



THE SENATE OF MARYLAND  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

March 24, 2023

Support of SB 482/HB 488 – Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment Program Mental Health Professionals in Public Schools

The Honorable Vanessa E. Atterbeary, Chair Ways and Means Committee

Chair Atterbeary, Vice-Chair Wilkins, and Esteemed Members of the Ways and Means Committee:

Our students are struggling with mental health as they return to classrooms post-pandemic, According to the 2021 Maryland Youth Pandemic Behavioral Survey, nearly 60% of high school students struggled with mental health issues during the past year, Approximately 20% of Maryland teens seriously contemplated attempting suicide and 28% reported knowing someone who was depressed, mentally ill, or suicidal. Between 2013 and 2021, emergency department visits for behavioral health conditions climbed from 10.5% to 18.3%.

Additionally, the pandemic took a harsh toll on U.S. teen girls' mental health, with almost 60% reporting feelings of persistent sadness or hopelessness. According to the Director of the CDC's adolescent and school health division, ***“In 30 years of collecting similar data, we've never seen this kind of devastating and consistent findings.”***

The spiraling crisis among young people, as well as other factors, has caused our schools to struggle to hire and retain qualified staff. According to a 2021 joint report from the National Education Association and the Center for Enterprise Strategy approximately 65% of the educators under the age of 35 had to take out student loans to complete their education. Fifty-nine percent of educators with unpaid loans reported that their student debt impacted their ability to save for the future.

In order to become a certified school psychologist an individual must complete a minimum of three years of graduate school. The average school psychologist salary is \$88,610 and social workers earn an average salary of \$58,000. Thus, tightening family budgets, limited career growth, crippling student debt, and escalating challenges in the profession has exacerbated the shortage of mental health professionals.

Allowing critical school staff to apply for the State's student loan repayment assistance program increases the likelihood that these professionals will serve in a Maryland public school and stay

there. Additionally, doing so offers an added incentive for more people to pursue education in these understaffed fields.

Senate Bill 482, which expands the purpose of the Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment program to include assisting in the repayment of loans for mental health professionals serving as school psychologists, resource psychologists, psychologist coordinators, social workers, social worker supervisors, or mental health coordinators, in public schools. It requires the Office of Student Financial Assistance (OSFA) to publicize the program to eligible mental health professionals to help recruit and retain mental health professionals in the public schools.

Senate Bill 482 would expand the "eligible fields of employment" for this program to specifically include the following positions:

"(D) "MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL" MEANS AN INDIVIDUAL EMPLOYED IN A PUBLIC SCHOOL IN THE STATE TO PROVIDE MENTAL Health Services, including as a School Psychologist, as a Resource PSYCHOLOGIST, PSYCHOLOGIST COORDINATOR, SOCIAL WORKER, SOCIAL "WORKER SUPERVISOR, OR MENTAL HEALTH COORDINATOR."

This language defines the Legislature's intent for positions included in the Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment Program. In addition, it will expand the eligibility for this specific group to allow those now eligible to have graduated from "any accredited college or university." Eligibility also allows for the inclusion of those mental health professionals who are employed by a county school system or a local health department that provides school health services through an agreement with a county board education.

While we are struggling to address an overall teacher shortage, I believe that this challenge needs to be expedited in order to better address our mental health crisis.

Ten out of the eleven senators in the Education, Energy, and Environment Committee have voted in favor of this bill. I urge you to support this much-needed extension of the Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance program.

Thank you,



Senator Karen Lewis Young