



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

**House Ways and Means Committee**

**Position: Informational**

February 18, 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. **We appreciate Chair Wilkins for bringing forward House Bill 575 and offer informational testimony focused on implementation and accountability considerations.**

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. Our concern is not with recognizing civic engagement as an excused absence. Rather, it is with the provision stating that these absences may not be included in the calculation of chronic absenteeism for the student or the school.

Under state and federal law, chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or more of instructional days for any reason, excused or unexcused. The metric is intentionally designed to measure total instructional time missed, not the reason for the absence. Excluding a specific category of absence from that calculation would introduce an exception into what is meant to be a uniform accountability measure. This raises practical and legal questions that could create inconsistencies between Maryland’s reporting and federal ESSA requirements. It may reduce comparability across districts and over time. It would likely require changes to student information systems and attendance reporting processes.

If the intent of the bill is to ensure students are not penalized for participating in civic engagement, that goal may be achieved without altering chronic absenteeism metrics. The statute could explicitly designate civic engagement as an excused absence, require that students be allowed to make up work without penalty, and prohibit truancy referrals or disciplinary consequences tied to these absences. Those steps would protect students while preserving alignment with state and federal definitions.

We also encourage consideration of equity in implementation. 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.

House Bill 575 raises important questions about civic engagement in public schools. **We support the objective of encouraging student participation in democracy, and we urge careful review of the attendance reporting provisions to avoid unintended compliance and data consequences.**

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