

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1834

As Passed Legislature

Title: An act relating to student excused absences for mental health reasons.

Brief Description: Concerning student excused absences for mental health reasons.

Sponsors: Representatives Callan, Rude, Johnson, J., Davis, Macri, Ramos, Rule, Santos, Senn, Paul, Simmons, Bergquist, Thai, Stonier, Riccelli, Frame and Harris-Talley.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Education: 1/20/22, 1/27/22 [DP].

Floor Activity:

Passed House: 2/2/22, 96-0.

Passed Senate: 3/1/22, 48-0.

Passed Legislature.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Requires that the rules of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (SPI) categorize a student absence from school for a mental health reason as an excused absence due to illness, health condition, or medical appointment.
- Directs the SPI to develop, in consultation with a student advisory group, guidelines to implement the student absence rules.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 13 members: Representatives Santos, Chair; Dolan, Vice Chair; Ybarra, Ranking Minority Member; Walsh, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Berg, Bergquist, Callan, McCaslin, McEntire, Ortiz-Self, Rude, Steele and Stonier.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Staff: Megan Wargacki (786-7194).

Background:

Student Absence from School: Definition and Excused Absence Categories.

State statute directs the Superintendent of Public Instruction (SPI) to adopt rules establishing a standard definition of student absence from school. In adopting the definition, the SPI must review current practices in Washington school districts, definitions used in other states, and national standards or definitions. The SPI must also consult with the Graduation: A Team Effort Partnership Advisory Committee (GATE Committee, formerly known as the Building Bridges Work Group).

By administrative rule, the SPI has established 13 categories for which student absences from school must be excused, including because of illness, health condition, or medical appointment for the student or person for whom the student is legally responsible. The rule also permits school districts to define additional categories for excused absences and gives the school principal or designee the authority to determine if an absence meets the state categories and the school district policy for an excused absence.

Graduation: A Team Effort Partnership Advisory Committee.

The GATE Committee includes representatives of agencies, organizations, and others, who work with youth who have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out of school. The GATE Committee identifies and makes recommendations to the Legislature for the reduction of fiscal, legal, and regulatory barriers that prevent coordination of program resources across agencies at the state and local level; develops and tracks performance measures and benchmarks for each partner agency or organization; and identifies research-based and emerging best practices regarding drop-out prevention, intervention, and retrieval programs.

Legislative Youth Advisory Council.

The Legislative Youth Advisory Council (LYAC) was established to examine issues of importance to youth, for example, emotional and physical health, education, and strategies to increase youth participation in government. The Office of the Lieutenant Governor supervises the LYAC and selects its 22 plus members. Among other things, the LYAC advises the Legislature on proposed and pending legislation on matters relating to youth and annually reports to the Legislature on its activities.

Summary of Bill:

By the beginning of the 2022-23 school year, the rules of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (SPI) must categorize a student absence from school for a mental health reason as an excused absence due to illness, health condition, or medical appointment. Prior to filing a public notice of the proposed rules, the SPI must consult with a student advisory group, as described below, in addition to the Graduation: A Team Effort Partnership Advisory Committee.

The SPI must also develop and publish guidelines for public schools to implement the definition of student absence from school. The SPI must consider including guidance for schools to integrate their responses to student excused absences for physical and mental health into their support systems for student well-being.

In developing the guidelines, the SPI must consult with a student advisory group whose members are directly impacted by student absence rules and policies and who represent the diversity of the public school population, including diversity in gender identity, family income, race and ethnicity, and geography, among other characteristics. The student advisory group must also include a member of the Legislative Youth Advisory Council appointed by the Lieutenant Governor.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Preliminary fiscal note available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) Mental health is very real and very important. Depression, trauma, anxiety, and other mental health conditions are faced by students every day. Students are struggling with their mental health now more than ever. COVID-19 has had an indescribable impact on the well-being of Washington's young people forcing them to have part-time jobs, worry about sick family members, miss out on traditional extracurriculars and other experiences. Many students need mental health days; at times, they need a break from the overwhelming amount of school work and social responsibilities they experience. Some students feel like they can no longer push through the endless responsibilities. While this is not the experience of every student, it is the experience of some. When mental health is heavily involved, where life and death is sometimes contemplated, that should mean everything.

Mental health is a highly stigmatized issue. Students are often scared to speak up when suffering, leaving them without the support they need. Rather than attending to their deteriorating mental health, students often worry about falling behind in school, which leads to worsening symptoms. Many students feel ashamed and cannot communicate these issues with their teachers. Some students cannot attend mental health therapy due to financial difficulties or not enough time in their schedules.

Schools, where students spend so much time, should do more to help students with their mental health. This prioritization of student mental health will help students be more successful and have better lives. Students across Washington feel pressure to choose between their mental health and their academic performance.

By qualifying mental health reasons as an excused school absence, students will no longer have to make this unnecessarily anxiety-producing decision. Excused absences for mental health will not solve every student's struggle, but this bill will allow students to take a pause from school to build themselves up again and will make an immense difference. The bill brings awareness to mental health and provides the necessary tools to deal with it. The newly established student advisory council will ensure that schools adequately address mental health absences to dismantle these issues at their core. Students need to feel that adults support their mental well-being for students are the emerging leaders of society.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: Sarnika Ali; Shae Dolan, Washington State Legislative Youth Advisory Council; Achalay Reyes, Federal Way High School-Associated Student Body; and McKenna Hulse.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: Tara Zolfaghari, Shreya Shaji, and Rohan Ganesh, Legislative Youth Advisory Council; Miranda Espinoza; Mikhail Cherniske, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction; Diana Stadden, The Arc of Washington State; Adrienne Stuart, Washington State Developmental Disabilities Council; Netra Krishnan; Tara Ryan; and Lily Villa.