

Written Testimony

HB612 Written Testimony – Ways and Means Committee (2/12 at 1:00 PM)

Public Schools - Lifesaver Schools Program - Establishment

Montgomery County, Maryland Association of Student Councils

Azimullah Rifai – Poolesville High School

Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, and members of the Ways and Means Committee:

My name is Azimullah Rifai and I am a student from Montgomery County. I serve in positions of leadership in both the Montgomery County Regional-SGA and the Maryland Association of Student Councils subcommittees, organizations that have favored the House Bill 612 (HB612) Lifesaver School Program bill. I am writing today to urge a favorable committee report on HB612 on behalf of Maryland students.

The need for this legislation is urgent. Mental health struggles are lived by students in virtually every environment, unfolding in classrooms, cafeterias, and homes. Unfortunately, I have witnessed firsthand the devastating impact of such struggles, both as a student and through my experiences working in hospitals, clinics, and emergency services across Maryland. But I know this because I have seen it firsthand—most painfully, in one of my first childhood friends.

The loss of my friend's father turned his world upside down. As he stopped showing up to class and barely spoke to me when we were together, I still tried my best to help, yet I felt powerless. I wish I could say our school stepped in, but in reality, he was just another student slipping through the cracks of a system that failed to recognize mental health as a priority. Schools are supposed to be a foundation for growth and learning, yet too many of them treat mental health as an afterthought. Too often, schools react **only after** tragedy has struck, scrambling for solutions when the damage is already done. **We cannot afford to wait.**

This is why HB612 is essential. By creating a framework where schools can be proactive rather than reactive, this bill recognizes schools that **establish evidence-based first aid training, mental health wellness programs or peer mentoring programs, and school-wide assemblies on mental health resources, providing an opportunity to shift the culture around mental health in schools.** Crucially, this bill does not impose financial barriers, allowing schools to partner with county boards of education to leverage existing mental health resources. Given the dire needs of students across Maryland, mental health must receive the same attention that physical health receives through nurses and trainings.

Ultimately, schools should be safe spaces where students feel supported and understood, not places where they are left to navigate mental health challenges alone. With HB612, we can begin to take the necessary steps to achieve this goal. Therefore, I request a favorable committee report for HB612. Thank you for your time and support.