

BILL: House Bill 1167
TITLE: Maryland Center for School Safety – Statewide Secure Schools Emergency Response Program – Established
DATE: February 21, 2024
POSITION: OPPOSE
COMMITTEE: Ways and Means
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The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) opposes House Bill 1167 which would mandate the creation of a new statewide “panic button” program to be accessible to all school staff and administered centrally by the Maryland Center for School Safety (MCSS).

MABE appreciates the intent to establish the statewide program proposed in this legislation. However, MABE believes the costs and intrusion into local policies, programs, services and school operations outweigh the benefits and merits of mandating the creation of such a program. House Bill 1167 would establish the new statewide secure schools emergency response program to be administered by the Maryland Center for School Safety (MCSS). Again, MABE appreciates the stated purpose of the program to improve the safety and security of public schools in the state, but objects to the need to invest in a uniform statewide emergency notification or “panic button” system to enable school personnel to communicate directly with a public safety answering point in perceived life-threatening and emergency situations. The bill further specifies that such incidents may include an array of incidents ranging from active shooters, intruders, medical emergencies, to severe weather conditions.

In addition, MABE is concerned with the proposed timeframe, mandating the Maryland Center for School Safety to ensure that this new statewide program has been implemented in each public school in the state by October 1, 2023. Again, MABE raises concerns with the approach taken in this bill to mandate a new statewide program based on a single procurement and single point of contact in life-threatening emergency situations occurring, or perceived to be occurring, in public schools. MABE’s adopted legislative positions and policy statement on school safety and security issues strike a balance of advocating for funding and policy decisions at the state level and support for local school system efforts to develop and implement school safety programs and strategies based on local priorities and available resources.

The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE), representing all local boards of education in Maryland:

- ✓ **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.
- ✓ **Supports** increased state funding to support the work of local school systems to ensure that state laws and regulations, including the Safe to Learn Act, are implemented with fidelity; and increased state and local funding for programs addressing gangs, drugs, human trafficking, behavioral health, and the impact of systemic violence in communities, schools, and our students’ lives.
- ✓ **Supports** local discretion to adopt programs and policies to ensure school safety and security.
- ✗ **Opposes** legislation which attempts to address student safety concerns by prescribing specific tools or approaches or imposes unfunded mandates on local boards of education.

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. MABE 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.

Following the tragic 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 (MCSS) was created to facilitate coordination and collaboration between local school systems. Tragically, a mass school shooting occurred on Feb. 14, 2018 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida; and a school shooting occurred on March 20, 2018 at Great Mills High School in St. Mary's County, Maryland. These events led to broad bipartisan support for the Safe to Learn Act of 2018, which:

- Established a School Safety Subcabinet and Advisory Board and increases funding for MCSS.
- Required school systems to designate a certified school safety coordinator and to conduct annual safety evaluations of each school;
- Required local school systems to designate a mental health services coordinator, and requires local assessment teams to intervene with students and individuals who may pose a threat to school safety;
- Required all school resource officers (SROs) and school safety and security personnel to complete a specialized curriculum in school law and restorative approaches, and requires school systems to report on schools with assigned SROs and, if not, how adequate local law enforcement will be provided; and
- Provided significant funding for school facility upgrades and school safety and security programs.

The Center for School Safety has revised and expanded the mandated training for all school security staff and SROs, and the legislature consistently invests in school safety programs and facility upgrades. In 2021, the legislature considered but did not enact bills to reform or eliminate SRO programs. However, police reform laws were enacted regarding the police officers' bill of rights, police misconduct, use of force and arrest procedures, use of body-worn cameras, and training, and impact all law enforcement officers including SROs.

In addition, Maryland law mandates local board policies on criminal gang activity, background checks and employer history reviews for employees and contractors, and emergency plans and drills to prepare for violent events and natural disasters. State law also defines educators as "persons in position of authority" and criminalizes as a fourth-degree sex offense sexual activity between educators and students above the age of consent.

MABE urges the legislature to continue to invest in the high quality school safety programs described above and consider the input of local boards on legislation raising concerns about the ability to ensure safe learning environments in all schools and for all students and staff.

For these reasons, MABE requests an unfavorable report on House Bill 1167.