To: State Representative Carol Doherty

From: Oliver Ames’ Law & the Legal Class -D Block Date: January 8, 2021

RE: The expansion of reasons for excused absences from school to include mental health days

# Executive Summary

The issues of students’ mental health and chronic absenteeism have been more prominent in today’s society. To address these growing problems, we recommend that you introduce legislation that would allow students to take 2 mental health days per semester. Other states have proven legislation similar to this has helped improve students’ mental health, strengthen students' academic performance, and reduce chronic absenteeism. We have outlined for you research and statistics on chronic absenteeism and students' mental health, alternative proposals, and evidence to support our recommended proposal.

# Background and Context

Students missing school has been a common recurring issue in the nation. Between 2015 and 2016, about seven million students missed 15 or more days of school. As a result from chronic absenteeism, students are missing 10% or more of their academic school year, whether it be from excused or unexcused absences. Chronic absenteeism affects as many as 6.5 million students nationwide, which is about 13% of the total student population. One of the root causes of chronic absenteeism is mental health issues. Mental health illnesses, such as social anxiety, depression, and stress, can make it extremely difficult for students to feel comfortable in an educational setting.

Traumatic experiences outside of the classroom can trigger a student’s mental health illness, and cause them to be continuously absent from school. Some states have already picked up on the increasingly high rates of student absenteeism, and have started to take further precautions.

In an attempt to help students, states have started to excuse absences in order for their students to take: “mental health days”. For example, Oregon has noticed that the youth suicide rates have been increasing in the state. To try and lower the suicide rates, Oregon’s government passed a law, which allowed it's students to be excused from school with mental health days. Before this law passed, students were forced to lie about the true reason for their absences, and would have to deal with make up work and face the consequences of potential punishment. In addition to Oregon, Utah now gives students the opportunity to take 5 mental health days every 3 months. There are legislative proposals to do the same in California, New York, and Florida. With states beginning to excuse students for needing a mental break, this could spark conversation about the parents being more open to this idea.

# Recommendation

Enabling students to take mental health days will benefit a student’s mindset and have a more stress-free education experience. Multiple states have implemented legislation allowing students to take mental health days, which is why we are recommending that students in Massachusetts be

allowed 2 mental health days per semester. Studies conducted shown by that in Oregon, 18% of high

schoolers and 17% of middle schoolers had reported that they seriously considered suicide. Depression affects approximately 20% of teenagers which is why suicide is the third leading cause of death between the ages of ten to twenty-four. After this law was passed, suicide rates have shown a decrease. Oregon students say that once this law was put into effect, they were found to be more supportive of each other and were more inclusive.

Students should be taking a mental health day if they start to experience behavior and personality changes, also if a student becomes easily irritated, he/she should take the day off to focus on their mental health. Mental health issues can even present physical changes, such as headaches, stomachaches, and sleepiness. According to Edutopia, daily saliva samples were collected at two Texas high schools to measure their cortisol levels. For instance, declining grades causes a student to begin the process of an influx of cortisol levels. High cortisol levels can impair brain functioning and suppress the immune system, causing long-term damage. Based on this information it seems vital to implement several periods of time to allow students to cool down and gain back energy. If a student begins to isolate themselves, this is another sign that a mental health day is needed. In 2018, Utah broadened their term of excused absences to include mental health. Doing this normalizes the fact that mental health conditions are the same as physical health conditions and it is often dismissed in the public and school eye.

We propose that students have 2 mental health days for each semester. This will help students mentally prepare for school better and help their performance academically. The mental health days will help better solve depression in teens and young adults by letting them take a day off to reset their minds and better the learning environment for the students of Massachusetts.

# Alternatives

In order to help prevent chronic absenteeism, we have created various different options that serve as alternatives to stopping the problem. First, create an attendance team that monitors attendances and informs parents of absences in order to make sure students are on time for class. This team will set goals with students who are continuously absent, and if needed, hand out punishments to encourage students to attend school. Another alternative is awarding students for the best attendance of each term, this will incentivize everyone to come to school more so they can get the reward. This will help stop chronic absenteeism and improve students academic performance.

Creating a positive environment in the school is vital for encouraging students to attend. This can be done by reinforcing positive behavior amongst students, which will allow both students and faculty to feel comfortable in a safe learning environment. Creating more interactive and exciting ways to learn at school will also make it a much more fun environment for students and could stop chronic absenteeism because kids actually want to come to school.

Additionally, bullying can be a main cause of chronic absenteeism. Students will be discouraged from attending school if they are being teased by other kids, creating an environment that they do not want to be in. This is why school systems should launch anti-bullying campaigns where students are monitored and observed to prevent bullying, therefore encouraging kids who may experience it to come into a more positive environment.

Based on these alternatives, it is still our recommendation that Massachusetts enact legislation that allows for the expansion of reasons for excused absences from school to include mental health days.