

Date of Hearing: April 9, 2024

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON WATER, PARKS, AND WILDLIFE

Diane Papan, Chair

AB 2124 (Davies) – As Amended April 4, 2024

SUBJECT: Department of Parks and Recreation: swimming lesson vouchers

SUMMARY: Requires the Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) to administer the Swimming Lesson Voucher Program (Program). Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Requires State Parks to contract with, and establish a network of, swimming lesson vendors that accept Program vouchers in every county, if feasible.
- 2) Requires that State Parks verify that swimming vendors have adequate and appropriate training to provide swimming lessons for the voucher recipient.
- 3) Requires State Parks to establish the application method and eligibility criteria for the vouchers, which shall include the following:
 - a) That the recipient be four years of age or younger;
 - b) That the recipients family income not exceed 200% of the federal poverty level; and
 - c) Proof of the recipient's residency in this state.
- 4) Allows State Parks to seek grants or other public or private funding for the Program.
- 5) Makes the implementation of this bill contingent upon an appropriation.

EXISTING LAW:

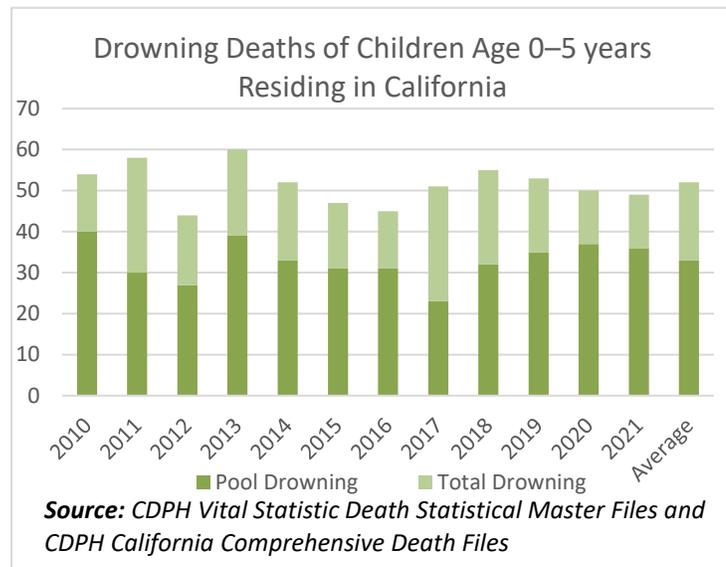
- 1) Requires the Division of Boating and Waterways (DBW), in cooperation with the State Department of Education and other appropriate entities involved with water safety, to develop an aquatic safety program to be made available for use at an appropriate grade level in public elementary schools at no expense to the schools (Education Code § 51879.7–51879.7).
- 2) Establishes the Swimming Pool Safety Act (Health and Safety Code § 115920 *et seq.*).
- 3) Establishes the state's commitment to ensure all California's can benefit from, and have meaningful and sustainable access to, the state's rich cultural and natural resources [(Public Resource Code (PRC) § 1000–1003)].
- 4) Requires the director of State Parks to establish the Outdoor Equity Grants Program to increase the ability of underserved and at-risk populations to participate in outdoor environmental educational experiences at state parks and other public lands where outdoor environmental education programs take place, among other requirements (PRC § 5090.75).

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown. This bill is keyed fiscal.

COMMENTS:

1) **Purpose of this bill.** This bill requires that State Parks establish and administer the Program that would provide vouchers for free swimming lessons for resident children four years or younger with a family income of less than 200% of the federal poverty level. According to the author, “Families across our State of California have lost loved ones due to unintentional drowning. Many of these deaths may have been prevented had the families been able to afford swimming lessons. California has beautiful coastlines, canals and rivers, and six cities, which are in the top thirty for highest pool ownership by household. We as Californians have tremendous access to bodies of water for recreational use, and by providing swim lessons to those who can’t afford it, we are not only helping others to be able to enjoy more of what our State has to offer, but we will be saving lives and teaching new life skills to people of all backgrounds.”

2) **Background.** According to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report, drowning deaths are the second leading cause of unintentional injury deaths for children aged 0 to 17 years and the leading cause for those aged one to four years. According to the California Department of Developmental Services, in California, drowning is a leading cause of injury-related deaths among children under the age of five (see adjacent chart).¹



From 1999 to 2019, the rate of unintentional drowning deaths among children aged 0 to 17 years declined 38%. For the same period, unintentional drowning death rates were higher for children in rural counties compared with urban counties and unintentional drowning death rates were higher for non-Hispanic-black children compared with non-Hispanic-white and Hispanic children.² The data show that disparities were greatest in swimming pools, with swimming pool drowning rates among black children aged five to 19 years 5.5 times higher than those among white children in the same age group. This disparity was greatest at ages 11 to 12 years; at these ages, black children drown in swimming pools at 10 times the rate of white children.³

Benefits of swimming lessons. Anecdotally, swimming lessons greatly reduce the risk of drowning for children. There is, however, little published evidence. A study conducted by the

¹ [Drowning Prevention. Department of Developmental Service.](#)

² Spencer, M. R. *et al.* Unintentional Drowning Deaths Among Children Aged 0–17 Years: United States, 1999–2019. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021)

³ Gilchrist, J. Racial/Ethnic Disparities in Fatal Unintentional Drowning Among Persons Aged ≤29 Years — United States, 1999–2010. Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014)

National Institute of Health reveals that participating in formal swimming lessons is associated with an 88% reduction in drowning risk in children aged one to four years, although the authors of the study indicate that estimates are imprecise. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends water survival training and swimming lessons for children between the ages of one to four years old, although most children might not be ready for swimming lessons until after their fourth birthday.⁴ The AAP does not recommend lessons for children under one year old.

Swimming lessons can teach children to respect the water, which makes them less likely to get themselves into dangerous swimming situations. Unfortunately, swimming lessons may be inaccessible and cost prohibitive for some families, especially families with multiple children. Current lesson programs for children under the age of four indicate that a course could take between 10 to 30 minutes, up to four days per week, for three to 12 weeks.

Current swimming lesson programs. To promote water safety and encourage exercise, Kaiser Permanente partners with cities in Southern California to offer Operation Splash, which provides free swimming lessons for low-income youth and adults and free junior lifeguard training. In the City of Los Angeles, Operation Splash enables city pools to stay open past the prime summer swim months to provide more exercise and recreational opportunities for adults and children. For 2017–2018, Kaiser Permanente awarded a \$408,000 grant to the City of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation for Operation Splash, which would provide swimming lessons for about 12,000 children and adults and provide junior lifeguard scholarships for 1,560 youth. The USA Swimming Foundation awarded \$898,184 to swim programs for both adults and children across the country through its 2022 grant program. Of the 141 programs that were awarded funding, ten were awarded to programs in California (seven for youth swim programs and three for adult swim programs).

- 3) **Arguments in support.** The California Association of Recreational and Park Districts writes in support, “We are deeply supportive of state policy that would increase access to water safety to ensure that all regardless of income have the opportunity to feel safe and secure in and around water. Expanded access to swimming instruction would reduce drowning fatalities, which has been steadily on the rise.”
- 4) **Related legislation.** AB 1056 (Davies) of 2023 would have required State Parks to establish and administer the California Youth Water Safety State Grant to make funding available to provide free swimming lessons for low-income and at-risk youth. AB 1056 died in Assembly Appropriations.

AB 1445 (Arambula), Chapter 370, Statutes of 2023, allows specified organizations to provide informational materials to a public elementary school regarding specified topics relating to drowning prevention.

AB 768 (Holden) of 2021 would have required that DBW and the State Department of Public Health, in cooperation with other specified entities, develop an aquatic and pool safety

⁴ [Swim Lessons: When to Start & What Parents Should Know.](#)

program to be made available for use by local education agencies at no expense. AB 768 died in the Assembly Education Committee without a hearing.

SB 217 (Portantino) of 2019 would have established various requirements for organized and recreational camps to comply with including for swimming and aquatic activities. SB 217 was held in the Senate Health Committee.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

California Association of Recreation & Park Districts
Coastal Conservation Association of California

Opposition

None on file

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