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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
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Testimony in Support of HB118 - Public Schools – Student Attendance – Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs

It is no secret that mental illness remains an enormous problem among this current generation of students. Over 70% of teens say that anxiety and depression are major issues among their peers. HB118 aims to help tackle this issue by allowing Maryland students to take mental health days as an excused absence.

The data we have regarding our student's mental health grows more concerning every year. 17% of Maryland students seriously consider suicide during their teen years. That is roughly one out of every six of our children who are having to go into the classroom carrying this immense mental and emotional burden. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says suicide is the third leading cause of death for Maryland youth.

As our students start coming back into the classroom, they will also be carrying the physical and emotional trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic with them. Many of our students have fallen ill or have had a loved one pass away as a result of the virus. This legislation becomes essential to ensure our students have every resource at their disposal to take care of their mental health.

HB118 will additionally help to de-stigmatize the issue of mental health for our students. It is important for students who suffer from mental illness to understand that these conditions are in fact very common - between 10 to 15 percent of all young people are suffering from depressive symptoms at any one time. Students should have the ability to take a day off and utilize the resources available to them to ensure their well-being and academic success.

Other States, such as Oregon and Utah, have implemented similar measures in recent years. Maryland needs to take this necessary step to ensure our students' mental health needs are met – and to ensure we are treating mental health and physical health with the same degree of seriousness.

To ensure that our students are getting the follow-up they need, the bill includes a requirement that a counselor or other school mental health specialist checks in with a student after they take a mental health day. It also requires a written note from a parent in order for the absence to be excused, so that families are aware of the situation their student is going through.

This bill does not aim to completely solve the issue of mental illness among our youth, but simply seeks to alleviate some of their daily anxiety by giving our students a small reprieve when they need it.

Additionally, this bill was passed unanimously by the Ways and Means committee in 2021, and moved through the House of Delegates by a 131-1 vote.

For these reasons, I respectfully ask for a favorable report on HB118.