

ESTIMATED ADDITIONAL OPERATING BUDGET IMPACT (dollars in thousands)

	FY21	FY22	FY23	3 Year Total Cost	Recurring or Nonrecurring	Fund Affected
Total						

(Parenthesis () Indicate Expenditure Decreases)

Duplicates/Conflicts with/Companion to/Relates to: HB142, School Task Force on Sexual Misconduct

Duplicates/Relates to Appropriation in the General Appropriation Act

SECTION III: NARRATIVE

BILL SUMMARY

Synopsis: House Judiciary Committee for House Bill 128 (HB128HJC) addresses the issue of ethical and sexual misconduct by educators and other school personnel, including school volunteers. It proposes several preventative and responsive measures to address the problem, including: background checks; disclosure requirements for applicants to public school employment and applicants’ prior employers; training for school staff and volunteers on recognizing and reporting instances of abuse; support for investigations of abuse; cross-agency communication among law enforcement, CYFD, and the Public Education Department (PED); and definitions of relevant terms.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS

HB128HJC does not contain an appropriation.

SIGNIFICANT ISSUES

HB128HJC arises from the recommendations of the House Memorial 57 Taskforce Strategic Plan on Educator Ethical Misconduct. HM57 was passed in the 2019 Regular Legislative Session and required PED convene a taskforce to examine issues related to the investigation, reporting, and documentation of ethical misconduct involving moral turpitude, and to develop a strategic plan to ameliorate these concerns, with specific regard to hiring, training, and reporting practices and policies, as well as potentially related necessary legislative changes. The taskforce included representation from PED, CYFD, the New Mexico School Boards Association, the Coalition of Educational Leaders, the Attorney General’s Office, the Public Schools Insurance Authority, the Albuquerque Public School District, the New Mexico PTA, the New Mexico Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs, and Cooperative Educational Services. The taskforce met three times and made a number of recommendations, including suggested legislative changes, which were reported to the Legislative Education Study Committee at its November 2020 hearing. HB128HJC encompasses most of those recommendations.

The bill addresses a number of issues surrounding abuse of children and students by personnel involved with the public school system, including employees, contractors and their employees, and school volunteers. The problem of sexual abuse in schools is perhaps more pervasive than is apparent; the nonprofit group, SESAME (“Stop Educator Sexual Abuse Misconduct and

Exploitation”) maintains a website that indicates one in 10 K-12 students is a victim of educator sexual misconduct, and just one child sex offender can harm as many as 73 victims in their lifetime. Despite decreased personal interaction, school closures, lockdowns, and distance learning practices arising from the COVID-19 global pandemic, SESAME documented 448 unique incidents of sexual misconduct perpetrated by K-12 educators and other school personnel in 2020; considering the secrecy that often surrounds these acts, the actual number of such cases is likely to be substantially greater than reported and documented cases might indicate.

The primary problem the bill seeks to curtail is the practice colloquially known as “passing the trash,” where a school employee who has been accused of or disciplined for abuse of a student or child leaves their current place of employment to move to a new area and new employer that are unaware of the offense they have committed or allegations of abuse levied against them. The bill requires disclosure by prospective school employees or volunteers of all prior employment by schools or employment that involved unsupervised contact with children or students, as well as disclosure of any investigation or violation of any ethical rule or policy approved by a former employer, unless false or unsubstantiated. The HB128HJC likewise requires disclosure of any investigation or violation that was not false or unsubstantiated of any state or federal statute relating to child abuse or neglect, sexual misconduct or any sexual offense, including any such investigation or violation of those offenses prohibited in the New Mexico Criminal Code. The bill makes specific reference to those offenses covered by certain Articles of the Code including:

- Assault and Battery;
- Harassment and Stalking;
- Kidnapping;
- Crimes Against Children and Dependents;
- Sexual Exploitation of Children;
- Sexual Offenses;
- Sexual Oriented Materials to Minors;
- Unauthorized Distribution of Sensitive Images; and
- Human Trafficking.

The bill likewise requires similar disclosure of an applicant’s relevant history, within 30 days, by a prospective employee’s relevant prior employers. The bill protects from liability former employers who report such information in good faith. These measures are based upon “SESAME” laws that have been enacted in a number of other jurisdictions, including Pennsylvania, Connecticut, New Jersey, Nevada, and Maryland.

Relatedly, the bill makes the administration of background checks more explicitly related to ethical and sexual misconduct by school personnel, and adds a number of definitions to the School Personnel Act to enhance that relationship, including definitions for “child abuse,” “contractor,” “ethical misconduct,” “moral turpitude,” “school volunteer,” and “unsupervised contact with children or students.” Significantly, the definition for the new term, “ethical misconduct” includes reference to any sexual offense prohibited by the Criminal Code and the Sexual Exploitations of Children Act, and encompasses behaviors that might not be immediately criminal, but that can be characterized as “grooming behaviors” that are reasonably apparent to result in inappropriate sexual contact with a child. HB128HJC also requires PED maintain a list, updated monthly, of the names of persons reported to the department for convictions or allegations of ethical misconduct, as defined by the bill, and provide this list to a school governing authority upon request.

HB128HJC would require local school boards adopt policies providing for the tracking and coordination of reports of child abuse made by school personnel, contractors, and volunteers, while protecting the identity of victims of abuse, and provides for the department to take licensure action against licensed school personnel who fail to report child abuse, neglect, or ethical misconduct as required. The bill also would require all school personnel, including volunteers and contractors and their employees, to complete training in the detection and reporting of child abuse and neglect, to include ethical misconduct and professional responsibilities. The department is directed to develop or adopt these required training programs and coordinate with public schools, the Human Services Department (HSD), the Department of Health (DOH), the Early Childhood Educational and Care Department (ECECD), and CYFD, as well as to promulgate rules for the administration of the required training.

The School Personnel Act currently requires a superintendent investigate all allegations of ethical misconduct by any school employee who resigns, is discharged or terminated, or otherwise leaves employment after an allegation of abuse has been made against them. HB128HJC allows a superintendent to designate a representative to act on their behalf in this investigation, and explicitly defines “designated representative” to include a regional education cooperative. This measure may relieve some administrative and financial burden upon poorer or rural school districts that may lack necessary or helpful resources to execute this duty.

The bill also amends the School Personnel Act so that superintendents, state agency administrators, and local school boards or school governing authorities would no longer be prohibited from disclosing to the public reasons for termination actions taken against school personnel, and likewise permits a record to be made of termination proceedings and related appeals, currently prohibited under the act. Further, under the proposed amendments to the act, records of arbitration proceedings under appeals to termination decisions can now be deemed an official transcript of such proceedings.

The universal duty to report reasonable suspicions of child abuse, contained in the Children’s Code, would be explicitly expanded by the bill to include physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual abuse perpetrated by adults other than a parent, guardian, or custodian; currently, that duty to report is limited to suspected abuse by an adult in a custodial relationship with a child. When an alleged perpetrator is school personnel, or a volunteer or contractor, a report is also to be made to the PED. HB128HJC enhances interagency communication by requiring law enforcement and CYFD to transmit a report to PED within 48 hours of receiving such a report, when an alleged perpetrator is school personnel or volunteer, or a contractor.

HB128HJC does not contain an appropriation. The House Memorial 57 Taskforce Strategic Plan included a recommendation that the legal and regulatory requirements of the plan be supported by sufficient appropriation. Some taskforce members representing school districts raised concerns that certain expanded requirements related to tracking reports of child abuse and training in recognizing and reporting abuse might increase expenses to school districts and charter schools.

PERFORMANCE IMPLICATIONS

When PED receives a report of suspected child abuse, as required under the proposed amendments to the Children’s Code, the bill requires the department to notify the person making the report of its receipt, within five days, that the report is being investigated. Mailing

notification within five days is sufficient compliance with this requirement.

ADMINISTRATIVE IMPLICATIONS

HB128HJC requires PED to maintain a list of the names of all persons reported to the department for convictions and allegations of ethical misconduct, to be updated monthly and provided to school governing authorities upon request.

The bill directs the department to develop or adopt training programs to be made available to every public school, to promulgate rules for the administration of the training program, and to coordinate with appropriate staff in public schools, HSD, DOH, CYFD, and ECECD. The department is to consult with the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the development and adoption of these rules, which minimally are to include training for reporting requirements, trauma-informed instruction, identification of indicators of likely abuse and inappropriate behavior, ethical misconduct, professional responsibility, investigations and procedures, and relevant definitions.

CONFLICT, DUPLICATION, COMPANIONSHIP, RELATIONSHIP

Relates to House Bill 142, which would establish a taskforce on sexual misconduct and require all public schools and postsecondary institutions to adopt policies and procedures addressing affirmative consent, and the prevention of sexual assault, domestic and dating violence and harassment and stalking.

TECHNICAL ISSUES

OTHER SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES

ALTERNATIVES

WHAT WILL BE THE CONSEQUENCES OF NOT ENACTING THIS BILL

AMENDMENTS