



February 3, 2021

The Honorable Vanessa Atterbeary
House Ways and Means Committee
Room 131, House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: Oppose – HB 118: Public Schools- Student Attendance- Excused Absence for Mental Health Needs

Dear Chairman Atterbeary and Honorable Members of the Committee:

The Maryland Psychiatric Society (MPS) and the Washington Psychiatric Society (WPS) are state medical organizations whose physician members specialize in diagnosing, treating, and preventing mental illnesses, including substance use disorders. Formed more than sixty-five years ago to support the needs of psychiatrists and their patients, both organizations work to ensure available, accessible, and comprehensive quality mental health resources for all Maryland citizens; and strives through public education to dispel the stigma and discrimination of those suffering from a mental illness. As the district branches of the American Psychiatric Association covering the state of Maryland, MPS and WPS represent over 1000 psychiatrists and physicians currently in psychiatric training.

Though MPS and WPS recognize that House Bill 118: Public Schools- Student Attendance- Excused Absence for Mental Health Needs (HB 118) is very well-intentioned, the Societies must oppose it as child and adolescent psychiatrists share concerns about the unintended consequences of this legislation.

MPS and WPS fear that HB 118 may worsen already-existing stigmas associated with mental health by conflating self-care with mental health. Currently, school systems do not typically inquire about a student's physical illness when parent or guardian requests a school absence for their child; yet, HB 118 takes the exact opposite approach when it comes to mental health and thus distinguishing it and the children and adolescents dealing with mental health disruptions as different.

In addition, HB 118, if enacted, may be problematic and potentially counterproductive to appropriate mental health treatment in children and adolescents. Rarely should children and adolescents be excused from school for mental health purposes unless they require a higher level of care, such as day hospitalization or inpatient care for which they would already receive an authorized absence. Attending school is usually part of the necessary treatment for children and adolescents treated for depressive and anxiety disorders.



MPS and WPS ask the committee to consider the following questions when deliberating HB 118:

- Suppose a child or adolescent with anxiety or depression is unable to go to school for a day. Should the pathway to excuse the absence be different from a child or adolescent who is having an exacerbation of his/her asthma or diabetes?
- Would a policy as proposed under HB 118 lessen barriers for children or adolescents dealing with anxiety to turn to school avoidance as a coping method?
- Without the appropriate follow-up protocols in place for children and/or adolescents who do take mental health days, what does this HB 118 truly achieve?

In closing, MPS and WPS believe that HB 118 is well-intentioned but appears to be a short-term solution that does not address the larger issues within the educational system that might lead a child to be anxious or depressed such as bullying or academic stress. MPS and WPS, therefore, ask that you give HB 118 an unfavorable report.

If you have any questions with regard to this testimony, please feel free to contact Thomas Tompsett Jr. at tommy.tompsett@mdlobbyist.com.

Respectfully submitted,
The Maryland Psychiatric Society and the Washington Psychiatric Society
Joint Legislative Action Committee