

TO: Chairman Pinsky, Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee, Senate of Maryland

FROM: Katherine Albert
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PTSA Youth Mental Health Advocacy Team

DATE: March 22, 2021

RE: **SUPPORT - HB461** - Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs

I am writing to ask you to please support HB461, *Public Schools - Student Attendance - Excused Absences for Mental Health Needs*. This bill would give students the option to take time off during the school year as an excused absence to address their mental health needs.

As a current junior in high school, and someone who has experienced the effects of negative mental health on my well-being and the well-being of others, I know how important mental health is for students. This is a topic that affects everyone, yet the stigma surrounding it prevents students from seeking and receiving the help and support they need to thrive both academically and socially in school.

Personally, much of my high school experience has been altered as a result of mental illness. Transitioning from middle school to the new world of high school was not an easy task for me, and the stress of added schoolwork and responsibilities, as well as my personal feelings, led to constant stress and anxiety. This later led to my formal diagnosis of anxiety and depression.

The stress of transitioning between middle and high school with limited resources and support led to my use of coping skills that had a negative impact on my health. I focused on my schoolwork more than my own health because I was afraid that if I took even a class period to talk to someone, I would fall behind in class. My inability to cope in a positive way created more problems for me that year, and I was eventually unable to focus on my treatment because of the academic stress I was under. However, I was eventually able to get the help I needed, and I learned how to channel my emotions in a more positive way.

Even though I'm doing better, I am still dealing with the negative consequences of my mental struggles that took place during my freshman year of high school. Though I have learned how to effectively cope with my depression and anxiety, I am still affected by it every day. Mental health is not something that I can choose not to think about because it does not affect me; I have to think about it every day. I am not "cured", and I never fully will be.

Looking back, I can attest to the fact that being able to take days off from school would have helped me to address my mental problems. Excused absences for mental health would have given me better access to needed support and provided relief during my worst days. I would have been able to take a step back and focus on something other than the constant pressure of keeping up with my academics. I wholeheartedly feel that the ability to have excused mental health days for students would not only lift some of the stigma around mental health in schools, but also provide a safe and stressless time for students to get the help and support we need. Mental health is a critical issue for everyone, and

it affects all students whether or not we address it. I believe that HB461 is a valuable step in the right direction towards improving our students' mental health care.

Thank you for your consideration of my testimony. I hope that you will vote for a favorable report on HB461, if you are a member of a committee that considers this bill, or vote to pass this bill when you have the opportunity.