

**Informational Testimony regarding House Bill 118
Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Mental Health
Needs**

**Ways and Means
1/20/2022
1:00 p.m.**

**Lauren Lamb
Government Relations**

The Maryland State Education Association offers this informational testimony on HB 118, which would provide that absences from school for mental health needs are lawful absences under certain circumstances and requiring a student who is absent due to mental health needs to meet with a school mental health specialist within an appropriate period of time.

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).

The adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to have considerable impact on the wellbeing of students and staff. MSEA believes that the stigma associated with seeking help for mental health challenges adversely affects our students, our members, and society in general, and that issues related to mental health should be treated as the equivalent of physical illness. In a 2020 poll, 81% of students said that mental health was "a significant issue for young people in the



U.S.”¹, and there is growing precedent for school districts explicitly acknowledging this form of absence²³.

Amid the personnel and resource challenges facing our schools and districts in recent years, including a “critical shortage” of school psychologists,⁴ behavioral health personnel face exceedingly high caseloads, and Maryland does not currently have a mental and behavioral health workforce sufficient to meet recommended student-to-staff ratios⁵. This shortage is likely to present challenges in meeting the requirement that students meet with a behavioral health professional within days of their return to school.

Acknowledging the importance of mental health supports is a vital step forward, and highlights that a multi-pronged approach, including investments in the mental and behavioral health professional pipeline, is needed to ensure that students and staff have the resources and support they need.

¹ <https://4-h.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/4-H-Mental-Health-Report-6.1.20-FINAL.pdf>.

² <https://www.npr.org/sections/back-to-school-live-updates/2021/09/02/1033605650/illinois-children-mental-health-days-schools-coronavirus>.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/23/well/mind/mental-health-day-laws-kids.html>.

⁴ <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED572300.pdf>.

⁵ <https://www.nbcwashington.com/investigations/schools-face-shortage-of-mental-health-professionals-as-students-slowly-return/2637788/>.