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of Howard County**

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**Board of Education of Howard County
Testimony Submitted to the Maryland Senate,
Judicial Proceedings Committee
February 4, 2025**

**SB0498: UNFAVORABLE
Motor Vehicles - School Buses - Seat Belts**

The Board of Education of Howard County (the Board) opposes **Motor Vehicles - School Buses - Seat Belts** as an unfunded mandate that has the potential to add extensive costs to future school system bus purchases.

SB0498 initially requires schools to include instruction on school bus safety and the proper use of seat belts on school buses within a program of safety education. Addressing use of seat belts on school buses, SB0498 requires all buses purchased after July 1, 2027, to be equipped with seat belts for every seat on a bus. The bill further indicates the failure of a school bus operator to ensure that an occupant of a school bus was wearing a seat belt may not be the basis of a civil action for damages against the school bus operator or a school, school district, or municipality.

Seat belts are currently used on buses for special education transportation in Howard County. Moreover, school bus safety education is addressed both through the Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) curriculum and the HCPSS Transportation Office. Specifically, a kindergarten health education curricular objective includes instruction that takes place during the Safety and Violence Prevention unit and includes identifying ways to stay safe when riding in a vehicle or bus. School bus drivers in Howard County also discuss bus safety with riders in conjunction with two bus evacuation drills conducted systemwide by the Transportation Office each school year. While the use of seat belts on regular school buses has been debated under prior introductions of similar bills, and the Board supports the potential to improve safety for all students, there are concerns with the added costs that would result from SB0498.

SB0498 has improved over the original 2024 version of the bill which also required retrofitting of existing buses. However, as noted in the [fiscal and policy note](#) from the previous introduction “new school buses that have seat belts installed for every passenger are approximately \$10,000 more expensive than those without them.” For Howard County, this would be factored into future transportation services bids with costs spread over the term of the contract. As a legislative platform, the Board opposes unfunded mandates such as SB0498.

For these reasons, we urge an UNFAVORABLE report on SB0498 from this Committee.