

Good Afternoon, Delegate Henson, and respected committee members.

Last Tuesday, when President Biden delivered his State of the Union address, he took time to implore Congress to “do more on mental health, especially for our children,” citing the fact that “millions of young people are struggling with bullying, violence, [and] trauma.” As someone who had to leave school in the face of bullying to preserve his mental health, I could not have agreed more, and I thank the President for drawing attention to situations like my own.

When racist graffiti appeared at Salisbury University threatening another Sandy Hook massacre, the first thing that entered my head was not “who could have done this?” as you might expect. As a young black man, I’m no stranger to confronting racist threats, even in our schools. I know the answer, and it’s terrifying: anybody could have done it, including people with whom I take classes and share a living space.

The next question a person asks himself in that position is, “is this just an idle threat or could they actually act on it?” And, unfortunately, we all know the answer. They absolutely can - as someone who remembers Virginia Tech and, more recently, Magruder High in Smithsburg, knows all too well. Yet, I was told to put on blinders and focus on my studies. To be clear, I tried to. I tried to reach out and seek help. But my concerns over my own safety were all-encompassing and made it impossible to function. This was no different than if I had suffered a debilitating physical injury: with every fiber in my being I wanted to continue my education, but it was simply impossible to accomplish.

When my story made the news, the main focus was on how unresponsive the University administration was at first. For my purposes, the faculty who I spoke to about my situation were compassionate and, to the best of their ability, helpful. However, they knew that their hands were tied by regulations that refused to give mental anguish its place alongside physical injury, which affected the tone with which they approached my case. Rather than doing everything in their power to help me restore mental balance, they ultimately worsened matters by emphasizing that my situation was about to cost my family thousands of dollars - absolutely the last thing you want to hear in the middle of a crisis.

Our doctors, our politicians, and our society are finally coming to the important conclusion that mental health *is* health. Mental anguish and trauma *are* anguish and trauma. And to treat pain and suffering of the mind as lesser than pain and suffering of the body does a grave disservice to millions of students who are currently suffering in silence - or worse, being told that their suffering isn’t genuine.

Thank you, Delegate Henson, for your ceaseless efforts to protect all students who find themselves in crisis, regardless of the cause and irrespective of how the symptoms appear. As someone fortunate enough to live in a state with one of our nation’s best educational systems, I look forward to future generations of students being able to more fully engage with their education, free of penalty for simply encountering one of life’s many challenges. To the committee at large, I appreciate your taking the time to hear my testimony, and I wish you all the best.