



Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director
1217 S. Potomac Street
Baltimore, MD 21224
410-935-7281
marypat.fannon@pssam.org

BILL: HB 575

TITLE: Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Civic Engagement

DATE: April 7, 2026

POSITION: Unfavorable

COMMITTEE: Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

CONTACT: Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director, PSSAM

The Public School Superintendents' Association of Maryland (PSSAM), on behalf of all twenty-four local school superintendents **opposes** House Bill 575.

This bill requires each local board of education to adopt an attendance policy for public school students that treats a student's absence as excused if, during a regular session of a public facing body, the student (1) testifies at a hearing of a public facing body; (2) conducts civic engagement activities, as defined by the bill; or (3) participates in the Maryland General Assembly Page Program. The attendance policy must authorize a student to be excused for at least 15 hours or two school days to testify or conduct civic engagement activities, or the length of time of the page program. The bill takes effect July 1, 2026.

(source: https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2026RS/fnotes/bil_0005/hb0575.pdf)

PSSAM respects and values the intent of this legislation and the importance of civic engagement. However, House Bill 575 presents several challenges, particularly because it may conflict and create confusion with existing attendance policies and data reliability. Under the Code of Maryland Regulations ([COMAR](#)), local education agencies (LEAs) already have discretion to excuse absences for "other emergencies or circumstances which, in the judgment of the local superintendent or designee, constitute a good and sufficient cause for absence from school." This flexibility allows school systems to accommodate unique situations, including civic engagement opportunities, while maintaining local control over attendance policies. **By creating a new statewide excused absence category, but including it in the official definition of chronic**

absenteeism, this bill will contribute to increased rates, even though these activities are well intentioned. Therefore, this bill could create confusion with existing, long-standing policies created based on student and school experiences and operational concerns with attendance data collection/reconciliation.

Existing Opportunities for Civic Engagement and Conflict with Existing Programs/Policies

Maryland students already have ample structured opportunities to engage in civic action. The state requires students to complete a minimum of 75 service-learning hours as a graduation requirement, ensuring that all students engage in community-based civic activities throughout their middle and high school years. Teachers may also choose to integrate opportunities to engage with public-facing bodies into coursework such as high school American Government—a state-required course. Schools and districts regularly support participation in civic engagement without requiring students to miss instructional time.

At the same time, school systems must carefully manage student attendance as they navigate an expanding number of legally recognized and mandated absences. Existing law requires schools to accommodate absences related to illness, behavioral health, religious observances, court obligations, pregnancy and parenting needs, and other approved circumstances. As additional absence categories are introduced, school systems must also ensure that attendance data is accurately recorded and reconciled across local and state reporting systems. Districts are also making increasing efforts to recognize and respect a broader range of religious and cultural holidays within their school calendars. As these categories expand, administrators must balance flexibility for students with the need to maintain consistent classroom attendance.

Attendance Concerns - Adding to Chronic Absenteeism

Since the pandemic, chronic absenteeism has plagued school districts, exacerbating the learning losses suffered by students. Trends in chronic absenteeism are moving in more positive directions, but not quickly enough. Superintendents recognize the devastating impact of chronic absenteeism on academic success and have made improving student attendance a top priority. While the intent of House Bill 575 is to encourage civic engagement, the bill creates an additional state-mandated excused absence category that may unintentionally undermine ongoing efforts to keep students consistently engaged in school.


It is important to recognize that chronic absenteeism measures count total days missed, regardless of whether the absence is excused or unexcused. This means that even well-intentioned, excused absences contribute to a student's chronic absenteeism status if they exceed 10 percent of the school year.

Contrary to common assumptions, chronic absenteeism is not limited to struggling students. High-performing and highly engaged students can also meet the chronic absenteeism threshold

when additional absences are added to already busy academic and extracurricular schedules. This bill presents students with an additional opportunity to miss instructional time for what may appear to be a reasonable tradeoff.

For these reasons, PSSAM **opposes** House Bill 575 and kindly requests an **unfavorable** report.

In accordance with COMAR's authorization for superintendents to "use their judgement....[that certain activities] constitutes a good and sufficient cause for absence...", several school systems currently have policies permitting excused absences for civic engagement as defined by the LEA:

- Baltimore City Schools excuses absences for students participating in the electoral process and grants students up to three school days of released time per year for participating in political campaigns; [Baltimore City Schools - Student Participation In Political Activities](#).
- Caroline County Public Schools consider the Student Page Program a school-sponsored event, meaning it is not defined as an absence according to G. under Definitions;  [CCPS Attendance Regulations.pdf](#) .
- Howard County Public School System's (HCPSS) [Policy 9010 Attendance](#) includes a broad definition for civic engagement, which is listed as an example of a discretionary absence. The policy has an allotment for up to three days of discretionary leave. HCPSS can authorize absences related to civic engagement with a parent note under Code 13.
- Montgomery County Public School principals have broad discretion to approve excused absences for school sponsored activities.
- Prince George's County Public Schools considers students in attendance when they participate in school-sponsored activities approved by the Superintendent, principal, or other authorized official.
- Washington County Public Schools' (WCPS) attendance policy does not count attendance at school-sponsored events as absences. WCPS can authorize absences related to civic engagement with a parent note under Code 13.

COMAR specifies the conditions that constitute a lawful absence school. Among these conditions are (1) death in the immediate family; (2) illness of the student; (3) pregnancy and parenting conditions; (4) court summons; (5) hazardous weather conditions; (6) work approved or sponsored by the school; (7) observance of a religious holiday; (8) State emergency; (9) suspension; (10) lack of authorized transportation; or (11) other emergencies or circumstances which, in the judgement of the local superintendent or designee, constitutes a good and sufficient cause for absence from school.

(https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2026RS/fnotes/bil_0005/hb0575.pdf)