

Gold Star Student Absences for Mental Health

Briefing Document

Introduction:

This document provides a summary and analysis of the provided source, "Sharri Briley - Issue," which argues for a change in how Arkansas schools handle student absences related to mental and behavioral health needs, particularly for children of military families. The document highlights the current situation, the proposed solution, and supporting arguments.

Key Themes and Ideas:

1. The Impact of Grief and Military Life on Student Mental Health:

- The document emphasizes the unique mental health challenges faced by children of fallen service members, whose lives are "turned upside down" by loss, as well as the challenges faced by children of deployed service members. These challenges are often overlooked within the school system.

Quote: *"When a service member passes away, they leave a family behind whose lives have now been turned upside down. Children of the Fallen have to continue attending school while they are going through the grieving process which can have mental and emotional health challenges no one considers."*

- **These challenges can affect their ability to learn.**

Quote: *"A student's mental health is a component of their physical health and that student's mental health can affect their ability to learn."*

2. Inconsistent Handling of Mental Health Absences:

- Currently, Arkansas schools do not consistently recognize mental health-related absences as excused. This is left to the "discretion of the individual school."
- This inconsistency can penalize students for attending counseling, grief-related events, or other mental health appointments, which could potentially discourage them from seeking help.

Quote: *"Currently, in Arkansas, school districts are not consistently recognizing student absences for mental health reasons as excused absences as it is up to the discretion of the individual school whether or not a child is counted excused or unexcused for missing school for mental health issues..."*

3. The Need for Recognition of Mental Health as a Health Issue:

- The document asserts that mental health is an integral part of overall health and that mental health challenges should be treated with the same seriousness as physical illness.

Quote: *"We must acknowledge that mental health issues can be just as disruptive and damaging as physical illness or injury."*

- The document urges that the stigma around mental healthcare must be demolished and that the state needs to recognize the youth suicide and self-harm crisis.

Quote: *"It is crucial that Arkansas recognize suicide and self-harm among our youth as the major public health crisis that it is, demolish the stigma around mental health care, and do everything within our power to help kids who are struggling to seek treatment."*

- The document also states that this legislation would help eliminate barriers and encourage open discussion about mental health between kids, their parents, and school personnel.

Quote: *"This legislation would remove barriers that cause kids to hide their mental health struggles, and encourage honest conversations between kids, their parents, and school faculty about mental health."*

4. Organizations Providing Support:

- The document mentions organizations like TAPS, SDIA, and Snowball Express that provide support and resources, especially to military families and their children, through events that could require students to miss school.
- These events are beneficial and should be able to be attended without penalty.

Quote: *"There are local and national organizations like TAPS, SDIA, and Snowball Express who coordinate wonderful events across the nation to bring Survivors together to give hope, connect with other Survivors, and in many ways provide them a 'vacation' when they wouldn't otherwise be able to afford one."*

5. The Proposed Solution: Legislation for Excused Mental Health Absences:

- The core proposal is for Arkansas to enact a law that explicitly states mental health days should be marked as excused for students, particularly those from military families.
- The law could potentially be broadened to cover *all* students in Arkansas.

Quote: *"Arkansas needs to adopt a law clarifying that mental health days should be marked as excused for students of military families."*

- The proposed solution includes guidance for schools to integrate responses to mental and physical health absences into their student support systems, treating behavioral health concerns the same as physical health concerns.

Quote: *"Arkansas should implement the definition of student absence from school and consider including guidance for schools to integrate their responses to student excused absences for physical and mental health into their support systems for student well-being. Student absences for behavioral health concerns should be treated the same as excused absences for physical health concerns."*

6. Impact Statements:

The document notes that impact statements from military families could be used to strengthen support for this needed legislative change.

Conclusion:

The document strongly advocates for a policy shift in Arkansas to recognize the significance of mental health in students' overall well-being. The current inconsistent handling of absences related to mental health is seen as a barrier that discourages help-seeking behavior. By implementing a law that treats mental health absences with the same consideration as physical health issues, Arkansas would be taking a crucial step to support its students' health and academic success.