



**House Ways and Means Committee
Written Informational Testimony
House Bill 575 – Public Schools – Student Attendance – Excused Absences for Civic Engagement
February 18, 2026**

Chair Wilkins and Members of the Committee:

Thank you, Chairperson Wilkins for submitting this legislation and for the opportunity to provide informational testimony on House Bill 575.

This testimony does not address the value of civic engagement itself. Students participating in the democratic process such as testifying before the General Assembly, meeting with legislators, or advocating on policy issues are engaging in important civic learning experiences. This testimony addresses the technical and practical implications of the bill as currently drafted.

I. Policy Alignment Considerations

The intent of HB 575 appears to be protecting students from punitive consequences for participating in civic engagement activities. That objective may be achievable without altering chronic absence calculations. **Protective measures could include:**

- Explicitly designating civic engagement as an excused absence (without excluding it from chronic absence calculations as this bill does),
- Requiring districts to allow make-up work without penalty,
- Designating civic engagement as a school sanctioned activity and documenting it as a field trip which would not be counted as an absence, and/or
- Prohibiting exclusionary discipline or truancy referrals for these absences.

Such approaches would support civic participation while preserving compliance with federal and state definitions and maintaining the integrity of attendance metrics.

II. Technical Concerns

1. Data Integrity and Measurement Consistency

The chronic absenteeism metric was intentionally designed to avoid distinctions between excused and unexcused absences. The metric measures total time away from instruction, not the justification for absence. Creating an exclusion from the chronic absence calculation for civic engagement absences would:

- Introduce a categorical exception into what is intended to be a uniform measure, and
- Create administrative complexity in student information system.

It could even contribute to greater challenges in comparability across districts, which already exist due to local control to add additional measures of excused absence at the district level.



2. Conflicts with Maryland's Definition of Chronic Absence

House Bill 575 provides that an excused absence for civic engagement: "may not be included in a calculation of chronic absenteeism for the student or the school."

Under state and federal reporting requirements, chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or more of school days for any reason, whether excused or unexcused.

Excluding a specific category of absence from chronic absence calculations could create a discrepancy between Maryland's reporting and federal definitions and potentially raise questions about compliance with ESSA accountability reporting. As noted in the fiscal and policy analyses, it is not clear whether such an exclusion is permissible under federal guidance.

Conclusion

House Bill 575 presents important questions regarding civic engagement in schools. However, the provision excluding civic engagement absences from chronic absenteeism calculations introduces technical and practical challenges, including:

- State and Federal compliance uncertainty,
- Data integrity concerns, and
- Administrative implementation complexities.

For these technical and operational reasons, careful revision of the bill is warranted, to ensure its intended outcomes are achieved prior to proceeding.

Thank you for your consideration.

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