

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