

## **HB 619 sponsor testimony- Rep. Willis E. Blackshear Jr.**

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Bird, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the Primary and Secondary Education Committee thank you for allowing me to present sponsor testimony on HB 619 along with my joint sponsor Rep. Miranda.

House Bill 619 would allow for School Districts to permit student mental health days. This means that students in grades k-12 could take up to 3 mental health days per year. Those mental health days would be considered excused absences so that the student can attend to their emotional and psychological well-being. This bill also gives schools the ability to refer students that have taken a mental health day to the appropriate school health and support services such as counseling, social work, or psychological services. Therefore, students are able to receive the supports they need to effectively deal with their mental health situation.

The need to address mental health in schools is becoming more and more evident. Whether it be social pressures, or anxiety due to schoolwork, or even personal issues that a student might be dealing with, school can be an extremely stressful place for kids.

\*\*\*\*\* Might want to include a “trigger warning” or “sensitive subject” warning\*\*\*\*\*

According to a CDC study<sup>1</sup> which surveyed adolescents ages 12-17, in the year 2018-19 approximately:

- 36.7% had persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness
- 18.8% seriously considered attempting suicide.
- 15.7% made a suicide plan.
- 8.9% attempted suicide.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html>

That is heartbreaking. To think that so many kids are struggling greatly with depression and other mental health issues is nothing short of heartbreaking. That is why I brought this bill forward-to address this issue by allowing students to openly confront the mental health challenges that they face, and receive help from parents, school counselors, and others without it being stigmatized.

Another thing I would like to address with regard to this bill is the leeway that it offers to schools and school districts. This bill makes it optional for school districts to implement this policy, and recognizes that many school districts may not have the adequate resources and organizational infrastructure to implement this immediately.

Lastly I would like to say that this bill is not a “be all end all” for solving the mental health crisis we are currently seeing. Many factors such as socioeconomic status, financial stress, physical health and others can all be attributed as root causes to the mental health issues that many Ohioans face. By allowing students to take mental health days, we are normalizing the discussion of mental health with our youth, and teaching them that it is okay to not be okay. We are also teaching them to reach out, and find resources that can help them instead of them suffering in silence.

Members of the committee please join us in taking action to address mental health in our schools. Thank you for allowing me to present this testimony, and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have, along with my joint sponsor Rep. Miranda.