

# MARYLAND STUDENT COALITION

JON DIPIETRO, DIRECTOR  
HUNTER CRAIG, DEPUTY DIRECTOR

CHRIS LIDARD, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR  
LAUREN RASKIN, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR  
VINAY KHOSLA, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR

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## TESTIMONY

**BILL:** House Bill (HB) 118 - Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs

**SPONSOR:** Delegate Washington, *Prince George's County (22)*

**POSITION:** **FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS**

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Monday, January 17, 2022

### **HB 118: Favorable with Amendments**

*The Maryland Student Coalition is an entirely student-led, advocacy group that serves to bring students together to promote education policy reform. Founded in 2020 as a vehicle for advocating for students' right to demonstrate, our scope has since expanded to include more educational advocacy initiatives. You can learn more at [marylandstudents.org](http://marylandstudents.org)*

Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Washington, and honorable members of the Ways and Means Committee. We are writing in favor of House Bill 118.

The Maryland Student Coalition finds it a necessity for students to be allowed inconsequential days off to treat their mental health. For the 180 day school year that is filled with tests, pressures, and other external forces, it should be expected that for minors, additional days off will be needed. In our respective jurisdictions, the school systems have been more than accommodating in allowing students to take a day off for their mental health. This legislation is a proactive measure to help student welfare. In some cases, teachers will encourage students to take a day off from school to study or catch up, especially in the most stressful of weeks. Additionally, adults find the expectation of giving students arguably less flexible workweeks as typical adults unconscionable.

Members of this coalition echo the same concern and recognize the importance of self-care. All of us have experienced tough days and challenging weeks in the education system. The antidote to cure the stress and anxiety that arise during these periods is just a simple break. With the educational setting being a student's fundamental place in society, it should serve the main purpose of treating students with virtue.

It does a disservice to student productivity and self-esteem to penalize them for a day off approved by their parent(s)/guardian(s).

Despite the admirable premise of this bill, we strongly urge that the language be changed from “requiring a student who is absent...to meet with a school mental health specialist” to “offering the option to a student who is absent...to meet with a school mental health specialist” or some other variation of this change. We believe that requiring students to discuss their mental health needs with a school mental health specialist every time they are absent for mental health reasons is unfeasible both for students and school health workers. Considering that there is a current mental health crisis in high schools, school mental health workers simply do not have the time every day to meet with all students who have taken an excused absence while also fulfilling their normal duties. Moreover, it is beyond the purview of the school system to violate students’ rights to privacy regarding their mental health by requiring they express the reasoning for their excused absence to a stranger, albeit a professional. It is also important to recognize that requiring a meeting with a school mental health worker reduces the instructional time for students who have returned after a mental health absence which may exacerbate the conditions which caused the absence initially. It is for these reasons above, and more, that we urge a favorable report with amendments.

The Maryland Student Coalition respectfully requests that a reasonable cap for how many days may be used by students, under 7-301.3(D) for the adoption of the regulations, be added to the legislation. However, supports the principles within the legislation and strongly encourages issuing a **favorable** report on HB118.