



S-2151 Requires School Districts to Permit Students Five Excused Absences for Mental or Behavioral Health Reasons (Codey)
Senate Education Committee
February 23, 2023

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. My name is Jennie Lamon and I am the Assistant Director of Government Relations for the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association. First, please allow me to underscore - mental health issues are critically important and no commentary against the approach taken in S-2151 undervalues the importance of mental/behavioral health.

However, S-2151 as it is currently drafted would not really be helpful for students or districts and, would in fact, create inequities.

New Jersey state Statute directs that students be recorded as:

- Present
- Absent or
- Excused for a State-excused absence

Those State-excused absences are enumerated in Statute. They are:

1. Religious holidays - every year the State Board of Education votes on a list of religious holidays on which it shall be mandatory to excuse students for religious observance upon the written request signed by the parent
2. Participation in observance of Veterans Day
3. Participation in district board of election membership activities
4. Take Our Children to Work Day;
5. College visit(s), up to three days per school year for students in grades 11 and 12; and
6. Closure of a busing school district that prevents a student from having transportation to the receiving school.

For absences that do not meet the one of the six statewide excused absences I just named, district boards of education may adopt policies that establish locally approved or excused absences for the purposes of expectations and consequences regarding

truancy, student conduct, promotion, retention, and the award of course credit. However, an absence designated as excused by the district board of education is still considered to be an absence in the submission of chronic absenteeism reporting to the State.

So in NJ NO health-related absences are fully excused, as only the 6 state-excused absences are considered "excused". This is true for illness, chemo treatments, heart surgery, etc

This bill would carve out a special category of statewide excused absences for mental health when the same does not exist for physical health, which we believe would be viewed as unfair and inequitable by students, parents and districts alike.

With appropriate notes from doctors, students who miss school for legitimate reasons (of which mental/behavioral health would be one) would not be restricted in any way from making up work or getting full credit.

Breaking the attendance expectations down so much with specific fully excused absences will create inequalities rather than solve situations. Currently school leaders have ample latitude to make an informed decision about credit based on the attendance information provided by parents and health care practitioners - and they are doing it. In addition, the community has input into the local policy that a district board of education adopts. So, if a community has a concern about the local policy, parents can recourse with the board.

For these reasons, we respectfully oppose S-2151 as written. We can however support S-2414 which recognizes local district discretion to develop its attendance policies, including issues of student physical or mental health.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.

(New Jersey Administrative Code Section 6A:32-8.4 - Student attendance)