

Chair Korman, Chair Atterbeary, members of the Environment and Transportation and Ways and Means Committees,

The Public Health Law Clinic has spoken with the sponsor about a technical change to the statutory language that is nonsubstantive and can be addressed with future legislation. **This bill is critically important and should be passed as is.**

The benefits of three-point seatbelts far outweigh the costs of implementing HB 134. Motor vehicle injury is the #1 leading cause of death of individuals aged 5-24 in the Maryland.<sup>1</sup> Between 2013 and 2022, 35 school-age children died in crashes as passengers in school-transportation vehicles nationally.<sup>2</sup>

Estimating the value of a child’s life in pecuniary terms is problematic at best, but because opponents to HB 134 oppose it on speculative cost grounds,<sup>3</sup> which likely overstate the actual cost, we must urge the Committee to consider the value of the lives of Maryland schoolchildren. Economic models estimate that the death of a single 10-year-old child in Maryland would result in an expected loss in lifetime productivity of approximately **\$2.7 million**.<sup>4</sup> Of all fatal rollover crashes<sup>5</sup> that occurred between 2013 and 2022 nationwide, two occupants died per crash.<sup>6</sup> Just one fatal rollover crash could result in approximately **\$5.4 million in lost productivity** for Maryland. Further, in 2022, the average medical cost for motor vehicle injury in Maryland was \$14,575 per person.<sup>7</sup> In 2022, motor vehicle crashes resulting in non-

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<sup>1</sup> WISQARS, <https://wisqars.cdc.gov/lcd/?o=LCD&y1=2018&y2=2022&ct=10&cc=ALL&g=24&s=0&r=0&ry=2&e=0&ar=lcd1age&at=groups&ag=lcd1age&a1=0&a2=199>, CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION (last visited Feb. 25, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> *Traffic Safety Facts, 2013-2022 Data*, NHTSA 1 (2024), <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813600>.

<sup>3</sup> This number is estimated in the Fiscal and Policy Note to be approximately \$4.3 million, spread across the state. (or ~\$179,000 per county per year). This letter later explains why we believe this figure may be overstated.

<sup>4</sup> This estimate of Years of Productive Life Lost is an approximation and is not an exact estimate. Years of Productive Life Lost = (Pensionable Age – Age at Death) x (Average Annual Income) x (Labor Force Participation) x (1 – Unemployment Rate). Pensionable Age was set at 67 years, per national standard. Age at death was assumed at 10 years. The annual mean wage in Maryland (in 2023) was \$73,849. *See* <https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdmanual/01glance/economy/html/wages.html>. Maryland’s labor force participation and unemployment rate (as of December 2024) were 65.6% and 3.1%, respectively. *See* <https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdmanual/01glance/economy/html/unemployrates.html>. This estimate was not adjusted for inflation.

<sup>5</sup> To observe the severity and danger of a rollover crash, please see the following article, which includes video of a 2020 school bus rollover crash which injured eight students, here: <https://abc6onyourside.com/news/local/perry-county-prosecutor-expects-to-file-charges-in-bus-crash-that-injured-8-students>.

<sup>6</sup> NHTSA, *supra* note 2, at 4.

<sup>7</sup> WISQARS, <https://wisqars.cdc.gov/cost/?y=2022&o=MORT&i=0&m=20810&g=24&s=0&u=TOTAL&u=AVG&u=PERCAP&t=COMBO&t=MED&t=VPSL&a=5Yr&g1=0&g2=199&a1=0&a2=199&r1=MECH&r2=INTENT&r3=NONE&r4=NONE>, CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION (last visited Feb. 25, 2025).

fatal injury to school-aged children amassed approximately \$1.6 billion in medical costs and \$28.9 billion in quality of life costs, nationally.<sup>8</sup>

**HB 134 is a cost-conscious solution to improve school bus safety for Maryland schoolchildren.** Its provisions apply only to new buses purchased according to the average bus-replacement rate (14-15 years). **HB 134 does not require retrofitting**, which (1) would have been much more costly and (2) would have risked voiding the manufacturer’s warranty.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, school districts now have the option to purchase school buses with three-point seatbelts **at no added cost to customers**. As of Fall 2024, Blue Bird, one of the three large bus manufacturers, makes lap/shoulder belts standard equipment on all school buses **without increasing the cost of the bus**.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the cost of purchasing buses with three-point seat belts is unlikely to be as high as the Fiscal and Policy Note estimate, which appears to include an additional \$10,000 per bus in the calculation of local fiscal effect.<sup>11</sup>

Also, in 2022, the Maryland General Assembly passed a law requiring that all school buses purchased beginning fiscal year 2025 be zero-emission vehicles.<sup>12</sup> With that law comes expected savings in fuel costs of up to \$247,600 in climate and health benefits per individual bus.<sup>13</sup> The cost differential of purchasing school buses with three-point seatbelts than without them is much lower than the projected savings generated through zero-emission school buses.

Finally, we feel that concern over the need to purchase additional buses due to capacity reductions is overstated. Transportation supervisors may address potential overloads by (1) transferring excess pupils to other buses, (2) adjusting their bus routes to minimize purchase of new buses, or (3) assigning some buses to run additional routes.<sup>14</sup> School districts in California,

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<sup>8</sup> WISQARS,

<https://wisqars.cdc.gov/cost/?y=2022&o=TAR&i=0&m=3010&g=00&s=0&u=TOTAL&u=AVG&t=COMBO&t=MED&t=LIFE&t=WORK&a=5Yr&g1=5&g2=15&a1=0&a2=199&r1=MECH&r2=INTENT&r3=NONE&r4=NONE>, CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION (last visited Feb. 25, 2025).

<sup>9</sup> STUART M. SPEISER ET AL., ALTERATION, MODIFICATION, OR CHANGE OF THE PRODUCT, 6 AMERICAN LAW OF TORTS § 18:162 (“It is well settled that a manufacturer, seller, or other supplier may be exempted or exonerated from tort product liability when a product is altered, modified, or changed after leaving the manufacturer’s hands.”)

<sup>10</sup> Taylor Ekbatani, *Blue Bird Announces Standard Lap/Shoulder Seatbelts on All School Buses*, SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION NEWS (Jun. 13, 2024), <https://stnonline.com/news/blue-bird-announces-lap-shoulder-seatbelts-standard/>; *Blue Bird Launches Most Comprehensive School Bus Safety Upgrades in its History*, BLUE BIRD (Jun. 13, 2024), <https://www.blue-bird.com/blue-bird-launches-most-comprehensive-school-bus-safety-upgrades-in-its-history/>.

<sup>11</sup> Dep’t of Legis. Serv., HB 134 Fiscal and Pol’y Note, [https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2025RS/fnotes/bil\\_0004/hb0134.pdf](https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2025RS/fnotes/bil_0004/hb0134.pdf), at 2 (2025).

<sup>12</sup> Md. Code Ann., Env’t § 2-1505(b).

<sup>13</sup> Ernani F. Choma, Lisa A. Robinson, & Kari C. Nadeau, *Adopting electric school buses in the United States: Health and climate benefits*, PNAS 1, 1 (2024).

<sup>14</sup> Saravanan Gurupackiam, et. al., *Reduction of capacity and projected costs associated with seat belt installation on school buses*, 67 TRANSPORTATION RESEARCH PART A: POL’Y & PRAC., 59, 63 (2024).

Public Health Law Clinic  
University of Maryland Carey School of Law  
Re: HB 134 Change of Position from “Favorable With Amendments” to “Favorable”

which requires three-point seatbelts, have found it unnecessary to purchase additional buses.<sup>15</sup> In sum, school districts have options to address school bus capacity which do not involve purchasing additional buses.

The Public Health Law Clinic supports a favorable report for HB 134.

Sincerely,



Lauren Gammer  
Public Health Law Clinic  
University of Maryland Carey School of Law

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas McMahon, *3-Point Belts on Buses: Real-World Experience Mitigates Most Concerns*, SCHOOLBUS FLEET (Oct. 26, 2015), <https://www.schoolbusfleet.com/10009811/3-point-belts-on-buses-real-world-experience-mitigates-most-concerns>.