

BILL: House Bill 341
TITLE: Maryland Student Transportation Safety Act
DATE: February 16, 2017
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 341. As introduced, this bill would impose significant and costly mandates on local school systems by requiring every school bus registered in Maryland after October 1, 2019 to be equipped with seat belts. In addition, the bill would prohibit the operation of a school bus unless the driver and all passengers are restrained by a seat belt.

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. MABE represents 24 local boards of education with a unified commitment to ensuring student safety in all school-related activities, and especially school bus safety.

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.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), school buses are approximately seven times safer than passenger cars or light trucks. Recognizing that seat belts are required in these other vehicles, NHTSA answers the question as to why school buses are safer.

“There is no question that seat belts play an important role in keeping occupants safe in these vehicles, however school buses are different by design and use a different kind of safety restraint system that works extremely well.”

“Large school buses are heavier and distribute crash forces differently than do passenger cars and light trucks. Because of these differences, the crash forces experienced by occupants of buses are much less than that experienced by occupants of passenger cars, light trucks or vans. NHTSA decided that the best way to provide crash protection to passengers of large school buses is through a concept called “compartmentalization.” This requires that the interior of large buses provide occupant protection such that children are protected without the need to buckle-up. Through compartmentalization, occupant crash protection is provided by a protective envelope consisting of strong, closely-spaced seats that have energy-absorbing seat backs.” <https://www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/school-buses>

However, small school buses, weighing 10,000 pounds or less, must be equipped with seat belts. According to NHTSA, “since the sizes and weights of small school buses are closer to those of passenger cars and trucks, seat belts in those vehicles are necessary to provide occupant protection.” In this way, federal requirements regarding seat belts are reasonably related to the size and relative safety of school buses.

Again, MABE's opposition to House Bill 341 is grounded in a strong commitment to student safety and the belief that current school bus design and safety requirements already achieve a very high standard of protection against serious injuries to students being transported to and from school.

If, in the alternative, the school transportation safety issues raised by this legislation were to be studied through a task force or commission, MABE and local school system transportation and safety professionals would certainly participate fully in that work.

For these reasons, MABE requests an unfavorable report on House Bill 341.