



HB118 PUBLIC SCHOOLS - STUDENT ATTENDANCE - EXCUSED ABSENCES FOR MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

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WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE

SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS

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Anne Arundel County Public Schools (AACPS) supports with amendments **HB118 Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs**. This bill establishes that a student's absence due to mental health needs is a lawful absence from public school attendance. A local board of education must excuse an absence due to a student's mental health needs, provided that a student who is a minor has permission from the student's parent/guardian for the absence. A local board may not require a note from a physician to excuse such an absence. A student who is absent due to mental health needs must meet with a school mental health specialist within an appropriate period of time, as determined by the local board, to discuss the student's mental health needs

AACPS recognizes the importance of promoting the positive mental health of all students through the development of impactful relationships and by teaching resilience. Student mental health is of particular importance during this time when AACPS students are faced with a global health pandemic and other challenges. School counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, pupil personnel workers, and school nurses collaborate with staff, parents/guardians, and the community to overcome barriers to learning. In 2019, AACPS, in collaboration with the Anne Arundel County Government, created the Anne Arundel Mental Health Task Force to examine, through a countywide lens, ways to address the increased mental health needs of children and adolescents in Anne Arundel County. In 2020, the Task Force issued a report with recommendations addressing several key areas, including discrimination, bias, and cultural barriers; lack of access to resources and mental health providers; mental health stigma; poverty; social media; and trauma. AACPS is committed to continued collaboration with the County and stakeholders to continue to help address the mental health needs of our County's youth.

While AACPS supports the intent of this legislation, a student's absence due to mental health needs is already covered under Maryland's compulsory attendance law. However, under current law, the principal or pupil personnel worker must require a physician's certificate from the parent/guardian of a student who is reported continuously absent for illness. We respectfully request that this proposed legislation be amended to align with the standards and requirements set forth in existing law and regulations pertaining to lawful absences for student illness by striking the following language:

A COUNTY BOARD MAY NOT REQUIRE A NOTE FROM A PHYSICIAN TO EXCUSE AN ABSENCE UNDER THIS SUBSECTION.

We also request that the bill be amended to further clarify what aspects of a diagnosis allow for absenteeism due to mental health needs.

In addition, it is important to note that the provision in the bill requiring a student to meet with a school mental health specialist within an appropriate period of time creates an employee workload issue. AACPS opposes legislation and mandates that will result in increased teacher and staff workloads.

Accordingly, AACPS respectfully requests a **FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS** committee report on HB118.