



EXCUSED ABSENCES FOR MENTAL HEALTH

A PROJECT OF COMMUNITY EQUITY COLLABORATIVE

Dear District Trustee and/or Administrator,

In 2021, Governor Newsom signed into law an amendment to Ed Code that expands excused absences to include those for the benefit of the pupil's mental or behavioral health.

While districts across the county are struggling with chronic absenteeism, it is important to recognize the **importance of occasional mental health days as preventative** to prolonged mental health issues that can stand in the way of student academic performance and wellness.

THE NEED

We are experiencing a **youth mental health crisis** in California: 45% of teens report having recently struggled with their mental health; almost $\frac{1}{3}$ of teens have recently experienced serious psychological distress. **LGBTQ+, low-income, and multi-racial youth** are at even higher risk. In California, suicide is the second-leading cause of death for adolescents.¹

WHAT STUDENTS ARE TELLING US

According to a 2020 national survey of youth, 51% of respondents identified **mental health breaks/absences as the second most critical mental health support**, only after access to mental health professionals.²

Here's what youth in San Mateo County told CEC about the importance of mental health days:

*"Burnout and excessive stress **deserves a break** as much as a cold."*

*"If you are not mentally well enough to attend school, then it'd be better to take a day to recover than to strain yourself for an **unproductive day**...it is a much **healthier choice in the long run** to be absent for one day than it is to push yourself and burn out faster."*

¹ <https://letsgethealthy.ca.gov/goals/living-well/reducing-suicide/>

² [MHA National Survey](#)



*“If one day I have too much anxiety or built up stress that I would not be able to **succeed in my school day**, that is just as important as when I am sick and have to stay home because I am throwing up.”*

Unfortunately, many **students and parents do not know about the recent change in law**: 70% of the high-school students and *all* of the teachers CEC surveyed were unaware that mental health days qualify as an excused absence. Because the legislation is so recent, many school districts have yet to update their attendance policies or otherwise facilitate student access to mental health days.

WHAT DISTRICTS CAN DO NOW:

- **Update your attendance policies** to reflect this new law and ensure they are **easily accessible** on your district and school-site websites, in student/family handbooks, etc.
- Update your tech systems to allow for accurate absentee coding and **review protocols with office/nursing staff**. Ensure that mental health days are included as reasons for excused absences on attendance slips, in phone messages, etc.
- Ensure teachers are aware that, **by law, they must allow students to make up work** when they take an excused absence for the purpose of mental health.
- Provide information to students as part of the **mental health component of your health curriculum**. (Sample resources for students and families are below.)

RESOURCES:

Visit our [website](#) to access the following:

- [Resource sheet for adults \(En Español\)](#)
- [Resource sheet for students](#)
- [Sample announcement/image](#) for your school/district newsletter
- Information about how your parent/student group(s) can sign up for a 15-minute, virtual presentation about this new law and when/how to utilize mental health days.

CONTACT

For more information about this project, or to provide input, contact Heather Hopkins at heather@communityequitycollaborative.org.

