

ALONZO T. WASHINGTON
Legislative District 22
Prince George's County

—
Vice Chair
Ways and Means Committee

—
Chair, Education Subcommittee



The Maryland House of Delegates
6 Bladen Street, Room 131
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
410-841-3652 · 301-858-3652
800-492-7122 Ext. 3652
Fax 410-841-3699 · 301-858-3699
Alonzo.Washington@house.state.md.us

THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of HB461 - Public Schools – Student Attendance – Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs

HB461 allows Maryland students to take mental health days as an excused absence. It is no secret that mental illness remains an enormous problem among this current generation of students. Over 70% of teens say that anxiety and depression are major issues among their peers.

Even more concerning, 17% of Maryland students seriously consider suicide. That is roughly one out of every six of our children who are having to go into the classroom carrying this immense mental and emotional burden. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says suicide is the third leading cause of death for Maryland youth.

As our students start coming back into the classroom, they will also be carrying the physical and emotional trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic with them. Many of our students have fallen ill or have had a loved one pass away as a result of the virus. This legislation becomes essential to ensure our students have every resource at their disposal to take care of their mental health.

HB461 will additionally help to de-stigmatize the issue of mental health for our students. It is important for students who suffer from mental illness to understand that these conditions are in fact very common - between 10 to 15 percent of all young people are suffering from depressive symptoms at any one time. Students should have the ability to take a day off and utilize the resources available to them to ensure their well-being and academic success.

Other States, such as Oregon and Utah, have implemented similar measures in recent years. Maryland needs to take this necessary step to ensure our students' mental health needs are met – and to ensure we are treating mental health and physical health with the same degree of seriousness.

To ensure that our students are getting the follow up they need, the bill includes a requirement that a counselor or other school mental health specialist checks in with a student after they take a mental health day. It also requires a written note from a parent in order for the absence to be excused, so that families are aware of the situation their student is going through.

This bill does not aim to completely solve the issue of mental illness among our youth, but simply seeks to alleviate some of their daily anxiety by giving our students a small reprieve every quarter when they need it.

Additionally, this bill was passed unanimously by the Ways and Means committee, and moved through the House of Delegates by a 131-1 vote.

For these reasons, I respectfully ask for a favorable report on HB461.