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## PEOPLE

### **A new Illinois law allows mental health days for students. Experts urge parents to take advantage of it.**

By Olivia Olander

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When first-grade teacher Tina Berry saw that her 12-year-old needed to take a mental health day, it was because she recognized some of her own stress-induced tendencies reflected in her daughter, a seventh-grader at Old St. Mary's School in the South Loop.

“When I get tired, I can feel myself going down a tunnel,” Berry said. “For my daughter ... I can see the heightened sense of nervousness and anxiety, and that’s when I said, ‘You need to just take a break.’”

Since the start of 2022, that break has been considered an excused absence for K-12 students in Illinois, as new legislation was enacted allowing children to take up to five excused absences for mental or behavioral health yearly. Schools may also refer students to support personnel, like a school psychologist or counselor, after two such absences.

Experts and parents said the change is welcome for children after a taxing two years of learning amid a pandemic. However, it’s not clear how many families are actually taking advantage of the policy.

“There’s a lot of kids suffering and not really getting help for what they need,” said Dr. Frank Belmonte, chief medical officer at Advocate Children’s Hospital. Addressing these mental health needs early can prevent more serious issues later, Belmonte said.

Allowing mental health absences to be excused “is really, really helping with mental health parity” in comparison with physical health, he said.

The office of Illinois Education Superintendent Carmen Ayala echoed this sentiment in an email, saying it hopes the policy will help reduce the stigma around mental health issues and promote “healthy habits of self-care.”

But some families have struggled with perceived privacy concerns and stigma around actually marking absences for mental health, said Faith Cole, director of student services for Oak Park and River Forest High School.

Cole’s district puts mental health absences in the same category as vacations and college visits, and students are limited to 12 such absences — including the five days for mental health — per year, as opposed to absences for illness or COVID-19, which are not counted in the same way.

Parents may be hesitant to share that their student is absent for mental health reasons, but the information is only shared and tracked internally in the district, Cole said.

Responses varied from other suburban districts reached about their policy on such absences.

In the north suburban Glenbrook High School District 225, 75 students — less than 1.5% of the district’s total population — have taken an absence designated for mental health since the beginning of the year, the district said. In west suburban Elmhurst Community Unit School District 205, that number is 6.4%, according to the district.

A representative from Wilmette Public Schools District 39 said they have not tracked the number of students who have taken mental health days, and a spokeswoman from the Oak Park Elementary School District 97 said they had insufficient data to comment on the effect of the law.

Other districts, like New Trier Township High School District 203 in Winnetka and Wilmette Public Schools, already allowed mental health as an excused reason for absence before this year.

Districts also varied in how much they had publicized the policy to parents when it was enacted. New Trier sent out the information in a larger email about a December board meeting; Elmhurst added it to their student handbook; and Oak Park and River Forest High School hasn’t publicized it at

all, though it's an available option for parents to select when marking their students absent, according to representatives from those districts.



Samina Hadi-Tabassum, from left, walks with 12-year-old twins, Yusef and Salma, as they depart for school on March 16, 2022, in Oak Park. Hadi-Tabassum said she has taken mental health days herself, and has advocated for her children to take days as needed, too. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

Samina Hadi-Tabassum, a parent of middle schoolers in Oak Park District 97, recalled the policy being shared in a district newsletter. But it could be explained more, said Hadi-Tabassum, who is also an associate professor of cognitive development at the Erikson Institute in Chicago.

“I would really appreciate having a conversation led by the school administration saying, ‘Look, we’ve got these ... mental health days; kids should take advantage,’ ” Hadi-Tabassum said.

Berry, who teaches in Cicero School District 99, said she doesn't think her district has done enough to publicize the policy. Her older daughter and 6-year-old son, a kindergartner at South Loop Elementary, have each taken a mental health day.

Berry knew her son, who has special needs and sensory issues, needed to take a day off when he started lashing out at home, "like this little peanut has this anger inside him," she said.

The two symptoms Berry recognized in her children — her daughter's anxious feelings and her son acting out — are some of the most important ones for parents to watch for in deciding whether a child should take a day off, said Dr. Judith Allen, chief operating officer and clinical director of nonprofit organization Communities In Schools of Chicago.

It's adults' responsibility to recognize when a normally bubbly child starts acting reserved, a well-dressed child starts wearing the same outfit everyday or any child deviates from their version of normal, Allen said.

Further, just as physical illness can be contagious, anxiety can spread between social groups and depression can [manifest as violence or behavioral issues](#), underscoring the need to keep students home, she said.

Parents might be afraid to deal with the answer when they ask if their children are struggling or suicidal, but taking initial steps early can act as a steppingstone to professional help, if needed, Allen said.

"Sometimes kids don't know how to put words to it, so they will act out instead and they end up going down that disciplinary path," she said.

The idea that skipping school is inherently bad is archaic, reminiscent of the "three-strikes-you're-out kind of approach that we used in the '80s and '90s," Hadi-Tabassum said.

If children need to take a day off, they should receive a follow-up from a social worker rather than discipline, she said. Within the recently enacted mental health day policy, schools have the option to alert appropriate personnel after a student takes two mental health days.

Districts have systems in place for schools to follow up with students, according to Jackie Matthews, a spokesperson from the Illinois State Board of Education.

“We hope that the excused mental health days can provide a boon to students in many different situations who may need time to decompress and get connected to supports,” Matthews said.

Hadi-Tabassum said she has taken mental health days herself, and has advocated for her children to take days as needed, too.

“Maybe you just need to stay home today,” Hadi-Tabassum said, “and not have to face this giant wall that a lot of kids feel when they’re going into a school day.”

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