

SB 498 - Ellis Written Testimony v2.pdf

Uploaded by: Arthur Ellis

Position: FAV

ARTHUR ELLIS, CPA
Legislative District 28
Charles County

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



THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Annapolis Office
James Senate Office Building
11 Bladen Street, Room 301
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
410-841-3616 • 301-858-3616
800-492-7122 Ext. 3616
Arthur.Ellis@senate.state.md.us

District Office
3261 Old Washington Road
Waldorf, Maryland 20602

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

Senate bill 498.pdf

Uploaded by: Edith Perry

Position: FAV



Southern Maryland Chapter of the National Coalition of 100 Black Women

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

Position: Favorable

January 31, 2025

Chair William Smith and the Honorable members of the Judicial Proceeding Committee thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony supporting Senate Bill 498.

The Southern Maryland Chapter of NCBW, the largest chapter in our state, has many members whose children ride the bus to school. Charles County Public Schools ride over 23,000 students, covering over 34,000 daily miles. St Mary's County Public Schools transports between 1,600 to 1,900 students annually. All members of NCBW have observed students standing up on school buses.

We know there has been significant debate over adding seat belts to school buses. What price are we putting on the lives of our children? Seat belts save lives. We are one accident away from serious injury to our most precious children. California, Florida, Louisiana, New Jersey, New York, and Texas have seat belts on school buses. Let's offer the best protection technology and manufacturing can provide to protect our students.

All Southern Maryland Chapter members of NCBW ask that the Judicial Proceeding Committee provide a favorable vote.

SB498 - Motor Vehicles - School Buses - Seat Belts

Uploaded by: Joseph Jakuta

Position: FAV

Committee: Environment and Transportation

Testimony on: SB 498 - "Motor Vehicles - School Buses - Seat Belts"

Organization: Climate Parents of Prince George's

Person Submitting: Joseph Jakuta, Lead Volunteer

Position: Favorable

Hearing Date: February 4, 2025



Dear Mr. Chairman and Committee Members:

Thank you for considering our testimony to SB 498, "Motor Vehicles - School Buses - Seat Belts." Climate Parents is a campaign to reduce climate change-causing pollution in our schools, and our group is active in Prince George's County. In particular, we recently worked directly with Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) technical staff and other advocates to develop a first in the national School Climate Change Action Plan.

In our work developing a Climate Change Action Plan for PGCPS, we found that having safety belts was an important step to encourage some parents who have access to bus service to allow their kids to ride the bus instead of driving children to school. The report states specifically:

Reliable, on-time and safe bus transportation performance is the single most important tool to increase ridership. The survey conducted by the CCAP Focus Work Group provided some insights into the thoughts of students in particular into the state of the buses. Some of these suggestions appear to come in at a reasonable cost and can be easily implemented and other suggestions are already being implemented by PGCPS.

Additionally, information is crucial to both parents and students in order to encourage increased bus riding. Students and parents/caregivers need to be aware of the safety features and amenities as they become available through active communication. Parents/caregivers need to be able to have accurate information as to when pick-ups and drop-offs will occur.

In order to keep bus ridership high so as to avoid parents taking single vehicle trips to schools, PGCPS must make sure the school population at large has access to safe buses with a positive experience and the knowledge that this is the best option.¹

This past year there was a school bus that rolled over in Howard County with injuries (February 2024), a crash with injuries in St Mary's County (April 2024), a school bus crash in Prince George's (October 2024) a school bus crash in Charles County (November 2024), a crash in Carroll County with injuries (December 2024), and those are just crashes that were noteworthy enough to make the local news. I know firsthand that my children's bus was also involved in a minor crash last year, and there are likely countless more. Thankfully, none of these turned tragic, but safety belts will definitely help reduce injuries in the worst crashes and also provide parents with more certainty as to their children's safety on school buses.

We encourage a FAVORABLE report for this important legislation.

¹ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1eS5YuvflbLyDsnw5QWwqITltKBeJx28/view>

SB498 Testimony - Juliana Aiko Nuñez.pdf

Uploaded by: Juliana Nunez

Position: FAV

**Juliana Aiko Nuñez
6409 Rock Forest Dr
Bethesda, MD 20817**

January 31, 2025

Judicial Proceedings Committee
Chair Will Smith Jr.
2 East Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

SB498 Motor Vehicles - School Buses - Seat Belts

Hello Chairman Smith and committee members, I am here to ask for your favorable report on SB498 Motor Vehicles - School Buses - Seat Belts

I first testified in support of this bill last year when it passed the House. After I testified, many circumstances have changed that reinforce the urgent need for school bus seatbelts.

I am now a middle school student who rides the school bus daily from my home in Bethesda to my campus in Washington, D.C. I experienced two separate incidents where I not only bumped my head against the back of the seat, but also fell off entirely onto the floor. A recent incident in Howard County involved a school bus rollover, and in August 2024, a tragic accident in Texas claimed the life of a preschooler. These events are heartbreaking reminders that the safety of us kids cannot be compromised. These personal experiences make it clear to me that our current system is failing to protect children during transit.

I am not testifying solely for my own safety. I am speaking out for every school bus rider—present and future. Our generation is the generation of change, and we deserve to ride in buses that are equipped with the necessary safety features to protect us. Children will not be safe on school buses unless they have seatbelts.

In conclusion, I urge you to provide a favorable report on this bill. Thank you for your attention and commitment to the safety of every child in our schools.

In closing, I ask this committee for your favorable report on SB498.

2025-02-04 - MD- School Bus Safety - SB498 Occupan

Uploaded by: Kristin Poland

Position: FAV



Testimony of
National Transportation Safety Board

Before the
Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
The Maryland General Assembly

– On –

Senate Bill 498, Motor Vehicles - School Buses - Seat Belts

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Annapolis, MD • February 4, 2025

Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher and members of the committee, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony regarding SB 498 – legislation that would require 3-point seat belts for all passengers to be installed in school buses purchased on or after July 1, 2027.

The NTSB is an independent federal agency charged by Congress with investigating every civil aviation accident in the United States and significant events in the other modes of transportation—railroad, transit, highway, marine, pipeline, and commercial space. We determine the probable causes of the accidents and events we investigate and issue safety recommendations aimed at preventing future occurrences. In addition, we conduct transportation safety research studies and offer information and other assistance to family members and survivors for each accident or event we investigate. We also serve as the appellate authority for enforcement actions involving aviation and mariner certificates issued by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and US Coast Guard, and we adjudicate appeals of civil penalty actions taken by the FAA.

School bus travel is one of the safest forms of transportation in the United States. Children are safer traveling in school buses than in any other vehicle. School buses are designed with a passive form of occupant protection, termed “compartmentalization,” which only requires the passenger to sit properly in the seat facing forward and functions by forming a compartment around the bus occupant. Compartmentalization is designed to contain passengers within their seating compartments during frontal and rear impact collisions. A key aspect of this occupant protection system is that passengers remain within the compartment prior to and during an impact, so that they benefit from the energy-absorbing seat design. However, we have completed numerous investigations that identified occupant protection as a safety issue in school bus transportation, particularly in crashes that include side-impact collisions, rollovers in which compartmentalization is incomplete and provides insufficient protection for occupants, or in circumstances with pre-crash bus maneuvers that move occupants out of the protective seating compartment before the crash occurs. Therefore, we have recommended enhancements to school bus occupant protection systems to address these scenarios.

On October 27, 2020, a freightliner truck collided with a school bus in Decatur, Tennessee, killing the bus driver and a 7-year-old passenger and injuring multiple passengers. We found that several of the school bus passengers were not seated properly in their seats, which increased their risk of injury. Lap/shoulder belts would have positioned the children appropriately in the seating compartment and mitigated their forward movement during the crash, keeping them within the protective seating compartment and reducing their risk of injury especially for those passengers who were propelled into the impact area.

On November 21, 2016, six students died, and more than 20 others were injured in Chattanooga, Tennessee, when a Hamilton County Department of Education (HCDE) school bus, operated by Durham School Services (Durham), struck a utility pole, rolled onto its right side, and collided with a tree. The school bus was not equipped with passenger seat belts. The bus was carrying 37 students and traveling 52 mph in a 25-mph zone at the time of the crash. The bus driver was transporting the students from the school to their drop-off locations when he answered a cell phone call. The cell phone call was still active when he lost control of the bus and departed the roadway. We concluded that the Chattanooga school bus driver's speeding, combined with his cell phone use while driving, led to the crash. The unbelted passengers in the Chattanooga school bus were at risk due to the precrash vehicle motions that threw them from their seating compartments prior to the bus striking the utility pole. This rendered compartmentalization ineffective during the crash sequence. Therefore, we recommended that each state, including Maryland, require that lap/shoulder belts be installed in all new large school buses to provide the best protection for all their occupants.

In February 2012, a school bus transporting students to Chesterfield Elementary School in Chesterfield, New Jersey, was struck at an intersection by a large, fully loaded truck, resulting in 1 bus passenger fatality, 5 serious injuries, and 11 minor injuries. The fatally and severely injured passengers were seated in the back half of the school bus, in the area of higher impact forces and accelerations. Some students on the school bus wore their lap belts improperly or not at all. As a result of our investigation, we concluded that, in severe side-impact crashes like the Chesterfield crash, properly worn lap/shoulder belts reduce injuries related to upper body flailing that are commonly seen with lap-only belts and, therefore, provide the best protection for school bus passengers. Further, better student, parent, and school district education and training may increase the use and proper fit of passenger seat belts in school buses. Thus, we recommended that school districts provide improved information to parents and students regarding the importance of properly using seat belts on school buses.

We also completed an investigation of a collision involving a school bus and a pickup truck in Helena, Montana where we concluded that the passenger lap/shoulder belts mitigated injuries in this side impact and rollover crash. In November of 2012, a 12-passenger school bus was struck by a Dodge Ram 1500 pickup truck after entering an intersection near Helena. The bus was occupied by the driver, an adult aide, and two student passengers. The pickup truck was occupied by the driver and one passenger. Following the collision, the school bus departed the intersection to the southeast, struck an electrical equipment box, and overturned 90 degrees onto its right side. The four lap/shoulder belted occupants of the bus were treated for minor injuries. We concluded that the passenger lap/shoulder belts

helped keep the school bus occupants within their seating compartments during the side impact crash and that the passenger lap/shoulder belts limited occupant-to-occupant contact and associated injuries during the rollover event. None of the bus occupants suffered concussions or other injuries that impeded their ability to evacuate. Such injuries are not uncommon in vehicle rollovers. The absence of head or extremity injuries indicated that the lap/shoulder belts were effective in protecting the bus passengers.

Finally, our investigation of a 2014 single vehicle school bus crash in Anaheim, California demonstrated that the proper use of lap/shoulder belts on the school bus reduced passenger injuries. A 24-year-old male school bus driver was in the process of completing his afternoon route driving middle school-aged children home from school when he lost consciousness as a result of a medical condition. The unconscious driver lost control of the school bus on a downhill graded and leftward curving roadway in a 35-mile per hour zone. The school bus departed the roadway to the right at a video estimated speed of 43-miles per hour. The school bus then mounted the curb, where it struck and dislodged a concrete light post. The bus continued up the embankment where the front of the bus struck and uprooted a tree. The bus also scraped along a large tree on the left side of the bus from the front axle backward to the rear axle. The bus came to rest at an angle on the embankment, leaning onto the large tree. The tree caused extensive intrusion into the school bus especially in the region near the left side emergency exit door. Importantly, two students seated in the area of maximum crush were wearing their seatbelts at the time of the crash. We found the severity of passenger injuries in the area of maximum intrusion was reduced by the proper use of the available lap/shoulder belts by the student passengers seated in this area.

Although compartmentalization makes school buses extremely safe, passengers without lap/shoulder belts remain vulnerable to either ejection or injury within the school bus (for example, from being thrown into an intrusion area). Therefore, to protect large school bus passengers, we recommend that Maryland amend its statute to require passenger lap/shoulder belts for all passenger seating positions in new large school buses in accordance with Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard 222.

SB 498 MAPT Letter.pdf

Uploaded by: Jeffrey Thompson

Position: FWA



Re: SB 498 School Buses - Seat Belts

Senator Smith and members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee,

The Maryland Association of Pupil Transportation (MAPT) is an organization that is composed of pupil transportation leaders from each Local Education Agency (LEA). MAPT is where you will find the most knowledgeable professionals involved in transporting Maryland public school students.

The question on if school buses should have seat belts for students has been a topic of debate for many years. With time, the school bus industry is evolving on this issue. On a federal level, both the National Transportation Safety Board and National Highway Traffic Safety Administration have moved to the position that lap/shoulder belts further enhance protection of students. Both agencies support all new school buses having lap/shoulder belts. The National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services issued a position paper in May 2020 supporting all new school buses having lap/shoulder belts. Bus manufacturers are now able to provide lap/shoulder belts without reducing bus capacity. As of November 2024, BlueBird, one of the three traditional large bus manufacturers, makes lap/shoulder belts standard equipment on all of their school buses and this is without increasing the cost of the bus. In Maryland, all EV buses are required to have lap/shoulder belts. Currently, many Maryland school systems have lap/shoulder belts on special needs route buses and several school systems are now moving to lap/shoulder belts on all replacement regular route school buses.

SB 498, with the amendment, mitigates many of the concerns from the student transportation industry about seat belts on school buses. It requires lap/shoulder belts only on new school buses, it protects school bus drivers, and it does not impose impossible expectations. With a uniform requirement, we believe the incremental cost for lap/shoulder belts should be reduced.

MAPT supports a favorable report, with the amendments, for SB 498.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions on the topic of seat belts on school buses or any school bus related item. You can reach me at (301) 475 4256 ext 34132 or by email at jkthompson@smcps.org.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey Thompson

ALLEGANY – ANNE ARUNDEL – BALTIMORE CITY – BALTIMORE COUNTY – CALVERT – CAROLINE – CARROLL – CECIL – CHARLES – DORCHESTER – FREDERICK – GARRETT – HARFORD – HOWARD – KENT – MONTGOMERY – PRINCE GEORGE'S – QUEEN ANNE'S – ST. MARY'S – SOMERSET – TALBOT – WASHINGTON – WICOMICO – WORCESTER

2025 SB498 Seat Belts w Amendments - Ellis.pdf

Uploaded by: Steve Nelson

Position: FWA



January 31, 2025

The Honorable William C. Smith Jr. and Members
Judicial Proceedings Committee
Senate Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS – SB 498 - Motor Vehicles - School Buses - Seat Belts

Dear Chair Smith and Members of the Committee:

In its current form, the Maryland School Bus Contractors Association (MSBCA) supports with Amendments – SB 498 – Motor Vehicles - School Buses - Seats Belts. This bill would require new school buses purchased after July 1, 2027, to have seat 3-point belts installed that are accessible to passengers for every seat on the bus. MSBCA requests the addition of amendments offered by Delegate Taveras, on cross filed HB 134. MSBCA can support this bill with the corresponding amendments. Those Amendments requested are:

AMENDMENT NO. 1

On page 1, in line 6, after “prohibiting” insert “a criminal prosecution or”.

AMENDMENT NO 2

On page 5, in line 33, after the second “OF” insert “A CRIMINAL PROSECUTION OR”

MSBCA serves as the voice of the private school bus companies that contract with local Maryland school systems in 19 of Maryland’s 24 jurisdictions to own and operate the nearly 3,500 contracted school buses that transport Maryland schoolchildren covering over 44 million miles annually across the State.

First and foremost, MSBCA remains committed to the safety of the students they transport and considers it a privilege to do so. The Association also remains committed to the position that the **yellow school bus is by far the safest mode of transporting children to and from school, with or without seat belts**. School buses have been demonstrated as the safest mode of transportation for many years, thanks to the manufacturers' dedication to passenger safety and responsible school bus contractors and their drivers.

Again, MSBCA looks forward to working with the legislators to make Maryland the safest state in the country for our children.

Sincerely,

Steve Nelson

Steve Nelson
President , Maryland School Bus Contractors Association
15 School Circle
Annapolis, MD 21401
202-386-3859

MSBCA serves as the voice of the private school bus companies that contract with local Maryland school systems in 19 of Maryland’s 24 jurisdictions to own and operate the nearly 3500 contracted school buses that transport schoolchildren across the State.

SB0498 Howard Co BOE Testimony 020425 for JPR - Se

Uploaded by: Staff Howard County

Position: UNF



**Board of Education
of Howard County**

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*Superintendent,
Secretary/Treasurer*

**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.