

Date of Hearing: April 21, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Mike Fong, Chair

AB 1985 (Irwin) – As Amended April 9, 2026

SUBJECT: Student health: athletic coaches: mental health training

SUMMARY: Requires, on or before July 1, 2028, and every two years thereafter, each campus of the California State University (CSU), each community college of a community college district (CCD), and each private postsecondary educational institution and independent institution of higher education that receives state financial assistance, and requests each campus of the University of California (UC), require a person who serves as a coach in an athletic program to complete a student mental health training, as specified. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Specifies that these will be titled, and may be cited, as Sarah Shulze’s Law.
- 2) Requires, on or before July 1, 2028, the CSU, the California Community Colleges (CCC), and each private postsecondary educational institution and independent institution of higher education that receives state financial assistance, and requests the UC to, identify and compile a list of mental health training programs that can be used to train athletic coaches. The training:
 - a) Must, at a minimum, cover suicide prevention education; and,
 - b) May also cover mental health first aid education if suicide prevention education is included.
- 3) Requires, on or before July 1, 2028, and every two years thereafter, each campus of the CSU, each community college of a CCD, and each private postsecondary educational institution and independent institution of higher education that receives state financial assistance, and each campus of the UC is requested to, require a person who serves as a coach in an athletic program, as a condition of the person’s employment or volunteer service, to complete a student mental health training that has been identified pursuant to 2) above.
- 4) Requires that, if the Commission on State Mandates determines that this act contains costs mandated by the state, reimbursement to local agencies and school districts for those costs shall be made as specified.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Establishes the UC as a public trust to be administered by the Regents of the UC; and, grants the Regents full powers of organization and government, subject only to such legislative control as may be necessary to insure security of its funds, compliance with the terms of its endowments, statutory requirements around competitive bidding and contracts, sales of property and the purchase of materials, goods and services (Article IX, Section (9)(a) of the California Constitution).
- 2) Establishes UC, CSU, and California Community Colleges (CCC) as the three segments of public higher education (Education Code (EC) Section 66010, et seq.). and, defines

"independent institutions of higher education" as nonpublic higher education institutions that grant undergraduate degrees, graduate degrees, or both, and that are formed as nonprofit corporations in California and are accredited by an agency recognized by the United States Department of Education. For purposes of any code or statute, a national or regional accrediting agency recognized by the United States Department of Education as of January 1, 2025, shall retain that recognition until July 1, 2029, provided that the accrediting agency continues to operate in substantially the same manner as it did on January 1, 2025. (Education Code (EC) Section 66010, et seq.).

- 3) Requires the governing board of each CCD, the Trustees of the CSU, the Board of Directors of the College of Law, San Francisco, and the Regents of the UC to, within existing resources, adopt and implement a rape and sexual assault education program for, and ensure maximum feasible participation of, students and student services professional staff members or student affairs professional staff members at each of their respective campuses or other facilities. (EDC Section 67391)
- 4) Finds and declares that colleges should provide special sexual assault seminars for all athletic coaches and administrators and members of athletic teams, among other things. States that these seminars should take place during a student athlete orientation program or prior to the first team meeting. (EDC Section 67391 (k))

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown.

COMMENTS: *Double referral.* This measure was heard by the Assembly Committee on Health on April 8, 2026, and passed with a 16-0 vote.

Purpose. According to the author, “athletic coaches play a crucial role in the lives of students as mentors and role models, often spending extended periods of time with students outside the traditional academic environment. Experiences on-and-off the field provide various opportunities for appropriate mental health interventions where coaches can provide mental health first-aid and hand-off care to parents and mental health professionals. However, requirements for collegiate-level coaches to take mental health trainings do not currently exist in California.”

The author continues that, “AB 1985 will require the [higher education segments] to identify and compile a list of mental health trainings for colleges and universities to train athletic coaches. Additionally, every coach at a college or university in California will be required to complete a training program approved by the Surgeon General. These trainings will ensure coaches are equipped with the tools to recognize signs of mental illness and behavioral distress in students participating in athletic programs.”

According to the author, “this bill is named in honor of Sarah Shulze, a Division I student-athlete from California that died by suicide while enrolled at the University of Wisconsin. Sarah was an incredible multi-disciplined runner with a devoted spirit for change-making and compassion for others. Through her memory, her parents created the Sarah Shulze Foundation to advocate for the causes dearest to her: Mental Health, Student Athletics and Women’s Rights.”

Mental health on college campuses. According to the 2024-25 Healthy Minds Survey, a nationwide survey on mental health and related issues in college student populations from the Healthy Minds Network, college students continue to report poor mental health, with more than

one in three students saying they experience moderate anxiety or depression. Data from the most recent survey found that only 36% of college students are thriving, reporting high levels of success in relationships, self-esteem, purpose and optimism, down slightly from 38% the previous year. There is slight improvement since the COVID-19 pandemic, with fewer students reporting anxiety, self-harm and suicidal ideation than in 2021–22. Student usage of mental health resources also continues to climb; 37% of all respondents said they had accessed therapy or counseling in the past 12 months, compared to 30% in 2018–19.

According to “Suicide in National Collegiate Athletic Association athletes: a 20-year analysis,” published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine (but focusing on athletes in the United States from 2002-2022), the rate of suicide in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) collegiate athletes has increased over the last 20 years and over the last decade has become the second most common cause of death, after accidents. The study concludes that additional mental health resources including efforts to raise awareness, screening for early risk identification, training coaches and support staff on how to identify athletes at risk, and providing access to mental health providers trained in sport psychology are examples of ways to help prevent suicide in this population.

NCAA pilot program. In August 2025 the NCAA announced a partnership with the National Council for Mental Wellbeing to offer fully funded Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) for Higher Education training to Division III institutions to focus on head coaches and athletic trainers. Division III schools are eligible to receive one fully funded training during the program, which will be in effect until August 1, 2027. According to the NCAA, the 2022 NCAA Coach Well-Being Study underscored the need for expanded mental health support in college athletics. NCAA says that more than 80% of coaches reported spending increased time addressing mental health concerns with their student-athletes compared with pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels, and many identified mental health as the top issue facing their teams. As of late July 2025, 66 Division III institutions had completed the MHFA training. Through this program, up to 30 individuals at each active Division III school are eligible to participate in a 7.5-hour, in-person training with expert MHFA instructors on their campus. Upon completion, participants will be certified in MHFA for Higher Education for three years.

Arguments in support. The American Academy of Pediatrics wrote in support, stating that AB 1985 (Irwin) “...represents a critical and timely step toward addressing the growing mental health crisis among young people and student-athletes. By ensuring that coaches are equipped with foundational training in mental health awareness and suicide prevention, AB 1985 will help create safer, more supportive campus environments where students can thrive both academically and personally.”

They continue, noting that “mental health challenges among children, adolescents, and young adults in California have reached alarming levels. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth ages 10–24 in California. According to the California Health Care Foundation, more than 1 in 3 California adolescents report persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness. Data from the California Healthy Kids Survey indicates that nearly 20% of high school students have seriously considered attempting suicide. Among college-aged young adults, anxiety, depression, and stress-related disorders have sharply increased, with campus counseling centers reporting record demand for services.”

The Academy notes that “student-athletes face unique pressures, including performance expectations, injuries, time demands, and identity challenges, that can exacerbate mental health struggles. Yet they often have frequent and trusted contact with coaches, making those adults uniquely positioned to recognize warning signs and intervene early. AB 1985 appropriately recognizes that coaches are often on the front lines of student engagement. Requiring mental health training...improves early identification of warning signs such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, educates stigma around mental health conversations within athletic programs, promotes timely referrals to campus mental health services, [and] builds trust and communication between students and adults in leadership roles. Importantly, the bill sets a clear and reasonable framework by requiring training completion by July 1, 2028, with renewal every two years. The requirement that training programs include suicide prevention education ensures a minimum standard that aligns with best practices in public health.”

Committee comments. Committee staff recommends, and the author has accepted, amendments that specify that the CCC Chancellor’s Office will be responsible for identifying and compiling a list of mental health training programs that can be used to train athletic coaches.

Related legislation. AB 1626 (Gabriel) would add a component on behavioral and mental health and trauma-informed care to the list of components to be emphasized by the 1998 California High School Coaching Education and Training Program.

AB 1665 (Pacheco) would add a component on pupil mental health training, as specified, to the list of components to be emphasized by the 1998 California High School Coaching Education and Training Program, and would require a person who serves as a coach in an interscholastic athletic program at a high school, including a private school, that is a member of the CIF to complete annual training in pupil mental health.

Prior legislation. AB 602 (Haney), Chapter 159, Statutes of 2025, requires in July 2026, CSU and UC campuses to offer students rehab services for drug and alcohol use, including overdoses, rather than immediately imposing disciplinary actions.

SB 153 (Committee on Budget and Fiscal Review), Chapter 38, Statutes of 2024, among other things, requires CDE to develop model referral protocols for addressing student behavioral health concerns by January 1, 2025, requires local educational agencies to certify that its employees received youth behavioral training by July 1, 2029.

SB 224 (Portantino), Chapter 675, Statutes of 2021, requires schools that offer one or more courses in health education to pupils in middle school or high school to include in those courses instruction in mental health.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

American Academy of Pediatrics, California
California Alliance of Caregivers
California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists
California Hospital Association
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI-CA)

Sarah Shulze Foundation
University of California Office of the President

Opposition

None on file.

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