



## People on the Go of Maryland

### House Bill 1204 Public and Nonpublic Schools - Student Elopement - Notice and Reporting Requirements

*Requiring certain public and nonpublic schools to notify a parent or guardian if a student attempts or accomplishes an elopement, the act of leaving the school campus without permission, except under certain circumstances; establishing certain reporting requirements for certain public and nonpublic schools and the State Department of Education regarding incidents of student elopement from school; and requiring the Department to develop a certain accountability system.*

#### Position: Support

Hearing 3/05 at 1:00 p.m.

Delegates Patterson, Hill, Kaufman, McComas, Schindler, and Turner

Assigned to: Ways and Means Committee

Written by Cody Drinkwater, Policy Coordinator,

and Mat Rice, Executive Director - People On the Go of Maryland

Supporting with Amendments to Ensure a Neurosensitive and Autistic-Informed Approach

Honorable Chairperson, and members of the Ways and Means Committee, People On the Go of Maryland (POG) is a statewide self-advocacy organization, run for and by those with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (IDD), and our mission is to promote self-advocacy throughout the State. POG respectfully offers this written testimony in support of HB1204

#### **Why this bill matters:**

Elopement is a critical issue for many Autistic and neurodivergent students, often occurring due to sensory overload, distress, communication barriers, or unmet needs. HB 1204 takes important steps in recognizing and tracking elopement, ensuring parental notification, and incorporating professional development for staff.

However, without key amendments, this bill risks reinforcing punitive or surveillance-based approaches rather than student-centered, supportive interventions.

### **Key Amendments Needed to Ensure a Neurodiversity-Affirming Approach**

1. It is important to require Input from the Autistic Community in Training & Policy Development. Likewise, it is necessary to amend the bill to mandate consultation with Autistic self-advocates, neurodivergent professionals, and disability rights organizations when developing training programs for school staff. It is also important to ensure that training includes non-coercive, neuroaffirming strategies rather than outdated compliance-based models. Avoidance on relying solely on parent-driven perspectives as well as Autistic adults bringing lived expertise that is crucial to understanding and addressing elopement in a respectful and supportive manner is necessary.

### **2. Prohibit Punitive or Restrictive Measures as Responses to Elopement**

It is essential to add language explicitly banning the use of restraint, seclusion, or other punitive responses in managing elopement and wandering. It is important to emphasize that elopement should be treated as a communication and support need, not a disciplinary issue. It is also important to encourage de-escalation strategies, sensory accommodation, and individualized support rather than physical intervention.

### **3. Ensure IEP Discussions on Elopement Are Neurosensitive & Student-Centered**

It should be required that discussions on elopement within IEP or Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) meetings: focus on understanding the root causes of elopement rather than just creating reactive safety measures, including accommodations that reduce distress and prevent elopement rather than solely tracking incidents. It is important to consider the students' input whenever possible, ensuring their autonomy is respected.

### **4. Address Root Causes of Elopement in School Environments**

The bill should be amended to require schools to analyze patterns in elopement behavior and adjust environments accordingly, as well as encouraging schools to implement Sensory-friendly spaces and de-escalation areas and clear communication supports (AAC, visual schedules, body doubling, etc.) as well as trauma-informed training on responding to distress-based elopement.

### **5. Improve Data Collection by Centering Student Well-being**

It is also necessary to ensure that elopement data collection is used to improve support, not punish students and include student-led or self-advocate-led reviews

of reported data to assess whether interventions are neurodiversity-affirming. This would be to protect against over-surveillance and stigma by emphasizing that tracking should inform supportive policies, not disciplinary action.

**Why These Amendments Matter**

Without these changes, HB 1204 risks reinforcing punitive, compliance-driven approaches rather than supportive, individualized interventions. The Autistic community must be at the table when discussing elopement policies. Nothing about us, without us. This bill presents an opportunity to create meaningful, affirming changes in how schools respond to elopement, ensuring student safety without sacrificing dignity, autonomy, or well-being.

POG graciously asks that HB1204 be supported WITH amendments to ensure it protects and respects Autistic students rather than controlling or punishing them.

Respectfully written by Mat Rice and Cody Drinkwater. Should you have any questions, please contact us.

Thank you,

Cody Drinkwater, Policy Coordinator

M: 443-923-9593

E: [cody@pogmd.org](mailto:cody@pogmd.org)

Mat Rice, Executive Director

M: 410-925-5706

E: [mat@pogmd.org](mailto:mat@pogmd.org)