

Testimony in Support of *House Bill 575:*  
*An Act Concerning Public Schools – Student Attendance – Excused Absences for Civic  
Engagement*

Ways and Means Committee

Feb. 18, 2026

My name is Daniela Naaman, and I am a junior at Thomas S. Wootton High School in District 17. I am writing to express my support for *House Bill 575: An Act Concerning Public Schools – Student Attendance – Excused Absences for Civic Engagement*. This bill would require the Maryland Department of Education and county school boards to adopt a policy excusing absences for students participating in civic activities.

This month, I participated in the American Jewish Committee’s Leaders for Tomorrow program, which involved a lobbying session on Capitol Hill; immediately after it ended, I attended the Maryland Jewish Advocacy Day event. These experiences profoundly impacted me. Getting to share my concerns with legislators was one of the most empowering things I have ever done; I left inspired, aware of the reach of my voice, and excited to continue making change. The experiences gave me confidence, helped me become more eloquent, and influenced me to learn more about law and politics. Above all, I was left with a sense of civic pride that I had not felt as acutely before. Because of these two experiences, I am not only determined to seek out new ways to become involved in politics, but also to more freely express my voice in social surroundings. I have furthermore realized that policy is something I would like to go into in the future.

Youth voices in their government are vital. Not only does hearing from youth, from my experience, make issues more meaningful and memorable for politicians, youth can also express unique and refreshing perspectives in an increasingly polarized and black-and-white world.

As civic trust rapidly declines, it is vital for Americans to be civically engaged from a young age to foster faith in institutions and promote societal unity. Advocating for issues as youth encourages civic engagement as adults and decreases feelings of discouragement in the status quo, leading to less apathy and resignation in favor of more involvement to create change.

The fact is that youth are inheriting an increasingly dangerous world. Climate change, global conflict, and societal issues on a more local level terrify us, and it is easy to feel powerless; something that one impactful advocacy experience can permanently reverse. On February 9th this year, there was a shooting in my school, something that has scarred my community and increased fear and mistrust among my peers. We must foster an environment where youth can drive change

against these issues. They have not been solved yet, so maybe it is their fresh perspectives that will make the world a better and safer place.

Not excusing students' absences for advocacy truly has no benefit. If they are so dedicated to a particular cause, having their absences unexcused might lead students to lie and make up excuses in order to advocate, which fosters worse attendance habits long-term. If they are nervous about advocating, it can prevent them from doing so, something that harms both them and the community. It is not easy for youth to take the time out of their days to research policies, write a statement, and commute to their legislative house. They do not do so lightly, or for any issue, nor do they owe it to anyone. In the process, they expand upon things they learn in school, such as in social studies and English classes, and develop life skills and independence. So why should they be punished for or discouraged from working hard, performing their civic duty, and learning experientially by having their absences unexcused?

Advocacy should be promoted, not discouraged. For these reasons—the power of the youth voice, the need to increase civic engagement among young people, the circumstances of the increasingly dangerous world in which we live, and the amount of effort and rewards students put in and gain from testifying—I ask for a favorable report for House Bill 575.