



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 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,

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