

HB 575 Testimony

Public Schools – Student Attendance – Excused Absences for Civic Engagement

Michael Gannon, Montgomery County Regional Student Government Association (MCR)

Dear Chair Wilkins, Vice Chair Feldmark, and members of the House Ways and Means 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. We 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.

MCR-SGA formally supports preparing students for life beyond high school and connecting them to real-world opportunities, including civic ones. Our policy platform calls 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.

We also want to address the attendance dimension of this bill directly. MCPS has worked hard to reduce chronic absenteeism, which stood at 23.2% of all students in the 2023–2024 school year, and remains above pre-pandemic levels at the high school level, where rates have hovered around 30%. The district’s strategic plan explicitly emphasizes “school connectedness” as the most critical preventative measure against chronic absence. Civic engagement fosters exactly that 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 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 Ways and Means 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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