

SENATE BILL REPORT

HB 1834

As Reported by Senate Committee On:
Early Learning & K-12 Education, February 21, 2022

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

Committee Activity: Early Learning & K-12 Education: 2/16/22, 2/21/22 [DP].

Brief Summary of Bill

- Directs the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to categorize an absence for a mental health reason as an excused absence due to illness, health condition, or medical appointment beginning in the 2022-23 school year.
- Requires OSPI to develop and publish guidelines for public schools to implement the definition of student absence from school.
- Tasks OSPI with consulting certain stakeholders including a student advisory group when developing student absence rules and guidelines.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON EARLY LEARNING & K-12 EDUCATION

Majority Report: Do pass.

Signed by Senators Wellman, Chair; Nobles, Vice Chair, K-12; Wilson, C., Vice Chair, Early Learning; Hawkins, Ranking Member; Dozier, Hunt, McCune, Mullet and Pedersen.

Staff: Ailey Kato (786-7434)

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.

Background: Student Absence Rules. The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) must adopt rules establishing a standard definition of student absence from school. When developing the rules, OSPI must review current practices in school districts, definitions used in other states, and any other national standards or definitions. OSPI must also consult with the Graduation: A Team Effort Partnership Advisory Committee formerly known as the Building Bridges Work Group.

OSPI rule establishes when absences must be excused, which includes a number of reasons, including illness, health condition, or medical appointment, including, but not limited to, medical, counseling, dental, optometry, pregnancy, and in-patient or out-patient treatment for chemical dependency or mental health for the student or person for whom the student is legally responsible.

Graduation: A Team Effort Partnership Advisory Committee. State law requires OSPI to establish this state-level advisory committee. The committee must include K-12 and state agencies that work with youth who have dropped out, or are at risk of dropping out of school.

Legislative Youth Advisory Council. This council was established to examine issues of importance to youth. Subject to the supervision of the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, this council has certain duties including advising the Legislature on proposed and pending legislation related to youth.

Summary of Bill: By the beginning of the 2022-23 school year, OSPI rules must categorize an absence for a mental health reason as an excused absence due to illness, health condition, or medical appointment.

Before filing notice of student absence rules, OSPI must consult with a student advisory group in addition to the Graduation: A Team Effort Partnership Advisory Committee.

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

OSPI must also develop and publish guidelines for public schools to implement the definition of student absence. OSPI must consider including guidance for schools to integrate their responses to student excused absences for physical and mental health in their support systems for student well-being. In developing these guidelines, OSPI must consult with the student advisory group.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Partial fiscal note available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: Students were facing a behavioral crisis before the pandemic, and it has gotten worse. Reports of suicide and substance abuse are skyrocketing. Students struggle with the many demands of school, and school can be one of the biggest stressors on youth. Many students struggle with mental health disorders. When students feel drained, they cannot successfully participate in their education. Mental health is as important as physical health. Schools can currently excuse absences for mental health reasons, but this is not clear to all school districts or consistently applied across the state. Students have done a lot of work on this bill. Guidance is needed for school districts to implement the rule.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Representative Lisa Callan, Prime Sponsor; Krissy Johnson, OSPI; Talia See, Justice for Girls Coalition of WA State; Havivah Giangreco, Fellow, Stand for Children.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.