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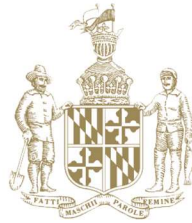
DEPUTY MAJORITY LEADER

Finance Committee

Senate Chair

Joint Committee on the
Management of Public Funds

Chair, Charles, St. Mary's and Calvert
Counties' Senate Delegation



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Sponsor Written Testimony: Favorable

Senate Bill 498: Motor Vehicles – School Buses – Seat Belts

January 31, 2025

Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee:

I am pleased to provide written testimony in support of Senate Bill 498, which will protect the lives of our students by requiring three-point lap-shoulder seat belts on school buses.

Between 2011 and 2020, there were 1,009 fatal school-transportation-related crashes, resulting in 1,125 fatalities—an average of 113 deaths per year. In Maryland, recent school bus rollovers have further underscored the limitations of the current compartmentalization safety system, which does not provide adequate protection in such crashes. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) has consistently advocated for seat belts in school buses, noting that they not only enhance student safety but also improve overall behavior, reducing disciplinary issues and distractions for drivers. The implementation of this seat belt requirement aligns with existing efforts to modernize Maryland's school bus fleet. As part of the Climate Solutions Now Act, passed two years ago, the state mandated that all new school buses be electric. Despite the higher costs—approximately \$400,000 per electric bus compared to \$150,000 for diesel buses—school systems successfully adjusted their budgets to accommodate this transition, which also included adding air conditioning to school buses.

Similarly, seat belts represent an additional investment in safety that can be incorporated within the existing 12-year bus replacement cycle. Additionally, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration is considering new requirements such as regenerative braking and lane avoidance features, which will further increase bus costs. Seat belts should be viewed as an essential part of this evolving list of safety enhancements, rather than an undue burden. Nine states—New York, New Jersey, Florida, Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, Nevada, California, and Iowa—already require seat belts on school buses, setting a precedent for Maryland to follow.

Given the significant evidence supporting their effectiveness, it is time for Maryland to take proactive measures to protect our students rather than waiting for further preventable tragedies.

The importance of this legislation cannot be overstated. Senate Bill 498 is a practical, data-driven response to safety concerns expressed by parents, educators, and transportation officials. By requiring three-point lap-shoulder seat belts on newly purchased school buses, we will significantly improve student safety, reduce injuries, and promote a culture of responsibility and protection. I urge the committee to give favorable consideration to Senate Bill 498 and ensure that Maryland continues to prioritize student safety. Thank you for your time and commitment to this vital issue.

Sincerely,

Arthur Ellis