

BILL: House Bill 1473
TITLE: Public Schools - School Vehicles - Three-Point Seat Belts
DATE: March 3, 2016
POSITION: OPPOSE
COMMITTEE: Environment and Transportation Committee
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The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE), representing all of the state's local boards of education, opposes House Bill 1473.

MABE recognizes the significance of the recent shift in the position of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) in support of three-point seatbelts on all school buses. MABE is pleased to point out that when NHTSA Administrator Mark Rosekind announced the policy change in November of 2015, he emphasized that "School buses are by far the safest way for children to get to and from school." At the same time, he stated that "Seat belts are icons of safety. And that makes them the single most effective thing we can provide to improve the confidence of parents, policymakers and children." In this context, Maryland's local boards of education, state officials such as the Maryland Insurance Commissioner and the State Director of Pupil Transportation, and now the General Assembly, are considering ways in which to make seatbelts on school buses a reality.

On behalf of local boards of education, MABE greatly appreciates the underlying principle of this legislation in support of the safe transport of students on school buses. However, MABE's opposition to this bill is grounded in the concern that the bill would impose this mandate without sufficient study or the provision of the necessary additional funding. The estimated cost of complying with this bill exceeds \$50 million.

MABE represents 24 local boards of education with a unified commitment to ensuring student safety; and for every board ensuring school bus safety is a universal priority. School bus safety involves a wide array of activities; bus driver training, providing safe bus stops, maximizing student safety through the use of security cameras on buses, enforcing traffic laws for reckless drivers who illegally pass buses, and the design and construction standards of the buses themselves. In these ways local school systems, bus contractors, and local law enforcement agencies work to ensure the safest possible transport of students to and from school.

However, Maryland's local boards of education are entirely fiscally dependent, without independent taxing or revenue authority, and therefore must utilize available state and local funding to administer the school transportation system. House Bill 1473 would impose an enormous additional cost on the purchase price of new school buses. Local boards could, in good faith, only accept the responsibility to administer such a mandate with the full assurance of sufficient additional funding to do so.

In addition, MABE objects to the provisions of House Bill 1473 which would prohibit a school bus from operating unless all students are seated; and require the bus driver to ensure that all students are using their seatbelt. These are clearly well intended objectives and operational standards. However, prohibiting the operation of a bus unless these conditions are met may have unintended consequences arising from student behavior which would interfere with the efficient operation of buses.

Again, MABE strongly opposes the unfunded mandate of significantly more than \$50 million represented by House Bill 1473. MABE does look forward to participating in further discussions concerning the policy and funding implications of any new requirement for seatbelts on school buses.

For these reasons, MABE requests an unfavorable report on House Bill 1473.