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BILL: HB 196  
TITLE: Motor Vehicles - School Buses - Seat Belts  
DATE: February 29, 2024  
POSITION: Favorable with Amendments  
COMMITTEE: House Environment and Transportation Committee  
CONTACT: Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director, PSSAM

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The Public School Superintendents' Association of Maryland (PSSAM), on behalf of all twenty-four local school superintendents, **supports HB 196 with amendments.**

This bill requires every school bus purchased on or after October 1, 2024, and registered in the State to be equipped with seat belts that are accessible to passengers for every seat on the school bus. Likewise, every school bus in operation before October 1, 2024, must have seat belts that are accessible to passengers installed for every seat on the school bus by October 1, 2026. Local school systems must provide student instruction on school bus safety and the proper use of seat belts on school buses, as part of an existing program of safety education. A person may not operate a school bus that is equipped with seat belts unless the person and each occupant are restrained by a seat belt. A person convicted of a violation of this requirement is subject to a fine of up to \$50. As under current law, "seat belt" is defined as any belt, strap, harness, or like device. Persons responsible for pupils on a school bus may not allow any pupil to stand while the school bus is in motion.

PSSAM appreciates the intent of House Bill 196 and the sponsors' concern for the safety and well-being of students on school buses. The safe transportation of our students is a top priority for all local superintendents. PSSAM is pleased to support this bill with amendments to be presented by the sponsor that do the following:

1. Remove the requirement for retrofitting buses.
2. Remove liability from bus drivers for students who unbuckle.
3. Generally address concerns about pupils standing while the bus is in motion.
4. Make the bill prospective for purchases of new school buses starting in fiscal year 2027.
5. Clarification on the type of seat belt.

While we still believe that school buses are almost 40 times safer than any other form of ground transportation in preventing serious injury or death\*\*, we understand that the installation of seat belts on buses is a matter of when, not if; and, we appreciate the sponsor's willingness to work with school systems to mitigate the financial and operational impact of changing our bus fleet.

We particularly want to thank the sponsor for taking our concerns seriously regarding student behavior on school buses. Although we implement numerous strategies and procedures to lessen the chance of inappropriate action on the part of students, this can be a difficult task in addition to ensuring each student is buckled and sitting in their seat for the entire ride.

Therefore, PSSAM **supports** House Bill 196 with amendments crafted by the sponsor and urges a favorable **with amendments** committee report.

\*\*School bus safety requirements are rigid and go well beyond those required for all other passenger vehicles. School buses are constructed with high back padded seats, compartmentalized seating, reinforced chassis, and front and rear bumpers. Compartmentalization provides a protective envelope consisting of strong, closely-spaced seats that have energy-absorbing seat backs. Local school systems adhere strictly to these guidelines. School buses have done an exceptional job of protecting students from serious injury or death in severe head-on and rear-end collisions.