a crucial component of their ability to thrive academically.

Research conducted by Born This Way Foundation found that young people overwhelmingly care about the issue of mental health – with approximately nine in ten describing it as a priority. However, about half of those surveyed say they rarely, if ever, talk about their mental health with their peers, parents, or other adults. Collectively, as a society, we need to do a better job understanding the mental health needs of our youth, recognize early warning signs of possible crisis, and learn how to respond effectively. This is especially important for educators who spend hours every day with their students and are uniquely positioned to identify those students who might be struggling with a mental health issue.

Programs like Youth Mental Health First Aid teach educators, school personnel, and others who are in regular contact with youth to understand, identify, and respond to signs of mental health and substance abuse concerns. Additionally, Teen Mental Health First Aid teaches high schoolers about common mental health and substance use challenges, what they can do to support their own mental health, and how to help a friend who is struggling. Such training equips young people with the knowledge and skills they need to have supportive conversations and engage with a responsible and trusted adult to assist, as necessary.

SB 14 is a critically important piece of legislation as it rightly elevates mental and behavioral health as a reason for an excused absence, provides students with an avenue to care for their mental health without fear of stigmatization, and enables school employees to access the tools they need to support their students. For the above reasons, we are pleased to support your measure.

Sincerely,



Arnold Sowell Jr.

Executive Director, NextGen California