
TO: House Ways and Means Committee

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

DATE: February 18, 2026

POSITION: Support with Amendments

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.

At the same time, MSDE believes it is important to preserve the integrity and consistency of how chronic absenteeism is calculated statewide. Chronic absenteeism is defined at both the state and federal level as a student missing ten percent of the school year, typically 18 out of 180 instructional days. This definition, used by the vast majority of states, includes all absences, whether excused or unexcused, with no exceptions. This consistency is essential because the purpose of tracking chronic absenteeism is to understand the full scope of missed instructional time and its impact on student learning. 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.

Proposed Amendments

1. MSDE respectfully proposes removing lines 10-12 on page 2 of the bill. The Department recommends that excused absences for any reason continue to count toward the calculation of chronic absenteeism, preserving consistency with state and federal definitions.
2. MSDE proposes an amendment to lines 2–5 on page 2 to provide greater clarity regarding the types of activities that will qualify as civic engagement under HB 575. Specifically, the amendment would clarify that eligible activities must relate to the consideration, development, or advocacy of legislation or policy within the General Assembly, thereby better guiding county boards in defining and approving civic engagement activities for students.

MSDE appreciates the opportunity to provide these recommendations and looks forward to working with the General Assembly to ensure students have meaningful opportunities for civic engagement while maintaining clarity and consistency in school attendance practices.

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