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A5



AP / HANS PENNIK

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JIM MCISAAC

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MENTAL HEALTH DAYS FOR STUDENTS

Legislation being proposed
in Albany would allow kids to
take days off to tend
to psychological needs

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EXPERTS' TIPS FOR STAYING HEALTHY IN THE NEW YEAR **A6-7**

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TOP STORIES

MULLING MENTAL

Legislation would allow students to take days off when they feel overly stressed

BY CRAIG SCHNEIDER

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Sometimes, Derik Bazemore says, he needs a day off from school to unwind, especially after three years of pandemic worries and hassles, not to mention the everyday stress of being an eighth grader.

"Kids, myself included, have suffered from the COVID pandemic. It has affected our mental health," said Bazemore, 14, who attends Dodd Middle School in Freeport.

School districts offering "mental health days" to schoolchildren has been a controversial issue nationwide, but legislation is expected to go before New York State's lawmakers when they reconvene this month.

A dozen states already have passed laws allowing mental health days in schools, several since 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced districts across the country to move to remote learning.

Supporters say "mental health days" would allow students to hit pause and recalibrate when they feel overwhelmed. Those who oppose them say students have enough days off during the school year, and that such days could just be a pass to play hooky.

Long Island's students, for their part, have dealt with the fallout of nearly three rocky years of remote learning, isolation, learning loss, masking, social distancing and more. Districts this school year — with studies showing a rise in student anxiety and depression — have sharpened their focus on mental health issues.

Some 74% of parents nationally believe schools should offer students days off for their mental and behavioral needs, according to a recent poll by Verywell Mind and Parents, which have websites focusing on wellness and parenting. The poll found that 56% of parents already let

their kids take them.

Derik's mother, Noret Bazemore, said she supports having such days, and she's allowed him to stay home if he's having a bad day.

"I think mental health days could be extremely important, especially as they get into seventh and eighth grade. The pressures change as they get up in the world," she said.

Bazemore said she's a "pretty strict" mother, and that allowing Derik — an A student — to stay home to miss a test "is not acceptable. . . . Any missed work has to be made up," she said.

But Heather Birong, who has three children in the Carle Place district, said she doesn't believe mental health days will help much, and that schools already should have programs to help students.

"Maybe they can allow them one day, if needed, and if a parent agrees," Birong said. "I don't think multiple

days will help."

Opposing viewpoints

At least one Long Island school — Plainview-Old Bethpage John F. Kennedy High School — is already allowing students excused absences for mental health, Principal James Murray said.

When school started in September 2021, Murray said he could see students were anxious as they worked their way back into their routines after more than a year of pandemic disruptions. So he asked Superintendent Mary O'Meara if he could allow them to take days to recharge their emotional battery, and she agreed.

"The pandemic affected many students in ways we could not always measure — the pressure for some was great," O'Meara said.

Students appreciated the district's empathy, and parents liked it because they didn't want to lie if their child needed a day off, he said.

Murray said the school still allows these days and plans to extend them down the line. Parents need to call in their child's absence and follow up with a note. Students are required to make up any work they missed. He put no limit on the number of mental health days, but if a student's days add up, an assistant principal follows up with the family, he said.

"We did have a few instances of that with students. Some [students] we knew were having problems," he said. But no student abused the practice, he said.

Murray said that a student who takes an excused absence on a test day can make it up. A student taking an unexcused absence might be able to take the test but risks a penalty being assessed on their grade, he said.

Some Long Island school administrators don't feel comfortable adding mental health days to their educational tool kit.

"How would giving them a

WHAT TO KNOW

■ **A dozen states have passed laws allowing mental health days for schools, several in the years since the pandemic struck.**

New York is not among them, but one lawmaker said he will propose such legislation this month.

■ **A recent poll by Verywell Mind, a website that focuses on health and wellness, found 74% of parents believe schools should offer students days off for their mental and behavioral needs.**

■ **But some parents and educators say students already have enough days off during the school year, and they worry that such days could be a pass for a student to play hooky.**

HEALTH DAYS FOR SCHOOLKIDS



Noret Bazemore with sons Simon, 12, and Derik, 14, at their Freeport home. She supports the plan.

day off fix the situation?" Baldwin Superintendent Shari Camhi said. "The student may just spend the day at the mall or on social media. How does that address the issue?"

Camhi added that there's no shortage of days off during the school year. "What is the

stress? Let's fix that," she said.

Some worry that providing such time off could be counterproductive.

In the National Review, Daniel Buck, editor-in-chief of the education newsletter Chalkboard Review, wrote last year that mental health days

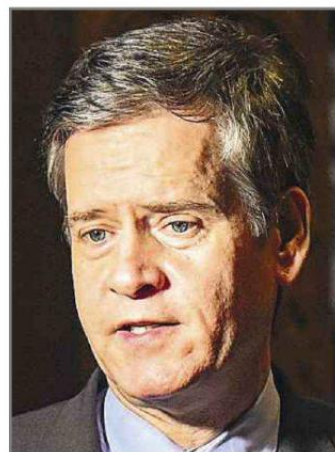
could teach students to avoid, rather than confront, their troubles.

"What if we built resilience back into our schools? What if we trained students in the stoicism of Marcus Aurelius and habits of virtue in Aristotle such that they can face the in-



DANIELLE SILVERMAN

Baldwin Superintendent Shari Camhi questioned the need.



AP / HANS PENNINK

State Sen. Brad Hoylman (D-Manhattan) backs the bill.

evitable difficulties of life?" he said.

Anxiety, depression on rise

Since the pandemic came to dominate school life, Long Island schools have put in place extra counselors and psychologists, formed partnerships with local mental health clinics, and even set up special rooms for students to take a break.

Before the pandemic, the rates of children's depression and anxiety were estimated to be 8.5% and 11.6%, respectively, according to a review of 29 studies across the world published in JAMA Pediatrics in August 2021. Since the pandemic, the study reported that one in four children was reporting depression and one in five was reporting anxiety.

Among high schoolers, more than a third (37%) nationally reported they experienced poor

mental health during the pandemic, and 44% reported they persistently felt sad or hopeless, according to a March 2022 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

States that allow days off for mental health include Washington, California, Illinois, Maine, Virginia, Colorado, Oregon, Connecticut, Arizona, Nevada, Utah and Kentucky. Policies vary from state to state. California does not have a limit on the number of permitted days, while Connecticut allows students two days per year.

New York lawmakers have considered legislation to allow mental health days in schools every year since 2019, with it failing each time. The bill's sponsor, State Sen. Brad Hoylman (D-Manhattan), said he will submit the bill once again when the legislature convenes this month. His hopes are higher, he added, considering the increased attention paid to young people's mental health. His bill requires the state Education Department to establish parameters around such days.

"We're finally realizing that to be healthy also includes mental health," Hoylman said. The mental health of young people "is an issue that's not going away. It's getting worse."

Allowing a student a day to reset emotions sends a message that "our mental health is as important as physical health," said Teresa Grella-Hillebrand, director of the Counseling and Mental Health Professions Clinic at Hofstra University.

Parents need to play a role in these days, she said, inquiring but not prying into what's bothering their child. Done right, this could spur an important conversation about why they are feeling this way, she said.

"It's not about shaming the child, telling them they can't hack it," Grella-Hillebrand said. "You don't want to make them feel defective in some way. . . . We want to normalize talking about mental health for kids, so they're prepared to deal with it when they're adults."

Noret Bazemore, Derik's mother, agrees.

"If they're feeling out of sorts, let them sleep or watch YouTube," she said. "Whatever ways he needs to chill out."