

**FAV-HB118-Del Washington EHEA.pdf**

Uploaded by: Alonzo Washington

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  
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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

**Testimony in Support of HB118 - Public Schools – Student Attendance – Excused Absences  
for Mental Health Needs**

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. HB118 aims to help tackle this issue by allowing Maryland students to take mental health days as an excused absence.

The data we have regarding our student's mental health continues to grow more concerning. 18% of Maryland students seriously consider suicide during their teen years. 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.

With Maryland students now back in the classroom, they carry the physical and emotional trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic with them. Many 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.

HB118 will additionally help to de-stigmatize the issue of mental health for our students. It is important for our young people 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.

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 when they need it.

For these reasons, I respectfully request for a favorable report on HB118.

# **HB118\_MD Youth Advisory Council\_Fav.pdf**

Uploaded by: Christina Drushel Williams

Position: FAV



Maryland Youth Advisory Council  
c/o Governor's Office of Crime  
Prevention, Youth, and Victim Services  
100 Community Place,  
Crownsville, MD 21032

James Mu, *Chair*  
Ricky Bridges, *Vice-Chair*  
Jason Park, *Secretary*

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March 22, 2022

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

**Re: HB 118**  
**Position: Support**

Dear Chairman Pinsky:

The Maryland Youth Advisory Council prides itself on being a group of young adults who work to serve as a voice for youth in the state of Maryland. As leaders in our communities and in our State, and as appointees of the Governor, President of the Senate, Speaker of the House, Maryland Association of Student Councils, Maryland Higher Education Commission, and the University System of Maryland, we take every opportunity to advise legislators and the Governor regarding issues facing youth.

**HB 118** allows students to receive excused absences for mental health. The Council strongly supports the bill as it aligns with the Council's focus on mental health and well-being in our Legislative Platform and as a legislative priority for the last two years.

The pandemic has highlighted the need for more mental health support among youth. A recent study in *Jama Pediatrics*<sup>1</sup> found that symptoms of depression and anxiety among adolescents have doubled since the onset of the pandemic. Providing the ability for students to focus on themselves, students will be more productive and better able to engage in their learning if they can take the much-needed time, in the form of a mental health day, to address their immediate health and well-being. The General Assembly must consider a holistic approach to supporting students inside and outside of the classroom, and allow students to take time for themselves to address their mental health needs.

There has been a focus on protecting physical health during COVID-19, however, the mental health of youth cannot be forgotten. Mental health poses a greater challenge than physical health. Unlike a physical illness, mental health involves a long process of healing and support. It can take years to recover from the mental distress caused by the pandemic, and schools need to implement policies to support the mental health needs of students. This bill is one step forward in creating that supportive school environment. The Council respectfully requests a favorable vote on **HB 118**.

Sincerely,

James Mu, Chair  
Maryland Youth Advisory Council

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<sup>1</sup> Racine N, McArthur BA, Cooke JE, Eirich R, Zhu J, Madigan S. Global Prevalence of Depressive and Anxiety Symptoms in Children and Adolescents During COVID-19: A Meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatrics*. 2021;175(11): 1142–1150. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2021.2482 (<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2782796>)

# **HB0118 - Senate\_FAV\_MdCSWC\_PS - Student Attendance**

Uploaded by: Christine Krone

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 23, 2022

RE: **SUPPORT** – House Bill 118 – *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 118.

House Bill 118 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 118 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:**

Christine K. Krone  
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 Consultants: Pamela Metz Kasemeyer and Christine Krone, Schwartz, Metz & Wise PA, 20 West Street, Annapolis, MD 21401

Email: [pmetz@smwpa.com](mailto:pmetz@smwpa.com); mobile (410) 746-9003 ; [ckrone@smwpa.com](mailto:ckrone@smwpa.com); mobile (410) 940-9165

**HB118 Absences for Mental Health Needs 3.23.22.pdf**

Uploaded by: Jeanette Ortiz

Position: FAV



## HB118 PUBLIC SCHOOLS - STUDENT ATTENDANCE - EXCUSED ABSENCES FOR MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

March 23, 2022

EDUCATION, HEALTH, AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

### SUPPORT

Jeanette Ortiz, Esq., Legislative & Policy Counsel (410.703.5352)

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Anne Arundel County Public Schools (AACPS) supports **HB118 Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs**. This bill establishes that a student's absence due to mental health needs is a lawful absence from public school attendance. A local board of education must excuse an absence due to a student's mental health needs, provided that a student who is a minor has permission from the student's parent/guardian for the absence. A local board may not require a note from a physician to excuse such an absence. A student who is absent due to mental health needs must meet with a school mental health specialist within an appropriate period of time, as determined by the local board, to discuss the student's mental health needs

AACPS recognizes the importance of promoting the positive mental health of all students through the development of impactful relationships and by teaching resilience. Student mental health is of particular importance during this time when AACPS students are faced with a global health pandemic and other challenges. School counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, pupil personnel workers, and school nurses collaborate with staff, parents/guardians, and the community to overcome barriers to learning. In 2019, AACPS, in collaboration with the Anne Arundel County Government, created the Anne Arundel Mental Health Task Force to examine, through a countywide lens, ways to address the increased mental health needs of children and adolescents in Anne Arundel County. In 2020, the Task Force issued a report with recommendations addressing several key areas, including discrimination, bias, and cultural barriers; lack of access to resources and mental health providers; mental health stigma; poverty; social media; and trauma. AACPS is committed to continued collaboration with the County and stakeholders to continue to help address the mental health needs of our County's youth.

AACPS appreciates the amendments to the bill which align a mental health absence with the standards and requirements set forth in existing law and regulations. The district also appreciates the amendment to the language which would have required a student to meet with a school mental health specialist as it would have created a significant employee workload issue.

Accordingly, AACPS respectfully requests a **FAVORABLE** committee report on HB118.



# **Mental Health Days Letter of Support.pdf**

Uploaded by: Jillian Amodio

Position: FAV

My name is Jillian Amodio, I am a mental health advocate, mother, and founder of Moms for Mental Health. Mental health is no less important than physical health. If we do not expect our children to attend school when they are physically unwell, we should give the same consideration to their emotional wellbeing.

Guilt, shame, and fear of what will be missed have no space in how one assesses whether or not a mental health day should be taken. The only question that needs to be asked is “does my mind and body need the day off to ensure that I am able to stay healthy and well?”

Human beings are not machines, there will be days when we simply need to rest and recover, physically, mentally, emotionally, or otherwise. If we push ourselves to ignore the signs our minds and bodies are giving us, telling us that we need a break, we choose to disrespect the validity of our own needs and wellbeing.

If we encourage our youth to tend to their mental health and wellbeing, we will breed a generation of adults who value themselves and their contributions enough to avoid the pitfalls of burnout and chronic fatigue. We raise a generation of individuals who recognize that mental health is a valid component of self care and wellbeing.

By allowing youth excused absences for mental health days, we take one step further toward dismantling the stigma and shame associated with mental health and we remind our youth that they are not defined by their productivity, or their attendance record, they are defined by how they treat themselves and others, with kindness, compassion, and humanity.

-Jillian Amodio  
443-254-4319  
[JillianLAmodio@gmail.com](mailto:JillianLAmodio@gmail.com)  
1198 Latrobe Dr,  
Annapolis MD, 21409

# **HB 118.Mental Health Student Health Leave - SENATE**

Uploaded by: John Woolums

Position: FAV

**BILL:** House Bill 118  
**TITLE:** Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs  
**DATE:** March 23, 2022  
**POSITION:** SUPPORT  
**COMMITTEE:** Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs  
**CONTACT:** John R. Woolums, Esq.

The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) supports House Bill 118 as amended in the House. Local boards recognize the need for limited excused absences for student health reasons including mental, emotional, and behavioral health issues. Therefore, MABE supports the core provision of House Bill 118 to ensure that students are not negatively affected by student disciplinary actions based on their lawful absences from school for mental health reasons.

MABE had requested amendments to clarify that excused absences should be of limited duration and administered in the context of local school system policies and procedures. In addition, MABE requested an amendment to remove the strict requirement that a student meet with school personnel following an absence for mental health reasons.

In the context of state law and regulations, MABE firmly believes that school systems should be responsible and accountable for developing and implementing 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 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." Therefore, MABE requested an amendment to provide that the prohibition on requiring a note from a physician also applies to cases of absences of limited duration.

Lastly, there is no parallel requirement regarding physical health related absences that students follow up with a school health professional. MABE appreciates the bill's intent to distinguish mental health-related absences and requested an amendment to replace the mandate with the reasonable opportunity for students who desire such a meeting.

MABE believes the amendments already adopted on House Bill 118 address the concerns raised above and therefore MABE requests a favorable report on House Bill 118.

**HB 118\_Lward\_fav.pdf**

Uploaded by: LaTonya Ward

Position: FAV

March 22, 2022

The Honorable Paul G. Pinsky  
2 West  
Miller Senate Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: HB 118, Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs (Del. Alonzo Washington)

Dear Members of the Committee:

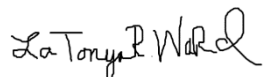
My name is LaTonya Ward, I am a resident of Prince Georges County, District 25. I am writing to ask for your support on HB 118, a bill that requires a local board of education to excuse as a lawful absence at least one day in each quarter of each school year due to a student's mental health needs. A local board may not require a note from a physician to excuse such an absence. I think this bill would greatly benefit children in middle and high school.

As the parent of a teen with intellectual and learning challenges, I believe this bill would benefit my child and his peers. Like many students managing through the pandemic, my son spent his last year of middle school and first year in high school in a virtual learning environment. The transition from in-person to an all virtual format took a tremendous toll on his mental health. This school year, as students returned to in-person learning he has done fairly well with the change, but there are days where he could use a mental break to regroup from the rigors of keeping up with covid protocols, social distancing, and staying on top of assignments all while working through a number of learning differences. He often works late into the night and on weekends to maintain the rigors of the academic work. There is very little down time, and he often feels overwhelmed. Having one or two days throughout the school year to have mental space to mentally refresh without penalty would be advantageous to his learning success.

Just this past December and January, the children had to return to virtual learning in Prince Georges County, due to a continued spike in covid cases. It appears that our new normal will be living with covid-19 and continued incorporation of the virtual learning environment when necessary. I feel that passage of this particular legislation would provide our children some mental respite. I urge you to consider full support of this bill.

Thank you for your service to the state and the community.

Kind Regards,



LaTonya Ward  
6937 Halleck Street  
District Heights, MD 20747  
Prince Georges County, MD – District 25  
Member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.

# Testimony.pdf

Uploaded by: Lorelai Symmes

Position: FAV

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Assembly,

My name is Lorelai Madison Symmes. I have grown up in Anne Arundel County, having lived in Severna Park since I was seven years old. I am now seventeen years old, and will be graduating from Severna Park High School on June 9th. Mental health is no foreign concept to my family or I. When I was fourteen years old, I was taken out of school and hospitalized for three months due to my suffering with severe anorexia nervosa. At this age, I was fighting for my life while still having to act as a student each and every day. As mental health days were not an excused absence, before and after my hospitalization I would have no option but to attend school. I would go from appointments where I was informed of my organ failure, straight back to class. While in treatment, I would sit on the floor doing homework in between therapy sessions because I had to keep up with my work in order to be able to stay in my class and graduate on time. Following my discharge, there had been countless days where I wake up in a period of flashbacks, on the verge of a panic attack, and for a while, having suicidal ideation. I have experienced a generous amount of physical illness and pain in my short life, yet that mental pain is what hurts the most. There was no choice but to attend school and ride out the day on the verge of breakdown. This led to prolonged depression and anxiety, an unhealthy amount of stress, social withdrawal, and poor performance. Think of going to school with the Flu; you are exhausted, in pain, and unable to concentrate. It would not be fun. Now imagine waking up and doubting yourself and your purpose, and then sitting through six hours of instruction. That is just as bad, if not far worse than attending school while physically ill, but it is completely acceptable to refrain from attending classes while dealing with a physical ailment. The same standard should exist for a student struggling mentally. As a Severna Park student, I am very familiar with our shockingly high suicide rate. I have grieved the loss of two classmates in the four years of my schooling there. Institutions and the County vouch to do better and change this statistic, yet still there are no legal mental health days for students. These are children who are to be our future; to become doctors, teachers, politicians, and nurses. But if these children are unsupported in their struggles with their own mind, how are they to grow up and help others? We want to see names on diplomas and awards, not another name of a young life taken too soon on a gravestone. I ask you to consider the state-wide benefits of introducing the excusal of absences for mental health based needs, for the sake of our students and our future as a whole. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Lorelai M. Symmes  
Severna Park, MD



**HB0118-FAV-DTMG-3-23-22.pdf**

Uploaded by: Olivia Bartlett

Position: FAV



**Olivia Bartlett, DoTheMostGood Maryland Team**

**Committee:** Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

**Testimony on:** HB0118 – Public Schools – Student Attendance – Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs

**Position:** Favorable

**Hearing Date:** March 23, 2022

**Bill Contact:** Delegate Alonzo T. Washington

DoTheMostGood (DTMG) is a progressive grass-roots organization with more than 3000 members across all districts in Montgomery County as well as a number of nearby jurisdictions. DTMG supports legislation and activities that keep its members healthy and safe in a clean environment and which promote equity across all our diverse communities. The general mental health of students across Maryland is a great concern and has been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. HB0118 addresses the problem by allowing students to stay home from school once every quarter for a mental health day without needing a doctor's note.

According to the Maryland Department of Health, in 2019 according approximately one-third of Maryland students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness and one-fifth of Maryland students seriously considered suicide. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased these percentages. An August 2020 CDC report showed that anxiety tripled and depression quadrupled across the US (CDC 2020). COVID-19 related stress – whether from financial instability, familial conflict, constant anxiety, or the persistent fear for the safety of themselves and loved ones – are directly contributing to student mental illness (Guessoum, 2020). Additionally, the lack of social contact students have experienced because of not being with their friends in school has been extremely harmful to their well-being. Without friends as outlets to relieve their stress, students are left with limited avenues to maintain their mental health. Extended periods of isolation, like what we have experienced the last two years, have been clearly linked to increases in suicidal thoughts and behaviors (McClelland, 2020). It is time for the legislature to heed the warnings of researchers and experts, and to enact legislation that supports vulnerable students.

*The New York Times* reported that in the past two years Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Maine, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Virginia have all passed laws that permit children, with parental permission, to miss school for mental or behavioral health concerns. And when a Harris Poll asked more than 1,500 teenagers in May 2020, 78% said schools should allow mental health days so students could take care of themselves.

HB0118 will help address this rising crisis by putting place a simple measure: providing students with Mental Health Days - excused absences from school, with permission from a parent, for mental health-related reasons. This bill involves no financial investment from the state and will be easy to implement statewide.

This bill is therefore good for students now, as we continue to face the turmoil of the coronavirus pandemic, and will be good for students in the future. Therefore, DTMG strongly supports HB0118 and urges a **FAVORABLE** report on this bill.

Respectfully submitted,

Olivia Bartlett  
Co-lead, DoTheMostGood Maryland Team  
[oliviabartlett@verizon.net](mailto:oliviabartlett@verizon.net)  
240-751-5599

# **EACtestimony.HB118Senate.pdf**

Uploaded by: Leslie Margolis

Position: FWA

**Education Advocacy Coalition  
For Students with Disabilities**

**SENATE EDUCATION, HEALTH, AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE  
HOUSE BILL 118: PUBLIC SCHOOLS—STUDENT ATTENDANCE—EXCUSED ABSENCES FOR  
MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS**

**MARCH 23, 2022**

**POSITION: SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS**

The Education Advocacy Coalition (EAC), a coalition of approximately 40 organizations and individuals concerned with education policy for students with disabilities in Maryland supports House Bill 118 with several amendments intended to address unintended consequences of the bill, which would, if enacted, permit lawful absences from school for mental health reasons.

EAC members are concerned that HB 118 could inadvertently result in the failure of school systems to comply with their obligation under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. §1401 *et seq.* to identify students who may have emotional disabilities and who may be in need of special education and related services. If students are repeatedly absent as a result of their mental health needs or are absent for an extended amount of time, that could very well be an indication that special education services or, at the least, accommodations under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 29 U.S.C. §794 are needed. Excused absences with no documentation requirements by a physician would leave families and IEP or Section 504 teams without the information necessary to make decisions about the education needs of the student and the supports needed by the student in school.

HB 118 could have another unintended consequence. Currently, many students are illegally removed from school when their parents are called to come pick them up or told to keep them home. These illegal “send homes” are particularly hard to address and eliminate because they are not documented as suspensions; in fact, they are not documented as disciplinary actions. EAC members are concerned that HB 118 could inadvertently increase the number of undocumented disciplinary removals from schools because parents may be pressured by school staff to keep their child with behavior challenges home for mental health reasons when, in fact, the school is suspending the child.

We believe both of these unintended consequences could be addressed by the following amendments:

Add: **THE PROVISIONS OF THIS ACT MAY NOT BE USED TO DELAY OR PREVENT REFERRALS TO CHILD FIND FOR STUDENTS WHO MAY NEED SPECIAL EDUCATION NOR TO THE PUPIL SERVICES TEAM FOR STUDENTS WHO MAY NEED SERVICES UNDER SECTION 504 OF THE REHABILITATION ACT OF 1973, 20 U.S.C. §794 et. seq.**

Add: **THE PROVISIONS OF THIS ACT MAY NOT BE USED FOR DISCIPLINARY REASONS OR TO BYPASS DISCIPLINE DOCUMENTATION REQUIREMENTS.: STUDENTS MAY NOT BE PENALIZED FOR SCHOOL ABSENCES OCCURRING FOR MENTAL, BEHAVIORAL OR PHYSICAL HEALTH APPOINTMENTS WHICH ARE DOCUMENTED BY THE HEALTH CARE PROVIDER PROVIDING THE CARE.**

Please feel free to contact Leslie Seid Margolis, chairperson, at [lesliem@disabilityrightsmd.org](mailto:lesliem@disabilityrightsmd.org) or 410-370-5730 for more information or to discuss these proposed amendments.

Respectfully submitted,

Selene Almazan, Selene Almazan Law, LLC  
Rene Averitt-Sanzone, The Parents' Place of Maryland  
Linda Barton, Ms.Ed., Education Advocate  
Elizabeth Benevides, Howard County Autism Society  
Ellen A. Callegary, Law Offices of Ellen A. Callegary, P.A.  
Rich Ceruolo, Parent Advocacy Consortium  
Michelle Davis, ABCs for Life Success  
Jennifer Engel Fisher, Weinfeld Education Group  
Lisa Frank, Andrea Bennett, and Jen Ritchotte, Special Kids Company  
Ann Geddes, Maryland Coalition of Families  
Beth Ann Hancock, Charting the Course  
Kalman Hettleman, Independent Advocate  
Morgan Horvath, Abilities Network  
Nicole Joseph, Law Offices of Nicole Joseph  
Rosemary Kitzinger and Marjorie Guldán, Bright Futures, LLC  
Leslie Seid Margolis, Disability Rights Maryland  
Ellen O'Neill, Atlantic Seaboard Dyslexia Education Center  
Rebecca Rienzi, Pathfinders for Autism  
Jaime Seaton, BGS Law, LLC  
Lori Scott and Ande Kolp, The Arc Maryland  
Ronnetta Stanley, M.Ed., Loud Voices Together  
Wayne Steedman, Steedman Law Group  
Guy Stephens, Alliance Against Seclusion and Restraint  
Maureen van Stone, Mallory Finn Legg, Alyssa Thorn, Project HEAL at Kennedy Krieger Institute  
Daya Chaney Webb, IMPACT Advocacy  
Jessica Williams, Educational Due Process Solutions, LLC  
Winifred Winston, Decoding Dyslexia Maryland  
Liz Zogby, Maryland Down Syndrome Advocacy Coalition

**HB0118 Howard Co BOE Testimony 032322 for EHEA - M**

Uploaded by: Staff Howard County

Position: FWA



**Board of Education of Howard County  
Testimony Submitted to the Maryland Senate,  
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee  
March 23, 2022**

**Board of Education  
of Howard County**

**HB0118: FAVORABLE W/AMENDMENT  
Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Mental Health  
Needs**

Vicky Cutroneo, *Chair*

Antonia Watts, *Vice Chair*

Christina Delmont-Small

Yun Lu, Ph.D.

Jennifer Swickard Mallo

Jolene Mosley

Chao Wu, Ph.D.

Peter J. Banyas  
*Student Member*

Michael J. Martirano, Ed.D.  
*Superintendent  
Secretary/Treasurer*

The Board of Education of Howard County (the Board) supports **HB0118 Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs** with an amendment to remove a position that would not provide intended services to students.

As amended and passed by the House, HB0118 makes mental health needs a lawful absence for students, and requires county boards to excuse. Mental health absences would require permission from a student's parent or guardian, but notes from physicians may not be required by the school system.

While the Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) currently treats mental health similar to any other aspect of student health and makes no distinction in absences for such, staff supports the intent of the bill as amended and passed in the House to ensure students are empowered to take time off for mental health needs, without added need for a physician/health visit to show cause. An amendment made in the House indicates such absences would be allowed for a limited time, with an additional amendment that authorizes a county board to adopt policies and procedures to carry out the requirements of the bill. This addressed initial concerns that the bill would set precedents different from other absences - with the amendment leaving parameters for extended absences to local policy discretion.

The original bill also required students who are absent for mental health needs to meet with a school mental health specialist within a period of time determined by the Board to discuss the mental health needs that caused the absence. This concerned staff in that it may overburden school resources to schedule each meeting, and it had the potential to dissuade students and families from saying the health absences are for mental health reasons. An amendment changed this requirement to instead notify students of the opportunity to meet as needed.

HCPSS Psychology Services staff indicates the position of psychometrist - included in the definition of school mental health specialist under HB0118 - receives minimal, if any, mental health or counseling training and would recommend it be removed. With this amendment, we urge a FAVORABLE report of HB0118 from this Committee.