

BILL ANALYSIS

Senate Research Center
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S.B. 532
By: West
Subcommittee on Higher Education
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As Filed

AUTHOR'S / SPONSOR'S STATEMENT OF INTENT

Texas is currently in severe mental health professional shortage. As a stark example of the state's mental health professional shortage, Texas' ratio of public school students to counselors is 390-to-1, while the American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of 250-to-1.

During this time of mental health professional shortage, the state is embarking on one of its greatest periods of growth in recent memory as it relates to state-supported or operated mental health care facilities. In addition to the construction of a new state mental hospital in Dallas approved by the 87th Texas Legislature during its Third Called Session, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission is looking at further state hospital expansion or creation, including in rural areas of Texas and in other urban centers, including Fort Worth.

Texas cannot fill its unmet need for mental health professionals without drastic improvements in methods of recruitment and loan repayment for mental health professionals.

S.B. 532 will reduce from five years to three years the number of years required for a person to participate in the state's Mental Health Professional Loan Repayment Program and see the program through to completion. Currently, mental health professionals have deemed the five-year completion horizon detrimental to the overall success of the program. It is believed that decreasing the time period required for the program from five years to three will increase participation in the program, and incentivize more students to pursue mental health professions, knowing that a relatively simple pathway exists for them to pay off their student loans through service in high-need areas.

As proposed, S.B. 532 amends current law relating to repayment of certain mental health professional education loans.

RULEMAKING AUTHORITY

This bill does not expressly grant any additional rulemaking authority to a state officer, institution, or agency.

SECTION BY SECTION ANALYSIS

SECTION 1. Amends Section 61.603(a), Education Code, as follows:

- (a) Requires a mental health professional, to be eligible to receive repayment assistance under Subchapter K (Repayment of Certain Mental Health Professional Education Loans), to meet certain requirements, including having completed one, two, or three, rather than one, two, three, four, or five, consecutive years of practice in a mental health professional shortage area designated by the Department of State Health Services.

SECTION 2. Amends Section 61.604(a), Education Code, to authorize a mental health professional to receive repayment assistance under this subchapter for not more than three years, rather than not more than five years.

SECTION 3. Amends Section 61.607(a), Education Code, as follows:

(a) Authorizes a mental health professional to receive repayment assistance under this subchapter for each year the mental health professional establishes eligibility for the assistance in an amount determined by applying the following applicable percentage to the maximum total amount of assistance allowed for the mental health professional under Subsection (b) (relating to prohibiting the total amount of repayment assistance received by certain mental health professionals from exceeding certain amounts):

- (1) for the first year, 33.33 percent, rather than 10 percent;
- (2) for the second year, 33.33 percent, rather than 15 percent; and
- (3) for the third year, 33.33 percent, rather than 20 percent.

Deletes existing text authorizing a mental health professional to receive repayment assistance for the fourth and fifth years by applying certain percentages to the maximum total amount of assistance allowed for the mental health professional under Subsection (b). Makes nonsubstantive changes.

SECTION 4. Amends Section 61.608, Education Code, by adding Subsection (e), as follows:

(e) Requires the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to administer the program under this subchapter in a manner that, as program openings occur, allows for the continuous:

- (1) approval or disapproval of applications;
- (2) determination of applicant eligibility; and
- (3) acceptance of eligible applicants into the program.

SECTION 5. Repealer: Section 61.603(b) (relating to requiring a licensed physician, to be eligible to receive repayment assistance after the physician's third consecutive year of practice, to be certified in psychiatry by certain entities), Education Code.

SECTION 6. Makes application of Sections 61.603 and 61.607(a), Education Code, prospective.

SECTION 7. Effective date: September 1, 2023.