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Committee: House Environment and Transportation Committee and House Ways and Means Committee

Bill Number: HB 134 - Motor Vehicles - School Buses - Seat Belts

Hearing Date: February 14, 2025

Position: Unfavorable

The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) respectfully opposes HB 134 which mandates the installation of 3-point seat belts on school buses.

On behalf of local boards of education, MABE greatly appreciates the underlying principle of this legislation in support of the safe transport of students on school buses. MABE represents 24 local boards of education with a unified commitment to ensuring student safety in all school-related activities, especially school bus safety. However, the magnitude of the unfunded mandates proposed in this legislation far outweighs the benefits to student safety through the operation of student transportation systems. Quite simply, if passed, the cost of purchasing new school buses will increase due to the added seat belts, and going forward, school systems will be required to purchase and operate more buses to accommodate the more stringent seating arrangements that seat belts necessitate, further compounding the financial and logistical challenges of student transportation.

School bus safety involves a wide array of activities: bus driver training, providing safe bus stops, maximizing student safety through the use of security cameras on buses, enforcing traffic laws for reckless drivers who illegally pass buses, and the design and construction standards of the buses themselves. In these ways, local school systems, bus contractors, and local law enforcement agencies work to ensure the safest possible transport of students to and from school.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), school buses are approximately seven times safer than passenger cars or light trucks. Recognizing that seat belts are required in these other vehicles, NHTSA has answered the question as to why school buses are safer:

“There is no question that seat belts play an important role in keeping occupants safe in these vehicles; however, school buses are different by design and use a different kind of safety restraint system that works extremely well.”

“Large school buses are heavier and distribute crash forces differently than do passenger cars and light trucks. Because of these differences, the crash forces experienced by occupants of buses are much less than that experienced by occupants of passenger cars, light trucks, or vans. NHTSA decided that the best way to provide crash protection to passengers of large school buses is through a concept called ‘compartmentalization.’ This requires that the interior of large buses provide occupant protection such that children are protected without the need to buckle-up. Through compartmentalization, occupant crash protection is provided by a protective envelope consisting of strong, closely-spaced seats that have energy-absorbing seat backs.”

Studies have shown that the compartmentalization design of school bus seats provides a high level of protection in the event of a crash, and the addition of seat belts may not necessarily result in a significant reduction in injuries or fatalities.

Lastly, the implementation of seat belts on school buses raises logistical challenges, particularly concerning younger students who may require assistance with buckling and unbuckling their seat belts. This could potentially create delays in boarding and disembarking buses, leading to disruptions in the daily transportation schedule.

Again, MABE’s opposition to House Bill 134 is grounded in a strong commitment to student safety and the belief that current school bus design and safety requirements already achieve a very high standard of protection against serious injuries to students being transported to and from school. We greatly appreciate the bill sponsor’s cooperation on amendments.

For further information, please contact Brian Dulay, MABE Government Relations Director, at bdulay@mabe.org.