

**Informational Testimony regarding House Bill 657
Public Schools - Standardized Behavioral Health Screenings for Students -
Development and Implementation**

**Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs
Tuesday, April 5th, 2022
1:00 p.m.**

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The Maryland State Education Association offers this informational testimony on House Bill 657, which would require the Maryland Consortium on Coordinated Community Supports to develop, in consultation with certain stakeholders, guidelines for developing a standardized behavioral health questionnaire to identify students with behavioral health service needs, require that the questionnaire be given to the parent or guardian of each student when the student enrolls for school and every year thereafter, and require each behavioral health services coordinator to develop and implement a certain standardized behavioral health questionnaire.

MSEA represents 76,000 educators and school employees who work in Maryland's public schools, teaching and preparing our almost 900,000 students for the careers and jobs of the future. MSEA also represents 39 local affiliates in every county across the state of Maryland, and our parent affiliate is the 3-million-member National Education Association (NEA).

MSEA believes that every child is a whole child who needs adequate social, emotional, and behavioral support to thrive in and out of the classroom. To that end, behavioral health counseling services should be integrated into the educational system beginning at the pre-kindergarten level through Grade 12. This legislation rightly acknowledges the importance of providing consistent, responsive behavioral health services in schools using up-to-date tools.

To effectively support students' growth, behavioral health and counseling services must be implemented with appropriate student-to-provider ratios and with

adequate time for any screening or service provided. As our schools face ongoing staffing shortages and increased mental health concerns in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is more important than ever that we increase the pipeline of qualified behavioral health professionals and approach additional mandates with caution. This legislation does not account for the current shortage of counselors, school psychologists, and behavioral health services coordinators.

We therefore must ensure that annual behavioral health questionnaires would be implemented mindfully as to not result in unintended negative consequences, including stigma and stereotypes about students' health, capabilities, and future outcomes.^{1 2} The questionnaire must be rigorously reviewed for bias to prevent misdiagnosis of students of color.^{3 4} It is crucial that all service providers have manageable caseloads and the resources to equip families, staff, and students with training around the meaning of and appropriate care for any diagnosis given, and that schools provide educators with the tools to meaningfully support students' behavioral health on an ongoing basis.

While increasing behavioral health resources is urgently needed, we caution against the consequences of hasty and under-resourced implementation. Students will benefit most when schools are provided with adequate staffing, appropriate screening tools that account for cultural and social context, and thorough training on addressing behavioral health needs that will lead students to success and not stigma.

¹ Mukolo, A., et. al., *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, *The stigma of childhood mental disorders: A conceptual framework*, February 2010, Retrieved February 22, 2022, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2904965/>

² Telesia, L., et. al. *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*, *The role of stigma in children and adolescents with mental health difficulties*, November 2020, Retrieved February 22, 2022, from https://journals.lww.com/co-psychiatry/Abstract/2020/11000/The_role_of_stigma_in_children_and_adolescents.10.aspx

³ Fadus, M., et. al., *Academic Psychiatry*, *Unconscious Bias and the Diagnosis of Disruptive Behavior Disorders and ADHD in African American and Hispanic Youth*, November 2019, Retrieved February 22, 2022, from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40596-019-01127-6>

⁴ Liang, J., et. al., *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *Mental Health Diagnostic Considerations in Racial/Ethnic Minority Youth*, December 2015, Retrieved February 22, 2022, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4916917/>