



**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**

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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.