



Written Testimony in Support of HB1204
Public and Nonpublic Schools - Student Elopement - Notice and Reporting Requirements
Submitted by Melissa Rosenberg, Executive Director, Autism Society of Maryland
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Members of the House Ways and Means Committee:

On behalf of the Autism Society of Maryland, I am submitting this testimony in support of HB1204, a bill that would require 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. The bill will establish 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.

Last month I had the honor of speaking at a memorial and resource event for the community in Southern Maryland in memory of Miles McMahan, one of six children with Autism who drowned in Maryland in 2024. This law, too, honors Miles and recalls for all of us that he eloped from school on several occasions. His parents were not alerted. We know that many schools do alert parents, but this must be an across-the-board requirement so that educators and families can work together as a team to help prevent tragedies and put preventative plans into place. We strongly encourage you to support HB1204.

What follows are some information about Autism and data about elopement/wandering that are important to understand.

First, for those not as familiar with Autism, we'd like you to understand that Autism is difference and difference isn't bad...it's just different. A different way of seeing the world, communicating, reacting, and contributing. In addition, it's important to talk about the scary equation of Autism + Wandering that this bill hopes to address. Everyone's journey with Autism is unique. No two people are alike. It's what can make Autism so fascinating and difficult to grasp. Some individuals will need more support throughout their lifetime and others less.

We know that 71% of wandering deaths in children with Autism under the age of 14 are due to drowning subsequent to wandering. People with Autism and other developmental disabilities are at an increased risk of wandering away from safe supervision. It's also common for people with Autism to seek out water – such as ponds creeks, lakes, pools and canals.

Wandering can occur under any kind of supervision and in people of all age groups. And it can happen in a moment. People with Autism, developmental disabilities and Alzheimer's/Dementia are at an increased risk of injury or death due to wandering.

Some other statistics:

- 49% of children with Autism attempt to elope at least once after age 4
- From age 4-7, that drops slightly to 46% of children with Autism eloping
- 56% of parents identify elopement as one of the most stressful behaviors they have to cope with
- 41.5 minutes is the average time children are missing
- People with Autism are 160 times more likely to drown than their neurotypical peers

Those who wander may not communicate with speech or understand the risks and potential dangers involved. But wandering can actually be a form of communication:

BIOLOGICAL FACTORS: “I have to use the bathroom” or “I’m hungry”

PERSONAL WANT/NEED: “I forgot my stuffed animal, and I need it.”

SENSORY SAFETY: “It’s too loud/crowded I need to find a quiet place.”

DYSREGULATION: “I’m having trouble coping and need to leave.”

CURIOSITY: “I want to explore.”

Those who wander are commonly found:

1. In or near water – always check water first
2. In or near traffic
3. In wooded areas
4. At another residence
5. At preferred stores / restaurants / attractions

In the event of a missing person, **CALL 911 First** then immediately arrange a search of all nearby bodies of water (pools, ponds, canals, etc).

Questions to consider when someone has wandered:

- Do they have a locative device?
- What is most likely to elicit a response from them ? (a certain song, high-interest, key word, calling their name?)
- Where does the missing person like to go?
- Does the missing person have medical conditions that could pose further risks?

Proactive Tips to Secure the Home and Surrounding Area

- Install door alarms on each door/window
- Install pool fences with self-latching doors around pools and bodies of water
- Identify all bodies of water in close proximity to the home
- Talk to trusted neighbors about a loved one who wanders
- Have a safety plan



- Call 911
- Check all surrounding water
- Enlist the help of neighbors, friends, caregivers
- Go to known areas of interest

Other Considerations As We Search

- Be mindful of things that may act as a deterrent or scare the individual such as loud noises, helicopters, drones, megaphones, crowds, etc.
- Get to know your local law enforcement before an emergency
- If a loved one goes missing, it will help them know how to approach them
- Share an informational sheet about your loved one and keep it up to date

More Considerations

- Support communication needs
- Ensure access to effective communications and ways to communicate basic needs/wants, express distress, request help
- Monitor the individual for changes in behavior, changes of favorite spots or interests
- Learn about locative technology to decide if GPS/tracking is right for your family

You can see the many things that go into wandering prevention and a search process. It is essential that schools alert families when

The Autism Society has many resources on Water Safety and Wandering Prevention on its website at <https://autismsocietymd.org/safety/>. These include checklists, letters for neighbors, emergency plans, plans to include in IEPs, social stories and the CALL 911 FIRST flyers in multiple languages. There are others here from other groups and I encourage you to take and read those.

Our organization is part of the Maryland Autism Coalition is group of over a dozen organizations across the state working to address this issue with a "Call 911 First" campaign, educational materials in multiple languages, the opportunity to train more swim instructors, make more swim lessons available, and to provide funding through scholarships to make those lessons possible. Later this year, a Public Service Announcement will go out across the state, urging families and community members to CALL 911 FIRST when a child goes missing. We'll be spreading the word in English, Spanish and other languages, to help keep Maryland's children safe.

But back to Miles and the reason that we are here. If you take anything away with you today, let it be hope and determination. Hope for the future for all of our children and a determination on the part of all of us to work together to educate our community, keep children safe, and always to remember.

Please support HB 1204. Thank you.