

ASSEMBLY THIRD READING  
AB 2354 (Gabriel)  
As Amended March 19, 2026  
Majority vote

## SUMMARY

Expands the California Serves Program to serve students in grades 6 through 12 and requires the California Department of Education (CDE), in partnership with the California Volunteers, to provide recommend effective service-learning strategies for grades 6 through 12.

### Major Provisions

- 1) Expands the California Serves Program from being applicable to students in grade 12 only to include students in 6-12th grades.
- 2) Requires the CDE to provide recommendations to the Legislature on ways to incorporate effective service learning by January 1, 2028, and expands the scope to include students in 6-12<sup>th</sup> grades.
- 3) Requires the CDE to post on its website by January 1, 2028, evidence-based strategies for expanding access to high-quality service-learning programs that may be used by teachers and local educational agencies (LEAs) serving students in 6-12<sup>th</sup> grades.
- 4) Requires the annual evaluation report on service learning to be submitted by the CDE, in partnership with California Volunteers, to specify the number of pupils by grade, in addition to other required data.

## COMMENTS

*California Serves Grant Program was established in 2022.* AB 181 (Committee on Budget) Chapter 52, Statutes of 2022, establishes the California Serves Grant Program and appropriates \$5 million in annual funding, beginning with the 2022-23 fiscal year, to the CDE to award grants to LEAs to promote access to effective service learning for students in 12th grade with the goal of expanding access for high school graduates to obtain a State Seal of Civic Engagement. The maximum grant amount is \$500,000 and eligible activities include:

- 1) Paid planning time for teachers to increase the use of service learning in instruction;
- 2) Professional development on service learning for administrators and teachers;
- 3) Purchase of instructional materials to help integrate service learning in instruction;
- 4) Participation costs, including materials or travel expenses related to service learning activities;
- 5) Personnel costs for coordinating service learning at the LEA or a school site; and
- 6) Participation costs associated with grant program evaluation.

*Recommendations to expand service learning.* The Legislature, in establishing the California Serves Grant Program, required the CDE in partnership with California Volunteers to provide

recommendations to the Legislature on evidence-based strategies to expand access to high-quality service-learning programs in California high schools and promote equitable access to these programs. In their January 2024 report to the Legislature, the CDE provided 5 recommendations:

- 1) Establish effective standards and indicators of service-learning;
- 2) Incorporate curriculum and strategies that encourage deep civic learning;
- 3) Ensure teacher access to ongoing professional development and learning;
- 4) Prioritize efforts to track who earns the State Seal of Civic Engagement; and
- 5) Design meaningful infrastructure that promotes service-learning at all levels.

*Service-learning vs. community service or volunteering.* Service-learning is distinguished from volunteering or community service in that it connects service with structured opportunities to learn from the experience. The federal Learn and Serve program of the Corporation for National and Community Service defined service-learning as “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.”

*State Seal of Civic Engagement.* This bill is intended to provide support to LEAs and charter schools serving students in grades 6-12 so that they may provide equitable student access to service-learning and the opportunity to earn the State Seal of Civic Engagement. AB 24 (Eggman), Chapter 604, Statutes of 2017, required the SBE to establish five criteria for the awarding of the State Seal of Civic Engagement. The SBE established these five criteria on September 10, 2020.

The five criteria are meant to provide LEAs with a Framework for making determinations of student qualifications required to earn the State Seal of Civic Engagement, based on their own local contexts. The criteria were written to ensure that no student is excluded from an opportunity to earn the State Seal of Civic Engagement based on academic ability, alternative school settings, or unique or unconventional expressions of civic engagement. The student must:

- 1) Be engaged in academic work in a productive way;
- 2) Demonstrate a competent understanding of the United States and California constitutions; functions and governance of local governments; tribal government structures and organizations; the role of the citizen in a constitutional democracy; and democratic principles, concepts, and processes;
- 3) Participate in one or more informed civic engagement project(s) that address real-world problems and require students to identify and inquire into civic needs or problems, consider varied responses, take action, and reflect on efforts;
- 4) Demonstrate civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions through self-reflection; and
- 5) Exhibit character traits that reflect civic-mindedness and a commitment to positively impact the classroom, school, community and/or society.

*Growing number of State Seal of Civic Engagement earned.* Participation in the State Seal of Civic Engagement program has been small but growing. According to the CDE, in the 2024-25 school year, 33 counties, 161 LEAs, and 492 schools were participating in the program. A total of 21,284 seals were attached to high school diplomas, as well as a small number to alternative diplomas, general education development certificates, and certificates of completion.

### **According to the Author**

According to the author, "AB 2354 strengthens California's investment in service learning by allowing schools to implement programs across grades 6 through 12, rather than limiting access primarily to grade 12. By supporting multi-year service-learning opportunities, this bill will help ensure that all students have a meaningful opportunity to develop the skills and experiences needed to earn the State Seal of Civic Engagement."

### **Arguments in Support**

According to the California Association of Student Councils, "Currently, the State Seal of Civic Engagement's (SSCE) design does not fully support a multi-year civic learning pathway that prepares students for meaningful engagement by graduation. Concentrating service-learning grant eligibility in grade 12 can limit a district's ability to build sustained civic engagement experiences across multiple years. Civic identity, community partnerships, and applied learning skills are developed progressively. When service-learning is compressed into a student's final year, districts may struggle to meaningfully foster instruction, build long-term community relationships, or ensure equitable participation for all students. This structure can unintentionally create uneven access to SSCE-aligned opportunities, particularly in districts that lack pre-existing civic learning infrastructure.

AB 2354 would clarify that the California Serves Program promotes access to effective service learning for pupils in grades 6 to 12 who are enrolled at participating LEAs, rather than focusing primarily on grade 12. By expanding eligibility to begin at grade 6, the bill would allow LEAs to design and implement multi-year service-learning pathways rather than concentrating programming in grade 12 alone. This change would enable districts to foster civic knowledge and engagement beginning in the earlier years of middle school, strengthen partnerships with community organizations, and provide students with sustained opportunities to meet SSCE criteria. AB 2354 maintains the program's existing purpose and administrative structure while modernizing it to reflect how civic development occurs over time through sustained engagement."

### **Arguments in Opposition**

None on file

## **FISCAL COMMENTS**

According to the Assembly Appropriations Committee:

- 1) One-time General Fund costs of \$394,000 and \$407,000 ongoing annually to CDE to hire additional staff to oversee expanded program implementation and technical assistance.

The Budget Act of 2022 education omnibus trailer bill included a \$5 million annual appropriation to establish the California Serves Program grant program, administered by CDE, to provide eligible grantees up to \$500,000 annually to promote service-learning. The Budget Act also requires CDE to annually submit a report to the Legislature with an

evaluation of the program, however, the Budget Act of 2022 did not provide additional resources for CDE to administer this grant program.

- 2) Potential Proposition 98 General Fund cost pressures of an unknown but likely significant amount, possibly in the low millions of dollars, to the extent the bill's expansion of eligible LEAs under the California Serves Programs results in a significant increase in applicants for grants and the Legislature appropriates additional funding to support this increase.

## VOTES

### **ASM EDUCATION: 9-0-0**

**YES:** Patel, Hoover, Alvarez, Bonta, Castillo, Garcia, Lowenthal, Pellerin, Zbur

### **ASM APPROPRIATIONS: 15-0-0**

**YES:** Wicks, Hoover, Aguiar-Curry, Calderon, Caloza, Dixon, Fong, Mark González, Krell, Pacheco, Pellerin, Sharp-Collins, Solache, Ta, Tangipa

## UPDATED

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