



Re: SB 724 School Buses - Seat Belts

Chair Smith and members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

The Maryland Association of Pupil Transportation (MAPT) is an organization that is comprised of pupil transportation leaders and professionals from each Local Education Agency (LEA). MAPT is where you will find the most knowledgeable people involved in transporting Maryland school students on school buses.

MAPT has concerns regarding SB 724 Motor Vehicles - School Buses - Seat Belts, and opposes the legislation in its current iteration. There are two primary concerns with the legislation. The first concern is with the requirement to retrofit older school buses. The second concern is the burden placed upon school bus drivers for ensuring students are wearing a seat belt.

Concern #1 - Retrofitting Older School Buses

While the concept of retrofitting older school buses with seat belts may sound possible on paper, in reality it is not a feasible option because of supply deficiencies, high cost, and liability issues. Manufacturers of school bus seats only build school bus seats based upon the supply needed for new buses being built at a factory. The manufacturers do not stock replacement school bus seats. A school bus seat manufacturer's current build capacity would not be able to supply even a fraction of the seats necessary to replace all school bus seats on older school buses in Maryland by October 2026. If the supply of seats were not an issue and seats were available, cost to purchase those seats would be the next hurdle. To retrofit a 12 row school bus would cost approximately \$23,000. In Maryland there are approximately 5,300 "regular route" public school buses. At a cost of \$23,000 per bus, the total funding needed would be \$121,900,000. LEAs do not have the funding available to cover the cost of this project. Lastly, the school bus manufacturers have stated that all warranties and support would be voided for school buses that have retrofitted seats. The school bus manufacturers feel there is too much safety risk involved by seats that were not originally installed at the factory.

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Concern #2 - Responsibility for students wearing seat belts

If school buses are equipped with seat belts, do we want students using them? Absolutely! However, the responsibility for wearing the seat belts cannot be on the school bus driver. The responsibility for wearing the seat belt has to rest with the student and the student has to bear the consequences issued by a school administrator for when they don't wear the seat belt. School bus drivers are already in a difficult position by having to continuously address various student issues while trying to safely operate the school bus. It would be impossible for a school bus driver to ensure that all students are wearing their seat belts 100% of the time. If a school bus driver had to stop the bus whenever a student unbuckled themselves, the school bus would never make it to school in the morning or home in the evening. The committee is well aware of the school bus driver shortages over the last several years and the impact those shortages had on our school systems. This additional burden on each school bus driver to manage seat belt use by each student is an impossible task that would greatly exasperate the school bus driver shortage we all have been experiencing.

Thank you for your time in reading the concerns from pupil transportation professionals regarding SB 724. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions on the topic of seat belts or any school bus related item. You can reach me at (301) 475 4256 ext 34132 or by email at jkthompson@smcps.org.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey Thompson
President