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health, safety and equity in education

Testimony in Support of HB 1226- Vehicle Laws - School Bus Safety - Occupant Capacity

February 28, 2020

Chair Barve, Vice Chair Stein, and members of the Environment and Transportation Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 1226.

I am Lisa VanBuskirk, the leader of Start School Later's Maryland and Anne Arundel County chapters. The goal of my all-volunteer organization is to educate communities about the physical and mental health, safety, and academic benefits of age-appropriate school hours, which the Maryland General Assembly has twice acknowledged with legislation in 2014 and 2016. To achieve my organization's goal, I have attended and testified at over 50 Board of Education meetings during the last six years. School bus transportation is typically the tail that wags the school bell times dog, which means that much of my focus the past few years has been on understanding Maryland's and Anne Arundel's school bus routes and bus safety concerns.

The beginning of the school year typically highlights the many challenges for school systems in transporting students. New bus drivers, new bus routes for students, new bus stops, and more. The 2019-2020 school year brought more complaints than usual about overcrowded buses with students standing or sitting in the aisle or trying to squeeze three high school students and their backpacks in one seat¹. More importantly, I saw those same complaints in multiple Maryland jurisdictions². While school systems blamed a lack of school bus drivers on the overcrowding, they also referred to the fact that students are permitted by state law to be in the aisle, as sufficient justification for why the overcrowding was acceptable.

At Board of Education meetings I've attended, presentations to the Board have focused on the ways that school buses are designed to safely transport hundreds of thousands of Maryland's students every day. The presentation typically focuses on the structural safety systems of the school bus itself, such as the way the seats are designed to move with impact, the bracing the seat in front of students provide, why there are no seat belts, etc. All of these safety systems assume that students are sitting in seats.

¹ <https://www.baltimoresun.com/education/ac-cn-bus-shortage-20190911-5uilk62m2jgt7nkux57qo36xaa-story.html>

² <https://www.baltimoresun.com/education/bs-md-bus-driver-shortage-20190919-siey6q4sqne5xnvynzou5oc6b4-story.html>

To my knowledge, **there are zero safety systems on a school bus for children standing or sitting in the aisle.** Crash test dummies are posed in the seats not in the aisles, when the bus safety systems are tested. There is nothing to prevent a student standing or sitting in the aisle from being thrown from the rear of the bus all the way to the front windshield in an accident. Public transportation bus and trams have straps from the ceiling, vertical poles, or special handrails that are part of seats for riders to grasp and brace themselves as the bus stops and starts. No similar handhold is offered on school buses.

Opponents may argue that this law will cost school systems more money as they may need to hire more bus drivers or purchase more buses. This is a false assumption, as I would argue that the overcrowding on buses also stems from a lack of regular review of school bus routing for accurate ridership. In 18 of Maryland's 24 school systems, a lack of methodical review of bus routes was cited in their most recent Office of Legislative Audit review³. For most jurisdictions, this was the 2nd or even 3rd time the OLA made this recommendation. If school systems could not count on hiding bus routing inefficiencies by accepting overcrowded buses as permissible, perhaps it would force them to actually act on the OLA recommendations.

For instance, Anne Arundel County hired a transportation consultant to review their bus operations with the report released last month. The report explained that Anne Arundel County Public Schools has no idea what the ridership will be on any given bus route. Overall, the existing routing has so many inefficiencies that school start times for all schools could be changed to fewer bus routes and fewer miles driven, through judicious review of bus routes. Might other school systems similarly benefit from reviewing school bus routes that ensures compliance with this law?

Please vote in favor of House Bill 1226 to ensure safe operations of Maryland's school buses.

Thank you,



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³ <https://www.ola.state.md.us/Search/Report?keyword=&agencyId=&dateFrom=&dateTo=&reportTypeId=4>