

Date of Hearing: May 6, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

AB 2698 (Ellis) – As Amended March 17, 2026

Policy Committee: Public Safety

Vote: 8 - 0

Urgency: No

State Mandated Local Program: No

Reimbursable: No

SUMMARY:

This bill authorizes the Office of Youth and Community Restoration (OYCR), upon appropriation by the Legislature, to administer a youth court diversion pilot grant program in six counties for first-time misdemeanor juvenile offenders, in which local police departments partner with district attorney offices, courts, and local school districts to enact a youth diversion program for first-time misdemeanor juvenile offenders.

- 1) Requires participating counties to annually report participation rates and recidivism rates of program participants.
- 2) Sunsets the pilot on January 1, 2030.

FISCAL EFFECT:

Ongoing costs (General Fund, or some other unidentified fund) to OYCR, possibly in the low millions of dollars, to administer a youth court diversion pilot grant program in six counties. OYCR anticipates needing four full-time positions to conduct contract management, technical assistance, and evaluation to administer and provide participating counties with three-year youth court diversion pilot program grants. These positions include a supervisor, two analyst positions, and a research data specialist, who would oversee the procurement, disbursement, and implementation of OYCR's youth court diversion pilot program grant. The bill does not specify a per-grant amount or total funding level. Comparable OYCR grant programs — such as the Ending Girls' Incarceration in California Action Network — provide grants ranging from \$125,000 to \$250,000 per site annually. At that order of magnitude, six three-year pilot grants could total approximately \$2.25 million to \$4.5 million.

The Legislative Analyst's Office recently warned of General Fund structural deficits of around \$35 billion per year beginning in the 2027-28 fiscal year.

Regardless of costs, consistent with Appropriations Committee rules and practice, this bill is eligible for placement on the suspense file because it has the primary purpose of creating a pilot program.

COMMENTS:

- 1) **Purpose.** According to the author:

Youth court diversion programs have been a proven alternative to the traditional court proceedings for first-time juvenile offenders. These programs see police departments partner with local high schools, district attorney offices, and courts to create a system for juveniles to go before a jury of their peers, holding first-time offenders accountable while also giving them opportunities for rehabilitation. While these programs have been proven successes, many counties and cities lack adequate funding to enact their own program. AB 2698 would authorize the Office of Youth and Community Restoration to establish a grant program for six counties in California to create a youth court diversion pilot program. This bill would ensure that first-time juvenile offenders are held accountable, while also fostering rehabilitation and civic engagement.

- 2) **Background.** Youth courts — also known as peer courts or teen courts — are an alternative to formal juvenile court adjudication for young, nonviolent, first-time offenders. Participation is voluntary, and the juvenile typically waives formal court hearings in favor of a peer-driven process. Following a guilty plea or admission of wrongdoing, the juvenile appears before a jury of peers, which imposes a disposition (such as community service or additional youth court service). Successful completion generally results in the case being closed without a formal juvenile record. Youth courts are not available in every county and operate under varying models. Welfare and Institutions Code Section 654 already authorizes probation officers, with the consent of the minor and the minor’s parent or guardian, to refer a minor to diversion services in lieu of filing a juvenile petition. AB 1005 (Ashby, Chapter 179, Statutes of 2024) expressly added youth, peer, and teen courts — including those operated by community-based organizations, tribal courts, and other entities — to the list of authorized Section 654 referral destinations. This bill would fund a specific model of youth court diversion through a new pilot grant program, rather than expand the underlying legal authority to divert.

This bill specifies numerous program-design elements — including the exact menu of dispositions (community service of 10 to 40 hours, or youth court jury duty one to three times), permitted additional sanctions (curfews of 7, 8, or 9 p.m.; specified essay and apology-letter requirements), courtroom logistics (no cell phones, last names not disclosed), and eligibility criteria. The Public Safety Committee analysis notes that this specificity may not match the operational practices of existing youth court programs in other counties, which may use broader disposition menus, different eligibility criteria, or different logistical practices. The committee analysis notes that the bill is modeled after the Bakersfield Police Department’s youth peer court program. AB 2698 has no formal support.

The bill is opposed by a coalition of more than 30 juvenile justice reform, civil rights, and community-based organizations, led by the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, who argue that diversion programs led by law enforcement, prosecutors, and probation partners risk net-widening — drawing more youth into justice system involvement rather than diverting them from it — and that standardized sanctions (curfews, monitoring, essays, service hours) are less effective than individualized, trauma-informed, community-based responses. The Public Safety Committee analysis further identifies several implementation questions the bill does not address, including: which county agency or entity is responsible for applying and accepting the grant, whether board of supervisors’ approval is required,

how cases are referred to the program, whether criminal proceedings remain pending during youth court proceedings, the level of court oversight contemplated, and probation's role in monitoring. The bill is also silent on whether OYCR must report the aggregated results of the pilot to the Legislature, which would be typical for a time-limited grant program of this kind.

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