

BILL: Senate Bill 1265
TITLE: Education – School Safety Protection Standards and Grant Program – Established (School Safety Act of 2018: Protection)
DATE: March 22, 2018
POSITION: SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS
COMMITTEE: Budget and Taxation Committee
CONTACT: John R. Woolums, Esq.

The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE), representing all twenty-four local boards of education, supports Senate Bill 1265, with amendments, toward the goal of enhancing student and school safety by addressing school facility design and investing in strategies to make out schools safer in emergency situations.

Safety and security in public schools is extremely important to local boards of education for the protection of students and staff, as well as necessary to environments conducive to teaching and learning. Therefore, MABE fully supports the primary objective of this legislation to ensure that school systems are adopting and implementing high standards for school safety programs and the design and operation of school facilities. The centerpiece of this legislative initiative is the grant program to aid local school systems and local governments in funding facility renovations to make schools and classrooms safer places to shelter in place. In addition, grant funding would support the installation of security technology such as controlled access doors and security cameras.

MABE supports federal, State, and local government funding for local public school safety programs, facility upgrades, and the wide array of behavioral health and public safety services provided by other public and private entities, which are essential to maintaining safe and secure schools and access to an excellent education for all of Maryland's students. At the same time, MABE supports local discretion to adopt programs and policies to maintain and improve school safety and security.

Senate Bill 1265 would specify the types of school facility projects which must be in place by the 2020-2021 school year, including: secure and lockable doors for each classroom in the school; an area of safe refuge in each classroom in the school; and surveillance and other security technology for school monitoring purposes. MABE requests amendments to reflect local discretion in deciding how to invest limited state and local resources to enhance school safety, rather than a date certain requirement to meet these three specific requirements. MABE requests that school safety related facility projects, including the three listed in the bill, among others, be installed "to the extent practicable"; and that all facility upgrades be in accordance with a locally adopted plan that is aligned with state school safety "standards", rather than "requirements". These amendments are intended to reflect the need for local school safety plans in order to identify, prioritize, and cost-out all of the needed school safety projects. Based on this work, state and local governments can provide the much needed infusion of state and local funding to support these planned and prioritized projects.

Senate Bill 1265 would also mandate that every school conduct an active threat drill during the first week of school. MABE supports the intent to identify the role of active threat drills in the law. MABE requests that the legislation be amended to more closely match the current requirements for routine school safety and emergency preparedness drills. In addition to several fire drills, state regulations adopted in 2013 mandate that all schools engage annually in six emergency drills, including: evacuation; shelter in place; reverse evacuation; lock down; drop, cover and hold; and severe weather (COMAR 13A.02.02.01-.04). MABE continues to support local decision making as to the timing and operation of these drills in coordination with local law enforcement agencies.

MABE firmly believes that safety in public schools is the joint responsibility of local boards of education, school administrators and staff, students, parents and guardians, law enforcement and other public safety agencies, human services agencies, and the community in general. We will continue to urge federal, state, and local governments to ensure adequate and equitable funding for local public school safety programs. In addition, the State must fund the mental health and public safety services provided by other entities, which are essential to maintaining safe schools and communities in which schools are located.

Following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, education and public safety officials jointly reviewed and updated school safety policies. In 2004, the State Board adopted regulations requiring local school systems to adopt emergency plans and conduct drills to prepare for violent or traumatic events on school grounds. Following the school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut in 2012, the State Board approved reforms to require evacuation, shelter in place, lockdown and other drills that all schools must conduct each year. In 2013, with MABE's support, the Maryland Center for School Safety was created to facilitate coordination and collaboration between local school systems, law enforcement agencies, and others.

In addition to addressing school safety planning and preparedness, Maryland has provided grant funding to help support school safety upgrades. In 2013, the State budget included \$25 million to fund facility risk assessments, security cameras, photo identification systems, door lock upgrades, and renovating school entrances. Governor Hogan recently announced a funding initiative and submitted a supplemental budget to increase funding for the Center for School Safety and support local school safety planning. MABE looks forward to the investment of state and local dollars in FY 2019 and beyond to renew the commitment to fund these types of much needed school safety and security upgrades.

Today, in the wake of the very recent school shooting at Great Mills High School in St. Mary's County, Maryland; and the mass shooting on Feb. 14, 2018 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, Maryland and other states are considering legislation and funding initiatives to strengthen school security and provide the maximum amount of school safety assurances for our students – our children. Maryland has a strong record of continuous improvement in student and school safety, and MABE is confident we will continue to do so.

For these reasons, MABE requests a favorable report on Senate Bill 1265, with the amendments described above.