

Date of Hearing: April 22, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
Darshana R. Patel, Chair
AB 2354 (Gabriel) – As Amended March 19, 2026

SUBJECT: Pupil instruction: California Serves Program

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. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 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 6-12th 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 6-12th 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.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Establishes the California Serves Program, to be administered by the CDE in collaboration with the California Volunteers to promote access for effective service learning for students in 12th grade to expand access for high school graduates in obtaining a State Seal of Civic Engagement. Requires the CDE, in partnership with California Volunteers, by January 1, 2024, to review evidence and provide recommendations on ways to incorporate effective service learning for students in 9-12th grades and promote equitable access to these programs. (Education Code (EC) 51475)
- 2) Establishes the California Serves Program for the purposes of awarding grants to promote access to effective service learning for students in grade 12, with the goal of expanding access for high school graduates in obtaining a State Seal of Civic Engagement through service learning. Allowable uses for grants include:
 - a) Paid planning time for teachers to increase the use of service learning in instruction;
 - b) Professional development on service learning for administrators and teachers;
 - c) Purchase of instructional materials to help integrate service learning in instruction;

- d) Participation costs, including materials or travel expenses related to service learning activities;
 - e) Personnel costs for coordinating service learning at the LEA or a school site; and
 - f) Participation costs associated with grant program evaluation. (EC 51475)
- 3) Establishes the 21st Century High School After School Safety and Enrichment for Teens (ASSETS) program to award grants for after-school enrichment programs for high school students. A program consists of an academic assistance element and an enrichment element that may include community service or service learning. (EC 8421).
- 4) Establishes a State Seal of Civic Engagement, to be affixed to the diploma of qualifying high school graduates, based on a demonstration of excellence in civics education and participation. (EC 51470)
- 5) Requires the State Superintendent of Public Instruction (SPI), on or before January 1, 2020, to recommend to the State Board of Education (SBE) criteria for awarding a State Seal of Civic Engagement to students who have demonstrated excellence in civics education and participation and have demonstrated an understanding of the United States Constitution, the California Constitution, and the democratic system of government. (EC 51470)
- 6) Requires the SPI, in developing criteria for the State Seal of Civic Engagement, to incorporate the Six Proven Practices for Effective Civic Learning, and to consult with a diverse group of credentialed, current, classroom teachers who teach the subject of history-social science, including government, in secondary schools. Requires the SPI to also consider including criteria based on each of the following:
- a) Successful completion of history, government, and civics courses, including courses that incorporate character education;
 - b) Voluntary participation in community service or extracurricular activities; and
 - c) Any other related requirements as it deems appropriate.
- 7) Requires the SPI to ensure, to the greatest extent feasible, that the criteria:
- a) Provide all students with an opportunity to earn the State Seal of Civic Engagement;
 - b) Recognize student excellence or outstanding achievement;
 - c) Are not based primarily on student achievement that is already recognized through grades or other standard measures of student achievement; and
 - d) To the extent possible, result in a seal that confers some benefit to students beyond secondary school. (EC 51471)
- 8) States that school district participation in this program is voluntary. (EC 51471)

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown

COMMENTS:

Need for the bill. 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.”

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:

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

Grants were awarded under this program as noted in the table below:

Year	# Grants Awarded	Range of awards
2022-23	12	\$24,343 to \$500,000
2023-24	11	\$325,301 to \$500,000
2024-25	13	\$160,540 to \$500,000
2025-26	10	\$67,000 to \$1.4M (consortium sponsored by the San Joaquin COE)

Source: CDE, 2026

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:

- Establish effective standards and indicators of service-learning;
- Incorporate curriculum and strategies that encourage deep civic learning;
- Ensure teacher access to ongoing professional development and learning;
- Prioritize efforts to track who earns the State Seal of Civic Engagement; and
- 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.”

Service-learning supports academic achievement, narrows achievement gap. A 2011 meta-analysis in the Journal of Experiential Education, *A Meta-analysis of the Impact of Service-Learning on Students*, of 62 studies involving 11,837 students found that, compared to controls, students who participated in service-learning programs demonstrated significant gains in five outcome areas: attitudes toward self, attitudes toward school and learning, civic engagement, social skills, and academic performance. The analysis also found that following certain recommended practices—such as linking to curriculum, community involvement, and reflection—were associated with better outcomes. A 2005 analysis of 217,000 student surveys found that “service [service-learning was not measured] of only one hour per week among lower-income students was related to significant reduction of the gap in achievement-related assets between higher and lower-income students.”

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.

Six Proven Practices for Effective Civic Learning. Existing law required the SBE, in establishing criteria for the State Seal of Civic Engagement to incorporate the Six Proven Practices for Effective Civic Learning, developed by the Education Commission of the States. These Six Practices are:

- 1) Provide instruction in government, history, law, and democracy;
- 2) Incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events in the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives;
- 3) Design and implement programs that provide students with opportunities to apply what they learn through performing community service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction;
- 4) Offer extracurricular activities that provide opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities;
- 5) Encourage student participation in school governance; and
- 6) Encourage students' participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures.

California Volunteers established by Executive Order in 2006. Governor Schwarzenegger issued Executive Order S-24-06 on December 11, 2006, reestablishing the California Service Corps as the California Volunteers in the Governor's Office, specifying the following duties and responsibilities to include, but not be limited to:

- Recruiting and mobilizing citizens for volunteer service by identifying service opportunities throughout the state and by recognizing citizens for the contributions they make as volunteers and participants in public service programs;
- Serving as the state's lead agency for community service and volunteerism, informing the public of the value of and need for greater community service and volunteerism in California, calling upon all Californians to become involved, and challenging public and

private institutions to create and support community service and volunteer opportunities; and

- Partnering with other public agencies at the state, county and local levels, and the private and not-for-profit sectors to leverage greater resources and create more opportunities for service and volunteerism.

According to the current Governor’s website, “Led by the state’s Chief Service Officer, Josh Fryday, California Volunteers, Office of the Governor engages Californians in service, volunteering and civic action to tackle our State’s most pressing challenges while mobilizing all Californians to volunteer and serve in their communities. #CaliforniansForAll was launched in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to build on the efforts of California Volunteers to establish a statewide volunteer corps to help with the state’s response to emergencies and disasters. California Volunteers also administers the AmeriCorps programs in California with over 80 programs providing critical services to more than 160,000 Californians annually.”

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.”

Related legislation. SB 1378 (Ochoa Bogh) of the 2025-26 Session requires the CDE to establish the California Excellence in Service Learning Designation Program to publicly recognize and designate schoolsites and LEAs that demonstrate excellence in service learning.

SB 578 (Limón) of the 2025-26 Session would have expanded the existing California Serves Program to promote access to effective service learning for grades 1 through 12; required LEAs to implement a Civic Engagement Pathways Program for pupils in grades 1 through 8; and required the Instructional Quality Commission (IQC), during its next consideration for the revision of the history and social sciences framework, to include civic engagement experiences, as specified. This bill was held in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

AB 1520 (Bonta) of the 2023-24 Session would have required the SPI by July 1, 2024, to select a partnership consisting of a county office of education (COE) and a community organization to serve as the State Seal of Civic Engagement Resource Lead. Would have required the State Seal of Civic Engagement Resource Lead to engage in a wide range of duties, including the coordination of support, provision of technical assistance, and delivery of professional learning to improve equitable access for students, especially those in marginalized communities, to the State Seal of Civic Engagement. This bill was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

AB 181 (Committee on Budget) Chapter 52, Statutes of 2022, establishes the California Serves Program to be administered by the CDE in collaboration with California Volunteers to promote access to effective service learning for students in 12th grade, with the goal of expanding access for high school graduates in obtaining a State Seal of Civic Engagement.

AB 2116 (McCarty) of the 2021-22 Session would have established the California Serves Pilot Program for purposes of engaging pupils in grade 12, and requires the CDE, in collaboration with California Volunteers, to conduct a study on ways to incorporate impactful service learning for pupils in grade 12. This bill was held in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

AB 2678 (McCarty) of the 2019-20 Session would have required California Volunteers, in collaboration with the CDE and appropriate stakeholders, to conduct a study on ways to incorporate impactful service-learning for pupils in grade 12 and, on or before January 1, 2022, provide recommendations on how to integrate service learning. This bill was held in the Assembly Education Committee.

AB 189 (Low) of the 2017-18 Session would have required the Instructional Quality Commission (IQC) to develop a model curriculum on service-learning for pupils in ninth to 12th grade, for voluntary use by educators. This bill was vetoed by the Governor. The veto message read:

I believe this bill is unnecessary. The Instructional Quality Commission carefully considered the subject of service-learning when it was updating the History-Social Science Framework and embedded it throughout the curriculum framework that the State Board of Education subsequently adopted.

AB 24 (Eggman), Chapter 604, Statutes of 2017, establishes a State Seal of Civic Engagement, to be affixed to the diploma of qualifying high school graduates, based on a demonstration of excellence in civic education and participation.

AB 1689 (Low) of the 2015-16 Session would have required, beginning with the high school class of 2022-23, that at least one of the courses required for graduation include a service-learning component. The bill would have defined service-learning and also required the SPI to develop curriculum standards for courses that incorporate a service-learning component. This bill was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

AB 524 (Low) of the 2015-16 Session would have required, beginning with the high school class of 2020-21, that at least one of the courses required for graduation include a service-learning component. The bill would have defined service-learning and also required the SPI to develop curriculum standards for courses that incorporate a service-learning component. This bill was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

AB 127 (Jeffries) of the 2009-10 Session would have established the California Volunteers Commission, which would serve as California's "State Commission" for purposes of the federal National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 and its implementing rules and regulations. This bill was held in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

SB 984 (Polanco), Chapter 213, Statutes of 2000, establishes the Cesar Chavez Day of Service and Learning program to promote service to the communities of California in honor of the life and work of Cesar Chavez and authorized the local and state operated Americorps and Conservation Corps to submit proposals for programs that will engage pupils through their schools and school districts in community service that honors the life and work of Cesar Chavez.

AB 1911 (Wesson and Hertzberg) of the 1999-2000 Session would have required school districts offering grades 9 - 12 to offer students the opportunity to enroll in courses that include service-learning activities for credit toward graduation. This bill was held in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

Alameda County Office of Education
California Association of Student Councils
Center for Volunteer & Nonprofit Leadership
GenUp
Jewish Family and Children's Services of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties
Menlo-Atherton High School Service-learning Students
National Youth Leadership Council
Youth Service America

Opposition

None on file

Analysis Prepared by: Debbie Look / ED. / (916) 319-2087