



Delegate Vanessa E. Atterbeary, Chair
Delegate Alonzo T. Washington, Vice Chair
Ways and Means Committee
Room 131, House Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

January 14, 2022

Bill: House Bill 118 – Public Schools – Student Attendance – Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs

Letter of Information

Dear Chairman Atterbeary, Vice Chair Washington, and Members of the Committee:

I am writing on behalf of the Maryland School Psychologists' Association (MSPA), a professional organization representing about 500 school psychologists in Maryland. We advocate for the social-emotional, behavioral, and academic wellbeing of students and families across the state.

This letter is to provide information related to House Bill 118, which would allow lawful absences under certain circumstances related to mental health needs of students. MSPA supports the intent of this bill. However, we have concerns regarding some of its elements. First, the bill appears to create a new category of school staff called "School Mental Health Specialist" (page 1, line 19). This language is not defined in COMAR, and it is not used by any local education agency or union, or by MSDE. A related problem is the inclusion of Pupil Personnel Workers (page 1, line 21) and Psychometrists (page 2, line 1) under this category. In COMAR, the training of neither of these professionals is required to include any mental health-related coursework or field experience. Based on their training, experience, and current deployment in Maryland's school systems, the three types of school-employed professionals most appropriately identified as School Mental Health Specialists would be School Counselor, School Social Worker, and School Psychologist. HB 118 should be amended to include only these three specialist types.

We are also concerned about the possibility of singling out and stigmatizing mental health needs. COMAR 13A.08.01.03 describes conditions that allow for a lawful absence from school. Mental health conditions should be considered no different than any other health-related absence. A simple revision of this section of COMAR could more clearly indicate that absences are lawful for physical illness as well as mental health issues.

We are also concerned about schools' capacities to be in compliance with section D (page 2, lines 13-17). While we certainly support the intention behind this section, school-employed mental health providers (School Psychologists, School Counselors, & School Social Workers) are already working beyond capacity in our public schools. Staff-to-student ratios for these providers in Maryland are significantly worse than national standards. This new potential influx of students may not be manageable with current staffing.

Again, MSPA supports the wonderful intentions of Del. Washington and of this legislation. However, as currently written, HB 118 poses significant problems. If we can provide any additional information or be of any assistance, please contact us at legislative@mspaonline.org or Scott Tiffin at stiffin@policypartners.net or 443-350-1325.

Respectfully submitted,

Katie Phipps, M.Ed., Ed.S., NCSP
Chair, Legislative Committee
Maryland School Psychologists' Association