

MDHSD_Cornticher_MD_HB575.pdf

Uploaded by: Daniel Cornitcher

Position: FAV



**Maryland High School
*Democrats***

Legislative Testimony

**Senate of Maryland
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee**

**Written Testimony in Favor of House Bill 575
Public Schools – Student Attendance – Excused Absences for Civic Engagement**

Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Daniel Cornitcher, and I serve as the Development Director for the Maryland High School Democrats (MDHSD) and as National Committee Coordinator for the High School Democrats of America (HSDA). I am writing in strong support of House Bill 575.

Students across Maryland care deeply about the issues being discussed in this building. Many want to testify, meet with legislators, and take part in advocacy, but too often they are forced to weigh that participation against school attendance policies and academic consequences.

I want to acknowledge that I have been fortunate. My school has been supportive of the advocacy work I have been involved in, and that support has made a real difference in my ability to participate. That is not the reality for every student.

I have worked with students across the state who do not have that same level of support. Some of our core members were unable to attend our Federal Advocacy Day in Washington last November because missing school would have had academic consequences they could not afford. At our State Advocacy Day on February 19 in Annapolis, several students who did attend struggled to secure make-up testing for exams scheduled that same day. Others had to leave early or arrive late, missing parts of the experience because of school-day obligations.

These are not isolated issues. They shape who is able to participate.

Even when students are willing to make the effort to show up, whether for part of the day or the entire day, they deserve to be supported in doing so. No student should have to choose between engaging in the democratic process and staying on track academically.

House Bill 575 helps address that. By guaranteeing excused absences for civic engagement, it removes a barrier that currently discourages participation.

There are already enough obstacles. Transportation to Annapolis can be difficult, especially for students traveling from farther parts of the state. There are financial and logistical challenges that limit access. At the same time, the Maryland General Assembly conducts much of its work during school hours. Hearings, sessions, and committee meetings often take place in the middle of the school day. Even virtual testimony requires students to step away from class.

This bill does not remove every barrier students in advocacy face. However, it does address one that the state has direct control over.

On a personal level, I have also had the opportunity to serve as a Page with the Maryland General Assembly, which gave me a level of access to the legislative process that many students will never have. For most students, testifying or meeting with a legislator is their primary way of engaging with their government. Those opportunities should be accessible, and they should not come with fear of academic penalties.

Advocacy in Annapolis already requires time, planning, and effort. Removing this one barrier makes it more possible for students across Maryland to take part.

It is my hope, and the hope of MDHSD, that House Bill 575 is passed so that all students, not just those with supportive schools, flexible circumstances, or privileged backgrounds, have a fair opportunity to engage in the democratic process.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Daniel W. Cornitcher

Development Director, Maryland High School Democrats

National Committee Coordinator, High School Democrats of America



 @mdhsdems

MarylandHSDA@gmail.com

HB575_FAV_MOST.docx.pdf

Uploaded by: Ellie Mitchell

Position: FAV



HB 575 - Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Civic Engagement
Senate Education, Energy & The Environment Committee

April 7, 2026

Position: Favorable

The Maryland Out of School Time Network (MOST) is proud to offer our enthusiastic support for this important legislation. As a statewide organization dedicated to closing opportunity gaps by expanding the quality and availability of afterschool and summer learning for school-aged youth, MOST also proudly serves as the backbone organization for the Maryland Coalition for Community Schools and MENTOR Maryland | DC.

Over the past decade, we have been inspired by a remarkable and growing wave of youth leadership, civic organizing, and democratic engagement across our state. Young people are showing up eager to participate, to be heard, and to shape the policies that affect their lives and families. This bill recognizes and honors that spirit, and we are deeply grateful for the vision and leadership behind it.

Because much of the work of our legislative bodies occurs during school hours, students often face a difficult choice: engage in democracy or protect their attendance records. That should never be a choice any young person is forced to make. Testifying before a committee, attending a hearing, or participating in civic activities is not time away from learning — it *is* learning. It is democracy made tangible and real in a way no textbook can replicate.

MOST knows this firsthand. Each year, we bring young people to Washington, D.C., for the "Afterschool for All Challenge," where they meet directly with Maryland's congressional representatives. We provide excuse notes to participating students' schools, yet whether that absence is honored remains inconsistent, left entirely to the discretion of individual schools and districts. This bill would help bring the consistency and clarity that students, families, and educators deserve.

We wholeheartedly agree that students must never be discouraged from civic participation out of fear of penalty or negative consequences on their records. Absences for civic engagement should be treated as lawful and excused. We are tremendously grateful to the bill's sponsor for championing this cause and for understanding that investing in youth civic engagement is investing in the future of our democracy. This legislation reflects a deep commitment to young people and to the principle that every student's voice matters. We enthusiastically urge the Committee to issue a favorable report and advance this bill.

Ellie Mitchell, Director
MOST / MD4CS / MENTOR MD|DC - emitchell@mostnetwork.org

Maryland Out of School Time Network / Maryland Coalition for Community Schools/ MENTOR Maryland|DC

1500 Union Ave / Suite 2300 / Baltimore MD 21211
www.mostnetwork.org

2026 HB 575 Wilkins Civic Engagement Testimony (1)

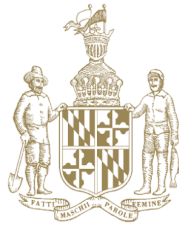
Uploaded by: Jheanelle Wilkins

Position: FAV

JHEANELLE WILKINS
Legislative District 20
Montgomery County

Chair, Ways and Means Committee

Rules and Executive Nominations
Committee



The Maryland House of Delegates
6 Bladen Street, Room 131
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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

APRIL 7, 2026

House Bill 575 - Public Schools – Student Attendance – Excused Absences for Civic Engagement

Dear colleagues,

I am pleased to present **House Bill 575 – Public Schools – Student Attendance – Excused Absences for Civic Engagement**, legislation that affirms civic participation is a vital part of student learning and ensures the youth of Maryland are not penalized academically for engaging in our democratic process.

HB 575 requires that Maryland State Department of Education and local school boards treat student absences as excused when students testify before the Maryland General Assembly. The bill limits these excused absences to up to 15 hours or two school days and ensures these absences are lawful and excluded from chronic absenteeism statistics.

HB 575 addresses an existing gap observed within Maryland’s schools with civic absences depending on district discretion. HB 575 establishes a consistent, statewide standard so that civic engagement is accessible to all students, not solely those whose schools already offer flexibility or accommodations.

Research consistently shows that early involvement in civic participation increases sustained engagement in voting and community leadership. To build a stronger, more representative democracy, we must empower our youth to engage in civic participation without fear of academic consequences. House Bill 575 ensures that Maryland students can learn democracy by embodying its essence in practice.

For these reasons, I urge the committee to give a **favorable report** for **House Bill 575 – Public Schools – Student Attendance – Excused Absences for Civic Engagement**.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jheanelle Wilkins".

Delegate Jheanelle Wilkins

X HB575 Support (Written).pdf

Uploaded by: Kenzie Funk

Position: FAV



**Testimony in SUPPORT of
House Bill 575: Public Schools – Student Attendance – Excused Absences for Civic Engagement**

Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

Position: Support

April 7, 2026

At Strong Schools Maryland, we work to support the faithful implementation and full funding of the promises legislated through the landmark Blueprint for Maryland's Future. The Blueprint envisions a public school system that is built upon the foundation of equity, supports all students' success, and removes barriers to opportunities. As a result, **Strong Schools Maryland offers favorable testimony in support of House Bill 575 – Public Schools – Student Attendance – Excused Absences for Civic Engagement**

We strongly support students engaging in civic life. Testifying before the General Assembly, meeting with legislators, and advocating on policy issues are powerful learning experiences. Public schools should encourage civic engagement through coursework, extracurricular opportunities, and partnerships that ensure students from all backgrounds can participate meaningfully and equitably.

We appreciate and support the amendments to expand the bill to include civic engagement with any public facing body rather than solely the General Assembly, as this would allow for the encouragement of civic engagement at every level of government, local and State. Furthermore, we also support striking the language that would mandate the exclusion of the excused absence for civic engagement from the calculation of chronic absenteeism. Now, the statute explicitly designates civic engagement as an excused absence, requires that students be allowed to make up work without penalty, and prohibits truancy referrals or disciplinary consequences tied to these absences while preserving alignment with state and federal definitions of chronic absenteeism.

We urge the committee to also consider equity in the implementation of this bill. Not all students have equal access to transportation, adult support, or flexible schedules that make legislative engagement possible. If civic participation is to be encouraged, schools and districts should ensure that opportunities are structured and accessible at no cost so participation does not depend on family resources or connections. The proposed legislation takes a step towards protecting and encouraging students to civically engage with their communities.

For these reasons, Strong Schools Maryland urges the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee to issue a favorable report on House Bill 575.

For additional information, please contact Riya Gupta at riya@strongschoolsmaryland.org.

XHB575_MSEA_Lamb_FAV.pdf

Uploaded by: Lauren Lamb

Position: FAV

FAVORABLE
House Bill 575
Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Civic Engagement

Senate Committee on Education, Energy, and the Environment
April 7, 2026

Lauren Lamb
Government Relations

The Maryland State Education Association supports House Bill 575, which would require each county board of education to adopt an attendance policy to excuse absences for civic engagement by public school students.

MSEA represents 75,000 educators and school employees who work in Maryland's public schools, teaching and preparing our almost 900,000 students so they can pursue their dreams. MSEA also represents 44 local affiliates in every county across the state of Maryland, and our parent affiliate is the 3-million-member National Education Association (NEA).

While classroom lessons are important, there is no replacement for experiential learning. Educators know the importance of balancing both. Research suggests that students who participate in experiential learning around advocacy and the legislative process are more likely to be civically engaged throughout their lives.¹

Engaging with elected officials or community partners is an impactful culmination of students' learning about civic engagement, advocacy, and policy development. We see the value in accommodating such experiences and ensuring that students can make their voices heard without academic consequences. The policies developed under this bill will address those situations thoughtfully.

We urge the committee to issue a favorable report on House Bill 575.

¹ Advocating for Engagement: Do Experiential Learning Courses Boost Civic Engagement? [Glover, Robert W.](#); Lewis, Daniel C.; Meagher, Richard; [Owens, Katherine A.](#) *Journal of Political Science Education* (2021). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1327442>

Montgomery Co Student Gov Assoc Testimony

Uploaded by: Michael Gannon

Position: FAV

HB 575 Testimony

Public Schools – Student Attendance – Excused Absences for Civic Engagement

Michael Gannon

Montgomery County Regional Student Government Association (MCR)

Maryland Association of Student Councils (MASC)

Dear Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee:

My name is Michael Gannon, I am a student at Magruder High School in Montgomery County, and I serve as the Director of Legislative Affairs for MCR, the countywide student government representing more than 50,000 public school students across Montgomery County, as well as the Legislative Director for MASC, the statewide student government, representing all secondary school students in Maryland. On behalf of these organizations and my peers across the state, I urge this Committee to report favorably on House Bill 575.

House Bill 575 would ensure that students who engage in civic activities, such as testifying before a committee of the General Assembly or meeting with legislators, receive excused absences for their participation. This legislation recognizes a simple truth: civic engagement is education. When students travel to Annapolis to advocate for their communities, they are doing exactly what their schools prepare them to do. They should not be penalized for it.

Both MASC and MCR-SGA formally support preparing students for life beyond high school and connecting them to real-world opportunities, including civic ones. Both policy platforms call for courses that make connections to the real world and champions college and career readiness through every avenue available to students. We also support graduation requirements that “regularly reviewed and updated to reflect modern circumstances pertaining to student needs,” including civic and democratic participation. HB 575 is a natural extension of those values: it removes a structural barrier that prevents students from exercising the very skills our education system is designed to cultivate.

I also want to address the attendance dimension of this bill directly. Civic engagement fosters exactly school connectedness: students who see their voice mattering are students who remain invested in their school and community. It would be counterproductive, and frankly discouraging, to count a student’s trip to Annapolis to testify on education legislation as an absence that drags down their school’s chronic absenteeism metrics. HB 575 corrects this by ensuring such absences are lawful and excluded from chronic absenteeism calculations.

This bill also carries an equity dimension that resonates deeply with our membership. Montgomery County, for example, is a diverse community, but access to civic participation is not equal. Students at schools with higher rates of socioeconomic need, or those who must balance school with family responsibilities, are often least able to absorb the academic consequences of an unexcused absence. If students from any background must choose between advocating for their community and protecting their academic record, they will—and should—choose their record. HB 575 ensures they do not have to make that choice. The Maryland General Assembly established the Maryland Youth Advisory Council precisely because youth voices in policymaking strengthen democracy, this bill extends that philosophy to every student who chooses to show up.

We urge the Committee to report favorably on House Bill 575. Our students are already showing up for Maryland. *This bill ensures Maryland shows up for them.* Thank you for your time.

Sources

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Seabright-HB575-Favorable.pdf

Uploaded by: Paula Seabright

Position: FAV

Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the committee,
My name is Paula Seabright and I am the co-chair of the Women's Giving Circle of Howard County's Grants Committee. As I mentioned a couple weeks ago, I am also the chair of the Young Women's Giving Circle intern program. Our 10 high school interns learn about philanthropy, collective giving, leadership and advocacy through supporting our organization's efforts to impact period poverty.

As I stated in my previous testimony before this committee, the Women's Giving Circle believes that one of the most important parts of philanthropic work is our ability to raise awareness about issues to people in positions to facilitate change. I wish I could have brought some of my interns with me today to share their experiences testifying here at the MDGA, at the board of education, and at the county council. Unfortunately, most of them have used up discretionary absences with family gatherings, college tours, and other extracurricular activities.

That's why this bill is so important. In Howard county schools fifth graders learn about the constitution and a bit about the legislative process in their Simulated Congressional Hearings. They speak to a panel of community leaders about issues related to one article of the bill of rights. We use Socratic seminars in GT and AP classes. We emphasize the importance of critical thinking and analysis. The state requires students to log 75 service learning hours to graduate. We educate our kids to be civically engaged. But we don't give them time to do that. Giving students 15 hours of excused absences so they can show up for issues that are important to them and their peers would benefit not just them, but our elected bodies. Whitney Houston said it best "I believe that children are our future. Teach them well and let them show the way." Your favorable vote for HB575 would help do that.

Thank you,
Paula Seabright
Columbia, MD

HB0575 - crossover bill - FAV - Excused Absences f

Uploaded by: Richard KAP Kaplowitz

Position: FAV

04/07/2026

Richard Keith Kaplowitz

Frederick, MD 21703

TESTIMONY ON CROSSOVER BILL HB#0575 - POSITION: FAVORABLE

Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Civic Engagement

TO: Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

FROM: Richard Keith Kaplowitz

My name is Richard Keith Kaplowitz. I am a resident of District 3. I am submitting this testimony in support of crossover bill HB#0575, Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Civic Engagement

Our youth are seeing the destruction of the rule of law and the treatment of immigrants by this administration. They are reacting to this throughout Maryland public schools. As reported by NBC4 News on January 20, 2026 *Hundreds of DC-area students walk out of class to protest ICE - On Tuesday, thousands of students nationwide protested the Trump administration, Immigration and Customs Enforcement and enforcement actions that in recent weeks have turned violent.*¹

WJZ TV reported that *Hundreds of Maryland students protest ICE operations with school walkouts*²

This bill recognizes that our youth are engaged and need to be encouraged to continue civic participation. To facilitate that, this bill will require the Maryland Department of Education ... and each county board [to] adopt an attendance policy for public school students that treats a student's absence as excused if, during a regular session of the general assembly, the student:

1. testifies virtually or in person at a hearing of any committee of the general assembly
2. conducts civic engagement activities, including: house bill 575
3. meeting with legislators
4. advocating for or against legislation and policy issues
5. and other activities deemed to be civic engagement by the department and the applicable county board.

If the attendance policy requires a note to excuse an absence, the policy shall authorize an appropriate representative to provide a note or reasonable documentation to excuse the student's absence. An excused absence under this section is a lawful absence and may not be included in a calculation of chronic absenteeism for the student or the school.

¹ <https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/hundreds-of-dc-area-students-walk-out-of-class-to-protest-ice/4045348/>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tCifP4pX7W8>

HB0575_Crossover Bill_RichardKaplowitz_FAV

These goals will be met by this bill requiring the State Department of Education and each county board of education to adopt an attendance policy to excuse certain absences for civic engagement by public school students, subject to certain policies and procedures.

I respectfully urge this committee to return a favorable report on crossover bill HB#0575.

HB0575 - State Board & MSDE - SWA - 4.7.26.docx.pd

Uploaded by: Yvonne Harper

Position: FAV

TO: Senate Committee on Education, Energy, and the Environment

BILL: House Bill (HB) 0575- Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Civic Engagement

DATE: April 7, 2026

POSITION: Support

The Maryland State Board of Education (State Board) and the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) extend their support for HB0575 - Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Civic Engagement with amendments.

MSDE strongly affirms the importance of creating meaningful opportunities for students to engage with the Maryland General Assembly. When students step into legislative spaces, they do more than observe democracy; they participate in it. Their perspectives enrich policy discussions, particularly on matters affecting education and youth wellbeing. We commend this bill for establishing a structure that ensures all students across the State may lend their voices, share their experiences, and engage directly with legislators without the consequence of an unexcused absence.

The State Board and MSDE appreciate the amendments put forward by the sponsor to preserve the integrity and consistency of how chronic absenteeism is calculated statewide. Maintaining alignment with the federal definition, and a neutral, consistent calculation, ensures that Maryland's attendance data remains uniform across the State and comparable with other states nationwide, as well as over time. This approach supports a shared understanding of student attendance patterns while preserving the ability to accurately assess and address missed instructional time, even as the State expands opportunities for civic engagement.

MSDE appreciates the opportunity to provide input on this legislation and looks forward to continued partnership with the General Assembly during implementation. The Department stands ready to provide additional guidance and support to local education agencies as needed to ensure successful and consistent application of the law.

For further details, please contact Laurel Cratsley, Interim Executive Director of Government Affairs, at laurel.cratsley@maryland.gov.

HB 575 - Oppose - Civic Engagement Excused Absence

Uploaded by: Jessica Goff

Position: UNF

BILL: House Bill 575
TITLE: Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Civic Engagement
HEARING DATE: April 7, 2026
POSITION: Oppose
COMMITTEE: Education, Energy, and the Environment
CONTACT: Jessica Goff, Governmental Affairs Associate (jgoff@mabe.org)

The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE), representing all the state’s local boards of education, **opposes House Bill 575 Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Civic Engagement**. Although MABE supports student civic engagement, excused absences still count when measuring chronic absenteeism. As a result, extending the definition of excused absences to include civic engagement will potentially increase rates of chronic absenteeism.

Chronic absenteeism is defined at both the state and federal level as a student missing ten percent of the school year. This definition, used by most states, includes all absences—both excused and unexcused—without exception. The purpose of tracking chronic absenteeism is to understand the full scope of missed instructional time and its impact on student learning. As stated by MSDE in written testimony on HB 575 in the House, “Regardless of the reason, when a student is absent, even for civic engagement, they are not present for classroom instruction. Maintaining a uniform calculation ensures clarity, comparability, and a shared understanding of attendance data across the state, while still honoring the value of civic participation.”

Despite our opposition, we do recognize the importance of ensuring students understand and value civic participation. Schools can organize field trips to see the General Assembly or other public facing bodies in action, meet with legislators, and even provide opportunities to testify. Schools could include writing testimony on specific bills as a part of their curriculum, teach students how to submit the testimony, and then watch hearings during class time. This is civic engagement that does not require missing instructional time. Additionally, there are several programs that already exist in Maryland for students related to civic engagement, including:

- [Maryland Student Civics Program](#): This program offers first-hand engagement with public officials to encourage youth participation in their communities. It runs two 10-week sessions per year (fall and spring semesters), open to any Maryland high school student who completes a short online application.
- [School-Based Service Learning \(Statewide\)](#): MSDE has developed service-learning units for high school students that include projects like lobbying on public issues, organizing voter turnout efforts, hosting candidate forums, and running soup kitchens tied to government and social issues classes. Many counties — including

Harford, Howard, Carroll, and Washington — have their own award-winning programs.

- [Maryland General Assembly Page Program](#): This is real-world experience students participate in — pages assist with legislative operations in Annapolis during the General Assembly session.

These are just a few examples of ways that students can participate in civic engagement, without having to alter student attendance policies through HB 575. We encourage the General Assembly to oppose HB 575, and instead, encourage school systems to take advantage of incorporating civic engagement into curricula, so students do not have to miss instructional time to participate in the democratic process.

For these reasons, MABE kindly requests an **unfavorable report on HB 575**.

HB0575 Howard Co BOE Testimony 040726 for EEE - Po

Uploaded by: Staff Howard County

Position: UNF



**Board of Education of Howard County
Testimony Submitted to the Maryland Senate
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
April 7, 2026**

**Board of Education
of Howard County**

Jennifer Swickard Mallo, *Chair*

Meg Ricks., *Vice Chair*

Andrea Chamblee, Esq.

Linfeng Chen, Ph.D.

Jacky McCoy

Jolene Mosley

Antonia Watts

Erin Alistar
Student Member

William J. Barnes
*Superintendent,
Secretary/Treasurer*

**HB0575: UNFAVORABLE
Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Civic Engagement**

The Board of Education of Howard County (the Board) opposes **Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Civic Engagement** as a mandate on local school system policy.

HB0575, as originally introduced, requires local boards of education to adopt an attendance policy that treats a student's absence as excused if they are participating in civic activities during a regular session of the Maryland General Assembly. The policy must excuse students who testify (either virtually or in person) at a General Assembly committee hearing or conduct civic engagement activities, such as meeting with legislators and advocating for or against legislation or policy issues. Furthermore, the policies and procedures adopted by the local board must allow a student to be excused for at least 15 hours or two school days to perform these activities. If a local attendance policy requires a note to excuse an absence, it must authorize an appropriate representative to provide the necessary documentation or note for the student.

The current Howard County Public School System ([HCPSS Policy 9010 Attendance](#)) includes a broad definition for civic engagement, which is listed as an example of a discretionary absence. The [Implementation Procedures](#) stipulate that students need to submit the request for such an absence at least a week in advance to have it be considered for a lawful absence. If HB0575 passed, HCPSS' policy would likely cover the instances envisioned by the bill within the current allotment for up to three days of discretionary leave, but may need language updates to explicitly grant a minimum of 15 hours or two school days for General Assembly testimony. Process changes beyond the policy may include how students can submit proof of engagement from third parties (legislative offices or advocacy groups) rather than just a signature from a parent.

As amended in the House, HB0575 broadened the definition of civic engagement beyond the scope of the General Assembly, which better aligns with the broader use of civic engagement built into the current HCPSS policy which was intended to be as inclusive as possible for activities such as voting, volunteerism, advocacy, testimony, and peaceful demonstrations. The new language that calls for excused absences for civic engagement, and the Page Program, to be in addition to any excused absences under existing policies of a local board means HCPSS would be required to allow for additional absence



beyond those under discretionary. A potential unintended consequence of this language would be the slippery slope of other types of required excused absences being continually added to statute, without a holistic lens towards the impact on student attendance.

As a legislative priority, the Board supports local decision making in the development of policy that accounts for a balance of educational practices, available resources, public input, and local accountability. While HB0575 aligns with the intent of HCPSS Policy 9010, it remains a mandate on local board's authority to set policies that are directly responsive to its citizenry.

For these reasons, we urge an UNFAVORABLE report on HB0575 from this Committee.

HB 575_ Public Schools - Student Attendance - Ex

Uploaded by: Trudy Tibbals

Position: UNF

HB 575: Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Civic Engagement: Please vote **TO OPPOSE** this bill.

Dear Education, Energy & the Environment Committee:

I am writing to respectfully, **strongly oppose HB 575**, concerning *Public Schools – Student Attendance – Excused Absences for Civic Engagement*.

Civic engagement is important, and students should absolutely learn about government, public policy, and community involvement. However, **creating additional categories of excused absences** for activities that may be broadly defined or politically oriented **risks undermining consistent attendance standards and the primary mission of our schools—education**.

Regular classroom attendance is critical to academic success, particularly as Maryland continues working to address learning loss and achievement gaps. Expanding excused absences for civic engagement activities may unintentionally encourage students to miss valuable instructional time, placing additional strain on teachers and disrupting classroom continuity. Schools should remain focused on providing balanced civic education within the classroom rather than facilitating absences tied to external advocacy activities.

*Students can engage civically through structured school programs such as student government, service-learning projects, and curriculum-based activities that occur without sacrificing instructional time. Politics should not be a focus at our schools, except possibly within a political science class or something similar, and if so, **ALL** political views and opinions should be taught and accepted.*

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to **oppose HB 575**.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration of my concerns regarding this important student attendance legislation.

Respectfully,

Trudy Tibbals

HB 575 xover -Public Schools - Student Attendance

Uploaded by: Zaniah Anderson

Position: UNF



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)