

# **Katherine Albert - HB461 Favorable Testimony.docx**

Uploaded by: Albert, Katherine

Position: FAV

**TO:** Chairman Pinsky, Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee, Senate of Maryland

**FROM:** Katherine Albert  
Student, Mount Hebron High School  
PTSA Youth Mental Health Advocacy Team

**DATE:** March 22, 2021

**RE:** **SUPPORT - HB461** - Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs

I am writing to ask you to please support HB461, *Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs*. This bill would give students the option to take time off during the school year as an excused absence to address their mental health needs.

As a current junior in high school, and someone who has experienced the effects of negative mental health on my well-being and the well-being of others, I know how important mental health is for students. This is a topic that affects everyone, yet the stigma surrounding it prevents students from seeking and receiving the help and support they need to thrive both academically and socially in school.

Personally, much of my high school experience has been altered as a result of mental illness. Transitioning from middle school to the new world of high school was not an easy task for me, and the stress of added schoolwork and responsibilities, as well as my personal feelings, led to constant stress and anxiety. This later led to my formal diagnosis of anxiety and depression.

The stress of transitioning between middle and high school with limited resources and support led to my use of coping skills that had a negative impact on my health. I focused on my schoolwork more than my own health because I was afraid that if I took even a class period to talk to someone, I would fall behind in class. My inability to cope in a positive way created more problems for me that year, and I was eventually unable to focus on my treatment because of the academic stress I was under. However, I was eventually able to get the help I needed, and I learned how to channel my emotions in a more positive way.

Even though I'm doing better, I am still dealing with the negative consequences of my mental struggles that took place during my freshman year of high school. Though I have learned how to effectively cope with my depression and anxiety, I am still affected by it every day. Mental health is not something that I can choose not to think about because it does not affect me; I have to think about it every day. I am not "cured", and I never fully will be.

Looking back, I can attest to the fact that being able to take days off from school would have helped me to address my mental problems. Excused absences for mental health would have given me better access to needed support and provided relief during my worst days. I would have been able to take a step back and focus on something other than the constant pressure of keeping up with my academics. I wholeheartedly feel that the ability to have excused mental health days for students would not only lift some of the stigma around mental health in schools, but also provide a safe and stressless time for students to get the help and support we need. Mental health is a critical issue for everyone, and

it affects all students whether or not we address it. I believe that HB461 is a valuable step in the right direction towards improving our students' mental health care.

Thank you for your consideration of my testimony. I hope that you will vote for a favorable report on HB461, if you are a member of a committee that considers this bill, or vote to pass this bill when you have the opportunity.

# **Jillian Amodio remarks.pdf**

Uploaded by: Amodio, Jillian

Position: FAV

Hello,

My name is Jillian Amodio, I am a mother of two and founder of Moms for Mental Health. I am writing in favor of the new bill that would allow for excused absences for mental health needs. One doesn't have to look far to recognize that mental health is of huge concern. If this past year has taught us anything, it is that our mental health and wellness is imperative to meeting our needs as social and emotional beings. While work ethic, determination, and perseverance are characteristics to be taught and valued, so too is it important to teach self care, compassion, and grace in the face of difficulty. We must be taught to not only recognize, but to honor our limitations.

Human beings are not machines, we are intricately and delicately designed wonders who deserve to be treated with the utmost care and respect. If we continue to push ourselves when our minds and bodies need a break, if we continue to ignore the warning signs that we are on the edge of burnout, and if we continue to put the expectations of others above our own needs, it is only a matter of time before our minds and bodies suffer the consequences.

Our physical health is no more important than our mental health. Both should be tended to. Just as we take off of work or school if we are suffering a physical illness, so too should we be encouraged to take a day as needed to tend to our mental health and emotional needs as well. It is through encouraging compassion towards oneself that we as a society move towards a place of greater acceptance, great respect, and greater love for all.

We are worth more than the time we spend in a classroom and a cubicle, and if we truly wish to see our youth rise to their full potential, we must do what we can to encourage them to take the time they need to be at their best. One does not move mountains exhausted and defeated, one moves mountains when they have been given the support and reprieve they need to recharge and face life's challenges revived and refreshed.

# **Mental Health Day Position Paper - MD Senate.pdf**

Uploaded by: Ballman, Ben

Position: FAV

Dear Delegates,

My name is Benedict Ballman, I am a senior at Winston Churchill High School in Montgomery County, district 15. I am also the founder of [DMV Students for Mental Health Reform](#), a coalition of students and clubs advocating for improvements to student mental health resources and education. In this way, I am speaking on behalf of students across the state of Maryland. I am writing to ask you to support HB0461, Mental Health Days for public school students.

I slept an average of three or four hours per night during my junior year of high school. Juggling school, sports, extracurriculars, and more, I constantly felt one mistake away from letting it all crumble. Unfortunately, this kind of high school experience is not an anomaly -- in fact, it is now the norm. Any student aiming to achieve a higher education must play sports, participate in extracurriculars, and engage in school clubs and activities on top of good grades -- anything to set themselves apart from their *competitors* in the college application process. And that does not even begin to account for the huge number of students who have to work part-time jobs to support their family, take care of younger siblings, or manage other responsibilities. The stress of high school came to a head my junior year. The anxiety of academics, the perpetual game of catch-up with my ever-increasing extracurricular workload, the fear of my future, and the burden of everything else that accompanies adolescence whittled away at me. Some days it confined me to my bed, unable to get out. I felt trapped in a cycle of ever escalating work. But even more than that, I felt alone. I stayed quiet about what I was going through, because I thought I was the only one to have gone through it. It has taken me a long time to realize, through my own passion and research about the mental health epidemic, that my feelings are shared and commonplace. With data showing a consistent decline in student mental health over the past few decades, and with the COVID-19 pandemic amplifying and exacerbating problems for students, we are struggling. Now more than ever, we need you to support us. I strongly believe that implementing Mental Health Days in schools across the state of Maryland would help to support student mental health.

To preface, I am defining mental health as the emotional, psychological, and social well-being of a given person. That being said, mental health is not simply the absence of a mental illness. Mental health lies on a spectrum, not oversimplified binaries like 'depressed' or 'not depressed', 'student with a mental health problem' or 'flourishing student.' Mental health is the summation of several complex factors within an individual's life, all of which must be considered.

In recent years, youth mental health has been rapidly developing into a crisis across America. Students everywhere are struggling with conditions like depression, anxiety, and substance use, among others. And as stated previously, even those students who are not diagnosed with a specific mental illness are often caught in a gray area, wherein their lack of mental health is still detrimental to their wellbeing. In the past decade alone, there has been a 10.6% increase in high school students who experience persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness (CDC, 2019). This increase brought the total percent to 36.7% in 2019 (CDC, 2019). For well over a third of students in America, poor mental health is a *daily* struggle. Even more disturbingly, the percent of children and adolescents admitted to hospitals for suicidal ideation or self-harm has more than doubled in the past decade (Plemmons, 2017). This is reflected by suicide becoming the second leading cause of death for adolescents in America (CDC, 2019). Rather than a silent burden that many would endure in past decades, the poor mental health of students is being thrust into the national limelight. The mental health crisis is no longer confined to the minds of students. It now occupies the obituaries.

Maryland is not excluded from this crisis. Maryland saw an increase of 8.6% in its suicide rate in this past decade (CDC, 2016), consistent with national trends. Also consistent with the nation, just below a third of Maryland high school students felt persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness (Maryland Department of Health, 2019). Meanwhile, almost *one fifth* of students in Maryland seriously considered

suicide (Maryland Department of Health, 2019). That is a problem. The entire front row of a regular thirty student class should not see suicide as their only option.

Sadly, the COVID-19 pandemic is only intensifying these concerning trends. The stress students are experiencing as a result of the pandemic has been extremely detrimental to our mental health. A recent CDC Report from August 2020 showed that symptoms of anxiety have tripled, and depression symptoms have quadrupled for adults in the US (CDC, 2020). The pandemic has affected students in the same way it has affected adults, so why should the resulting impact be any different? Just like adults, financial instability, familial conflict, constant anxiety, and persistent fear for our own safety, and that of our loved ones, has weighed on students. These hardships are not only hurting students, but predisposing them to mental illnesses like depression, anxiety, and more (Guessoum, 2020). Above all else, however, social isolation has taken its toll on students. As everyone can remember from their childhood and teenage years, our relationships are vital to our development and wellbeing. But that has been stripped away from us: we are no longer able to decompress with friends, no longer have school as a reprieve from home life, no longer able to practice with teammates. Students are alone right now. Extended periods of isolation like these have been directly linked to increases in suicidal ideation and/or behavior (McClelland, 2020). During this pandemic, students' mental health is at just as much risk as our physical health. It is time that we heed the warnings of researchers and experts, and act to support student mental health.

In this vein, establishing Mental Health Days across schools in Maryland will support the mental health of students, especially in this trying time. Mental Health Days are excused absences from school for mental health related reasons. Just how a student is allowed to take a sick day because they do not have the capacity to learn or work while struggling with physical symptoms, mental health days allow students who are experiencing symptoms of poor mental health to take time off school. Mental Health Days give students the ability to take a break from the stresses involved with school and to actively support their own mental health. In addition, enacting state legislation supporting student mental health reduces the stigma surrounding it, increasing the chance that students will seek help. Different variations of mental health days have been implemented in different states, **none of which have required any financial investment by the state**. The Mental Health Day bill in Oregon, for example, allows students to take five Mental Health Days within a three-month span. If a student were to exceed this limit, then they would have to meet with a counselor to check in on the student's wellbeing. Limits such as these prevent students from abusing Mental Health Days, an understandable concern among parents, school leaders, and legislators. The limits also help schools to identify which students are struggling, allowing for active prevention of mental illness. A similar approach has been implemented in HB0461.

As previously illustrated, high school today is an incredibly stressful, competitive place. We are facing increasing workloads and more rigorous coursework in school, with diminishing free time and less hours of sleep. This has escalated to the point wherein the number one pressure that students face today is getting good grades, with the need to look good or fit in socially less than half as commonly listed (Pew Research Center, 2019). As Noelle Leonard, PhD from NYU College of Nursing, puts it: The life of a rapidly growing number of high school students is "school, homework, extracurricular activities, sleep, repeat." The chronic stress that students experience as a result begins to disrupt their ability to perform academically, fosters poor mental health, and leads to risky behavior (Leonard, 2015). What's worse, students are given no reprieve from this onslaught of work. Students need Mental Health Days to have a chance to support themselves. Whether school is disrupting them from caring for a diagnosed mental illness, causing increased stress, or resulting in them struggling in any other way, students should have the opportunity to take a break when they need to. A Mental Health Day could be used by students to catch up on sleep, make up missed work, or just to rest. Additionally, Mental Health Days allow students to address aspects of their lives that they are not able to as a result of school. Students' lives are more complex than ever due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On top of the stresses students already face in school, they have to handle familial disputes, financial anxiety, the loss of loved ones, and more. But because of



the barrage of work students receive from school and extracurricular activities, many have difficulty finding the time to properly cope with these struggles. Mental Health Days gives students the respite they need to deal with all the intricate aspects of their lives that affect their mental health, in addition to academics.

This past fall, the Montgomery County Board of Education almost unanimously voted to implement Mental Health Days. The single dissenting vote argued that there were existing avenues for students to take leave for mental health related reasons. However, this opposing argument actually underscores one of the main aspects of establishing Mental Health Days: the direct impacts are just as important as the symbolic ones. On its face, Mental Health Days give students a direct outlet to support their mental health. While some counties do offer recourse if a student needs an absence for mental health related reasons, there is no current state-wide policy supporting this. However, looking past the surface, passing state legislation supporting the mental health of students will serve to decrease the stigma surrounding mental health. By not only acknowledging, but actively supporting student mental health, Maryland would be validating what many students themselves see as weakness or failure. “We have a lot of kids that are dealing with [mental health issues] in silence,” says Jennifer Rothman, senior manager for youth and young adult initiatives for the National Alliance on Mental Health. “They’re embarrassed or they think people are going to judge them and not believe them.” The stigma surrounding mental health prevents students from seeking help when they need it. Overall, young people see the stigma surrounding mental health as the leading barrier to accessing mental health services, with 69.5% of young people perceiving it as a significant barrier to professional support (Bowers, 2012). State action on this topic signals to students that they no longer need to keep their mental health a secret. Instead, students can begin to talk to others around them, build a support system, and seek help from school resources if they need. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, many counties do have an option to request an excused absence for mental health related reasons. Though, this option almost always requires parents calling their students in sick. There are two problems with this option. First, it labels the students' struggle as a sickness. This oversimplification of mental health contributes to the stigma, and prevents any conversation around the student's mental health and wellbeing. Secondly, this option requires students to ask their parents for permission. But, due to the deeply rooted cultural stigma, many students are understandably worried about going to their parents, instead choosing to remain silent. However, having a proper mechanism for Mental Health Days will encourage students to start these crucial conversations with family, friends, and others, as they have tangible government policy to point to as they try to explain and justify their struggle. The de-stigmatization that will result from these conversations will make students feel more supported by their community and increase the likelihood that students seek professional support when they need to. Mental Health Days will “help reduce the stigma” argues John Larson, President of the Oregon Education Association. Students will no longer have to feign sickness, skip school, or lie just to support their own wellbeing. Instead, they can seek support from others in their lives, and address their mental health out in the open.

It is important to acknowledge that this legislation will not single handedly overturn a stigma that has been so heavily ingrained in our society. Many students will remain silent about their mental health needs, and schools currently struggle to identify those students. The structure of mental health services in most schools revolves around the counseling department. If a student needs support, they can go to their counselor. Together the counselor and the student can work to address whatever is going on, involving professional services if needed. But this system relies on either the student actively seeking support, or letting their mental health deteriorate to a breaking point. “As a matter of public policy,” says Debbie Plotnick, vice president of mental health and systems advocacy at Mental Health America, “for decades we have waited until stage four, until crisis” to address the mental health of students. We have never tried to catch students before they fall. And Maryland high schoolers agree, according to a survey I conducted of over 400 Montgomery County students. When asked how well the counseling department at their school actively prevents mental health issues among students, 58.4% selected a 1 or 2 on a scale of 5.

This indicates poor outreach to the student body by the counseling department. The result of the survey is not the fault of the counseling department, but rather the reactionary system of support that schools currently employ. HB0461 establishes Mental Health Days in a similar approach to that of Oregon, giving schools the tools to begin actively identifying and supporting struggling students. In Oregon, each student is given five mental health days within a three-month period. If a student exceeds this, they are required to meet with a counselor. As a policy, this creates an avenue for students to support themselves, while simultaneously enabling schools to practice active prevention of mental illness. Schools would have a device that highlights students in need of support, and be able to provide those students with the resources that already exist on campus.

In an era of deteriorating student mental health, especially now during this unprecedented time of adversity and isolation, students need help. Establishing Mental Health Days at the state level will give us more of an ability to support ourselves, and more of an ability to cope with the hardships we are all currently facing. In addition, Mental Health Days will help to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health, a consistent barrier preventing students from seeking support, and will allow schools to actively prevent mental health issues within the student body. This is a measure with existing language in several other states; requires no financial investment by the state; and it has support from students, parents, and teachers alike. Now, we need your support to help the students of Maryland.

Thank you for your consideration,  
Ben Ballman  
Maryland High Schooler

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Results of my counseling department survey:  
<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1SUtPIIQppua4wS8Bz5UL-8COIESo6jtphfNVXAaRo0Y/edit?usp=sharing>



**HB0461TestimonyAnaNunez\_MHHS PTSA.docx.pdf**

Uploaded by: Bodziak, Caroline

Position: FAV

DATE: March 20, 2021

TO: Chairman Paul G. Pinsky  
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee  
Maryland Senate

FROM: Ana Nunez on behalf of:

- Mt. Hebron High School's PTSA, including but not limited to the Executive Committee and Mental Health Committee
- Sara Tagget, Teacher at Mt. Hebron High School
  - Youth Mental Health Advocacy Team:
  - Student Members: Katherine Albert, Clare Mansour, Colleen Poole
  - Parent Members: Michelle Albert and John Albert
  - PTSA Officers: Caroline Bodziak, PTSA President, and Erinn Camp Mansour, PTSA First Vice President

SUBJECT: **SUPPORT** - HB0461 - Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs

I am writing this letter to express strong support for HB0461 on behalf of myself, my family, our PTSA (concerned parents, teachers and students,) and many others in my community. We ask that you issue a favorable report for this legislation, which ensures that students can get an excused absence to address their mental health needs, with permission from a parent or guardian, and without requiring a note from a physician.

I am a 47-year-old mom, to two teenage daughters, as well as two step-daughters. I've worked full-time for the federal government for over 25 years. I have lived in Maryland all my life. As someone who has experienced trauma, resulting in mental health issues all my life, I am keenly aware of how important mental health is; just as important as physical health. Yet, it was not until I experienced my daughter's mental health issues that I was willing to begin the necessary research, partnering, community involvement and advocacy for this critical topic.

My oldest step-daughter and my youngest daughter both are on medication for depression and anxiety. They both had very difficult times navigating high school, while trying to deal with the height of their mental health concerns at the time.

While there are so many facets and joint solutions to mental health concerns, I know, without a doubt, that had my daughter been able to invoke a mental health day here and there, she would have found some much-needed relief during some of the most exhausting, overwhelming, and downright scary stretches of days of her life. Even with therapy, including dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) classes and group sessions, she still would have trouble as the pressure consistently piled on. A break for a day to re-group would have been extremely beneficial to her and may have prevented some truly self-destructive behaviors.

I have spent the past two years working with the Mt. Hebron High School PTSA and administration, within the Howard County Mental Health Community Action Council, with the Horizon Foundation in Howard County to foster the education, awareness and support needed for our high school students. Our PTSA has received multiple grants to help us with our critical work in mental health, and now we need your support, too. So, I am extending my work to advocacy on a larger scale now. I ask whole-heartedly, for your support for HB0461, as one more step in helping our teenagers learn how to prioritize their mental health and well-being.

# **HB461 (MSC Testimony).pdf**

Uploaded by: DiPietro, Jonathon

Position: FAV



**BILL:** HB0461 - Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs

**SPONSOR:** Delegate Alonzo T. Washington

**POSITION:** FAVORABLE

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Friday, March 26, 2021

### **HB 0461**

Chair Pinsky, Vice Chair Kagan, and Members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee, we are writing in favor of HB0461- Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs.

The Maryland Student Coalition finds it a necessity for students to be allowed inconsequential days off to treat their mental health. For the 180 day school year that is filled with tests, pressures, and other external forces, it should be expected that for minors, additional days off will be needed. In our respective jurisdictions, the school systems have been more than accommodating in allowing students to take a day off for their mental health. They find this as a proactive measure to help student welfare. In some cases, teachers will encourage students to take a day off from school to study or catch up, especially in the most gruesome of weeks. Additionally, adults find the expectation of giving students arguably less flexible workweeks as typical adults unconscionable.

Members of this coalition echo the same concern and recognize the importance of self-care. All of us have experienced tough days and challenging weeks in the education system. The antidote to cure the stress and anxiety that arise during these periods is just a simple break. With the educational setting being a student's fundamental place in society, it should serve a main purpose of treating students with virtue. It does a disservice to student productivity and self-esteem to penalize them for a day off approved by their parent(s)/guardian(s).

For the reasons stated above, we urge the committee to issue a favorable report on HB0461.

# **HB0461 - Senate\_FAV\_MdCSWC\_PS - Student Attendance**

Uploaded by: Kasemeyer, Pam

Position: FAV



## The Maryland Clinical Social Work Coalition

The Mdcswc, sponsored by the Greater Washington Society for Clinical Social Work, represents the interests of more than 9,500 licensed clinical social workers in Maryland.

TO: The Honorable Paul G. Pinsky, Chair  
Members, Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee  
The Honorable Alonzo T. Washington

FROM: Judith Gallant, LCSW-C, Chair, Maryland Clinical Social Work Coalition

DATE: March 30, 2021

RE: **SUPPORT** – House Bill 461 – *Public Schools – Student Attendance – Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs*

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The Maryland Clinical Social Work Coalition (Mdcswc), sponsored by the Greater Washington Society for Clinical Social Work, represents the interests of more than 9,500 licensed clinical social workers in Maryland. On behalf of Mdcswc, we **support** House Bill 461.

House Bill 461, as amended by the House, provides that absences from school for mental health needs are lawful absences, prohibits the requirement of a physician's written excuse for those absences, requires the permission of a parent or guardian, and specifies that a student meet with a school mental health professional upon return. The increase in the incidences of mental health issues in children, particularly adolescents, is well-documented. Addressing these needs requires a broad range of services but also must recognize that even if not severe, a mental health issue in a child may make school attendance challenging and not in the child's best interest on a given day. House Bill 461 provides some flexibility in attendance policy to recognize the need for time off without a requirement to document that need by a physician. It is a small change in policy with the potential to help those students experiencing mental health issues, as well as their parents or guardians, relieve one point of stress. A favorable report is requested.

**For more information call:**

Pamela Metz Kasemeyer  
Danna L. Kauffman  
410-244-7000

Greater Washington Society for Clinical Social Work: [www.gwscsw.org](http://www.gwscsw.org)

**Contacts:** Coalition Chair: Judy Gallant, LCSW-C; email: [jg708@columbia.edu](mailto:jg708@columbia.edu); mobile (301) 717-1004  
Legislative Consultant: Pamela Metz Kasemeyer, Schwartz, Metz & Wise PA, 20 West Street, Annapolis, MD 21401

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# **Clare Mansour - HB461 Favorable Senate Testimony.**

Uploaded by: Mansour, Clare

Position: FAV

**TO:** Chairman Pinsky - Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee, Maryland Senate

**FROM:** Clare Mansour  
Junior, Mount Hebron High School  
PTSA Youth Mental Health Advocacy Team

**DATE:** March 22, 2021

**RE:** **SUPPORT - HB461** - Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs

Hello everyone, my name is Clare Mansour. I'm a Junior at Mount Hebron High School, and I believe that passing this mental health bill would be incredibly beneficial to struggling students. As someone who suffers from clinical anxiety and ADHD, I cannot stress enough how often I wished I could just take a day to relax and recharge my brain after weeks of overloading it.

High school is an incredibly stressful time for many people; the immense pressure to make life-altering decisions alone would be more than enough to burn out a young mind. Teens also have to try balancing unstable social lives, an overwhelming workload, non-academic responsibilities, and more. Even for a neurotypically healthy teenager, high school is mentally taxing. For students suffering from mental illnesses, high school essentially forces them to tie both hands behind their backs and then expects them to keep up with everyone else.

According to the Washington Post, "A study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ... showed that the rate of suicide increased by 56 percent from 2007 to 2017 among people ages 10 to 24. Suicide, in recent years, has become the second-most-common cause of death among teens and young adults. It has overtaken homicides and is outpaced only by accidents." (See attached article) Despite these statistics, in other states like Oregon where students worked to promote policies similar to HB461, there was strong opposition to granting mental health days for students, arguing that students would abuse the system. In response, I ask those who may be opposed to this bill, if it is fair to rob students who desperately need mental health days just because a few students might misuse them? Is it worth risking their health and safety just because some students might spend a day or two slacking off?

There is a definite stigma of exhibiting any signs of wavering mental health, because it's often seen as weakness, and it has undoubtedly led to a dangerous lack of empathy. My school community is working hard to combat this stigma, encouraging students to ask staff and other trusted adults for help with mental health struggles when we need it. However, the public school system is struggling to accommodate and support students with the mental health problems they are experiencing. When a stomachache is considered an acceptable reason to miss class, but depression or a panic attack is not, it seems like the school system is contradicting itself. If we are to provide a consistent message, we must collectively acknowledge mental health as any other sickness or injury. Our first step is to pass this bill and let students know their schools value their mental health just as much as their physical health.

Thank you for listening to my testimony and I hope you will support and pass HB461.

## Schools now letting students stay home sick for mental-health days

By **William Wan**



Oct. 22, 2019 at 7:00 a.m. EDT

In the face of rising rates of depression, anxiety and suicide among young people, some states and school systems have started allowing students to take mental sick days off from school.

Last year, Utah changed its definition of valid excuses for absences to include mental health issues. This summer, Oregon enacted a law — driven by a group of high school student activists — that allows students to take days off for mental health.

Students in other states, including Colorado, Florida and Washington, are attempting to get similar laws passed.

“High school can be a lonely, difficult place to begin with,” said Hailey Hardcastle, 19, who spent months lobbying for the Oregon law as a high school senior. “But there’s so much more pressure these days — getting into college, the social pressure, even just the state of the world and what you’re exposed to with climate change, and everything going on with politics. A lot of times it can feel like the world is about to end.”

Hardcastle and others encountered skepticism and resistance from lawmakers who worried that students would use mental health days as an excuse to skip school or that such a law would coddle young people.

But mental health problems among youths have been on a steady, alarming rise in recent years. A study this year showed a steeper hike in reports of mental distress, depression and suicidal thoughts among teens and young adults than in people of other ages.

Suicidal thoughts among teens ages 18 or 19 increased 46 percent from 2008 to 2017, and suicide attempts among people ages 22 or 23 have doubled. A study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention this month showed that the rate of suicide increased by 56 percent from 2007 to 2017 among people ages 10 to 24. Suicide, in recent years, has become the second-most-common cause of death among teens and young adults. It has overtake homicides and is outpaced only by accidents.

Experts cannot easily explain the mental illness epidemic among youths. Some have attributed it to lack of community, the rise of social media, bullying or less sleep.

“I don’t think there’s one single answer,” said Jennifer Rothman, a senior manager at the National Alliance on Mental Illness. “But we know there’s a real need to do something about it. And these mental sick days are a way to at least end the silence and talk about the problem.”



In Oregon, the idea for mental sick days came up at a summer camp of student leaders from high schools throughout

In Oregon, the idea for mental sick days came up at a summer camp of student leaders from high schools throughout the state, said Hardcastle and others who attended. Many students talked about suicides by friends and friends of friends. Some talked openly about their own struggles with mental illness.

The student leaders created a new group — Students for a Healthy Oregon — and enlisted the help of psychologists and lobbyists to volunteer as advisers.

“We helped them figure out which legislators they needed to get on board and things like how to organize a letter-writing campaign,” said Robin Henderson, a psychologist and chief executive for behavioral health for the Providence Medical Group in Oregon. “It was surprising the amount of pushback they got.”

Before the law, Oregon students could have up to five days of excused absences in a three-month period for physical illness, doctor or dentist appointments or a family emergency. Outside those circumstances, they often would not be allowed to make up tests or homework they missed.

Some lawmakers grilled the students on their proposal. At a legislative hearing in April, state Sen. Mark Hass (D) told the students, “One of the things we’re dealing with up here is chronic absenteeism . . . that affects graduation rates.”

State Sen. Dallas Heard (R) said he believes students need to toughen up: “If we simply just start saying . . . that there really is no consequence for ramping up this idea that we should not have to come to work or practice or to school because we’re having a bad day . . . I’m concerned that’s going to continue to start eroding our society to the point where we have much, much bigger issues.”

Heard also worried about the effect on athletes: “If they’re a starter on the team, should [they] still be able to start even if the rest of the team is not missing practice?”

“Life is going to get a lot harder,” Heard told the students.

Trying to answer the lawmakers’ concerns, high school senior Derek Evans responded, “The bottom line of this is there will be students that will abuse the system but there will be students that this will save.”

Evans talked about his struggles with anxiety and depression, and how recently — after being a longtime 4.0 student — he had to take four days off for mental health and was sternly warned by administrators that he would fail if he did not return to school immediately.

“The system appears not to support our students but to force them into classes when they are far from healthy,” Evans said.

Allowing students to take mental sick days could help parents and counselors take notice and spark conversations, other students argued at the hearings.

“One the biggest problems that persists with mental health is the stigma around it,” Amit Paley, CEO and executive director of the LGBTQ youth suicide prevention group the Trevor Project, said in an interview. “If a young person can feel comfortable saying ‘I need help,’ that can be life-changing for a young person. It’s really different than having to lie about what’s going on just to take a sick day.”

This summer, after a year of lobbying, letter writing and testifying at their state capitol, the students in Oregon got their bill signed into law and enacted. Since then, they have been advising student leaders in other states who are interested in getting similar laws passed.



interested in getting similar laws passed.

In Colorado, students are working with local officials to try to introduce a bill when the state legislature reconvenes in January.

“There’s been a lot of talk about mental health because of the school shootings we’ve had,” said Ethan Reed, a high school junior and a leader in the effort.

President Trump and others have blamed mass shootings on mental illness, but studies show other factors are more strongly associated with the attacks, such as a strong sense of resentment and access to guns.

Reed and other student advocates, as well as many education officials, have focused on students who have been traumatized by school shootings, including one in June at a Colorado STEM school, and other students who fear that their classrooms could be next. “I know a lot of youth in our community who are still hurting from it,” said Reed, who sits on a state school safety group. “Something like this would help.”

Meanwhile, the high school student leaders in Oregon are trying to pass a second bill this year that would incorporate mental health into physical-health checkups that are already carried out in Oregon schools every year.

“The whole experience of passing the bill, it’s makes you realize you can change things,” said Hardcastle, now a freshman at the University of Oregon. “You don’t have to have special connections. You just have to speak up and be passionate.”





**HB 461 - Support - MPS WPS (Senate).pdf**

Uploaded by: Tompsett, Thomas

Position: FAV



March 26, 2021

The Honorable Paul G. Pinsky  
Senate Education, Health, & Environmental Affairs Committee  
2 West, Miller Senate Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: Support – HB 461: Public Schools- Student Attendance- Excused Absence for Mental Health Needs

Dear Chairman Pinsky and Honorable Members of the Committee:

The Maryland Psychiatric Society (MPS) and the Washington Psychiatric Society (WPS) are state medical organizations whose physician members specialize in diagnosing, treating, and preventing mental illnesses, including substance use disorders. Formed more than sixty-five years ago to support the needs of psychiatrists and their patients, both organizations work to ensure available, accessible, and comprehensive quality mental health resources for all Maryland citizens; and strives through public education to dispel the stigma and discrimination of those suffering from a mental illness. As the district branches of the American Psychiatric Association covering the state of Maryland, MPS and WPS represent over 1000 psychiatrists and physicians currently in psychiatric training.

MPS and WPS originally filed opposition to House Bill 461: Public Schools- Student Attendance- Excused Absence for Mental Health Needs (HB 461) for a variety of reasons. As amended, however, MPS and WPS **now support** HB 461. Specifically, the Societies appreciate the addition of a mental health professional following up with a student who takes a mental health absence. Such a practice will hopefully help prevent reinforcing school avoidant behaviors and either help to identify a problem and/or get the student into treatment if necessary.

MPS & WPS thanks the Sponsor and the House for the thoughtful amendments to the bill and ask the Committee for a favorable report. If you have any questions with regard to this testimony, please feel free to contact Thomas Tompsett Jr at [tommy.tompsett@mdlobbyist.com](mailto:tommy.tompsett@mdlobbyist.com).

Respectfully submitted,  
The Maryland Psychiatric Society and the Washington Psychiatric Society  
Joint Legislative Action Committee

**EHE - HB461 - ATW.pdf**

Uploaded by: Washington, Alonzo

Position: FAV

ALONZO T. WASHINGTON  
*Legislative District 22*  
Prince George's County

—  
*Vice Chair*  
Ways and Means Committee

—  
Chair, Education Subcommittee



The Maryland House of Delegates  
6 Bladen Street, Room 131  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401  
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## THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

### **Testimony in Support of HB461 - Public Schools – Student Attendance – Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs**

HB461 allows Maryland students to take mental health days as an excused absence. It is no secret that mental illness remains an enormous problem among this current generation of students. Over 70% of teens say that anxiety and depression are major issues among their peers.

Even more concerning, 17% of Maryland students seriously consider suicide. That is roughly one out of every six of our children who are having to go into the classroom carrying this immense mental and emotional burden. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says suicide is the third leading cause of death for Maryland youth.

As our students start coming back into the classroom, they will also be carrying the physical and emotional trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic with them. Many of our students have fallen ill or have had a loved one pass away as a result of the virus. This legislation becomes essential to ensure our students have every resource at their disposal to take care of their mental health.

HB461 will additionally help to de-stigmatize the issue of mental health for our students. It is important for students who suffer from mental illness to understand that these conditions are in fact very common - between 10 to 15 percent of all young people are suffering from depressive symptoms at any one time. Students should have the ability to take a day off and utilize the resources available to them to ensure their well-being and academic success.

Other States, such as Oregon and Utah, have implemented similar measures in recent years. Maryland needs to take this necessary step to ensure our students' mental health needs are met – and to ensure we are treating mental health and physical health with the same degree of seriousness.

To ensure that our students are getting the follow up they need, the bill includes a requirement that a counselor or other school mental health specialist checks in with a student after they take a mental health day. It also requires a written note from a parent in order for the absence to be excused, so that families are aware of the situation their student is going through.

This bill does not aim to completely solve the issue of mental illness among our youth, but simply seeks to alleviate some of their daily anxiety by giving our students a small reprieve every quarter when they need it.

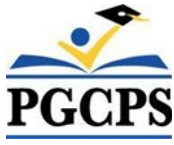
Additionally, this bill was passed unanimously by the Ways and Means committee, and moved through the House of Delegates by a 131-1 vote.

For these reasons, I respectfully ask for a favorable report on HB461.

# Testimony HB 461.pdf

Uploaded by: White, Erica

Position: FAV



**PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY  
BOARD OF EDUCATION**  
14201 School Lane, Upper Marlboro, MD  
20772

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Title: Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs  
Bill Number: **HB 461** Position: **Favorable**  
Hearing Date: March 30, 2021  
Committee: Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs  
Contact: Erica M. White, Esq. – (301) 952-6048

As amended, House Bill 461 requires a local board of education to excuse an absence due to a student's mental health needs as a lawful absence, without the need for a doctor's note. This bill also requires the student to have permission from a parent or guardian, and to meet with a school mental health specialist upon returning to school.

Addressing the mental health needs of students has been the cornerstone of ensuring that they are present and ready to learn during distance learning. It has been identified by many stakeholders, students and parents, as a confounding reason for academic and social disengagement which has rendered many students vulnerable. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated mental health conditions for many students with pre-existing stressors and has created new struggles for students who had otherwise been able to cope. School systems across the nation have now realized that mental health support is critical in supporting the whole child. House Bill 461 will assist the school system in our efforts to support students' mental health needs beyond the current pandemic.

This bill will also allow us to hold students harmless in being able to attend to their mental health needs by using a lawful absence.

For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on HB 461. Thank you for your consideration.

# **MAYSB - HB 461 FWA - Mental Health Absence - Senat**

Uploaded by: Park, Liz

Position: FWA



*"Being here for Maryland's Children, Youth, and Families"*

**Testimony submitted to Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee**

**March 30, 2021**

**House Bill 461 – Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for  
Mental Health Needs**

**Support with Amendments**

The Maryland Association of Youth Service Bureaus, which represents a statewide network of Youth Service Bureaus (YSBs) throughout the State of Maryland, supports House Bill 461, Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs, with amendments being offered by Senator Lam. YSBs provide prevention, intervention and treatment services to at-risk youth and work with many youth experiencing mental health related issues. This bill will provide a needed resource to students when they are experiencing a mental health issue or crisis.

MAYSB supports young people being able to take a “sick day” for any health reason, including behavioral health. We are concerned, however, with the amendments added to the bill in the House because they create a complicated system, create a new and questionable definition of a mental health professional, and could unintentionally lead to the stigmatization around mental health.

We have been working with Senator Lam on amendments, and we believe, those he has offered to this bill make it a meaningful bill that strikes a balance between making resources available to families without unnecessarily stigmatizing children.

We respectfully ask you to support this bill with amendments.

Respectfully Submitted:

Liz Park, PhD  
MAYSB Chair  
[lpark@greenbeltmd.gov](mailto:lpark@greenbeltmd.gov)



# **HB 461.Mental Health Days - SENATE.pdf**

Uploaded by: Woolums, John

Position: FWA

**BILL:** House Bill 461  
**TITLE:** Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for  
Mental Health Needs  
**DATE:** March 30, 2021  
**POSITION:** SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS  
**COMMITTEE:** Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs  
**CONTACT:** John R. Woolums, Esq.

The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) supports House Bill 461 with amendments to clarify the proposed mandate that a student meet with school personnel following an excused absence for mental health reasons.

Local boards recognize and respect the role of limited unexcused absences for student health reasons including mental, emotional, and behavioral health issues. However, MABE does not support amending State law to refer to mental health issues alone as such a type of lawful absence to be clear, MABE opposed this legislation as introduced to stipulate that one day per marking period be recognized as a lawful absence for mental health reasons.

In the context of state law and regulations, MABE firmly believes that school systems should be accorded the discretion to develop and implement local student attendance policies and programs to promote regular school attendance and reduce truancy. From the federal Every Student Succeeds Act to the Blueprint for Maryland's Future Act, policy-makers and educators agree that student attendance is paramount to their individual educational progress and success.

State regulations, under COMAR 13A.08.01.03 already thoroughly describe the conditions under which a student is lawfully absent from school, and reasonably provide that proof in the form of a written note from the doctor's office is not required unless the absences are continuous. In the alternative to legislation, MABE continues to prefer the revision of the regulations to more clearly include references not only to physical illness but also mental, emotional, and behavioral health issues.

For these reasons, MABE requests a favorable report on House Bill 461 with an amendment to replace SHALL with MAY in line 18 on page 2 of the bill.

**2021 MSPA HB 461 Senate Side.pdf**

Uploaded by: Faulkner, Rachael

Position: INFO



Delegate Paul G. Pinsky, Chair  
Delegate Cheryl C. Kagan, Vice Chair  
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee  
2 West, Miller Senate Office Building  
Annapolis, MD 21401

**Bill: House Bill 461 – Public Schools – Student Attendance – Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs**

**Letter of Information**

Dear Chairman Pinsky, Vice Chair Kagan, and Members of the Committee:

I am writing on behalf of the Maryland School Psychologists' Association (MSPA), a professional organization representing about 500 school psychologists in Maryland. We advocate for the social-emotional, behavioral, and academic wellbeing of students and families across the state.

This letter is to provide information related to House Bill 461, which would allow lawful absences under certain circumstances related to mental health needs of students. MSPA supports the intent of this bill. However, as amended in the House, we have concerns regarding its potential implementation.

First, the bill appears to create a new category of school staff called "School Mental Health Specialist" (page 2, line 2). This language is not found in COMAR currently and is not used by any local education agency, union, or MSDE. Another significant problem is the inclusion of psychometrist under this category (page 2, line 5). Psychometrists, under COMAR Section 13a.12.03.07 work under the supervision of a school psychologist to assist the school psychologist in "administering psychological tests and other related psychometric tasks." Their training does not include any mental health-related coursework or field experience. While psychometrists are not widely used in Maryland, and not used at all in most LEAs, it poses a significant problem to identify them as a specialist in mental health.

We are also concerned about the possibility of singling out and stigmatizing mental health needs. COMAR 13A.08.01.03 describes conditions that allow for a lawful absence from school. Mental health conditions should be considered no different than any other health-related absence. A simple revision of this section could more clearly indicate that absences are lawful for physical illness as well as mental health issues.

We are also concerned about schools' capacities to be in compliance with section D (page 2, lines 18-22). While we support the intention behind this section, school-employed mental health providers (school psychologists, school counselors, & school social workers) are already working beyond capacity in our public schools. Staff-to-student ratios in Maryland are significantly worse than national standards. This new potential influx of students may not be manageable with current staffing.

Again, MSPA supports the wonderful intentions of Del. Washington and this legislation. However, as currently written and amended, the bill poses significant problems. If we can provide any additional information or be of any assistance, please contact us at [legislative@mSPAonline.org](mailto:legislative@mSPAonline.org) or Rachael Faulkner at [rfaulkner@policypartners.net](mailto:rfaulkner@policypartners.net) or (410) 693-4000.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kyle Potter". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "K".

Kyle Potter, Ph.D., NCSP  
Chair, Legislative Committee  
Maryland School Psychologists' Association