

Testimony in support of SB0968 - Education - Schoo

Uploaded by: Richard KAP Kaplowitz

Position: FAV

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Richard Keith Kaplowitz
Frederick, MD 21703

TESTIMONY ON SB#/0968 – FAVORABLE

Education - School Bus - Fire Safety Standards

TO: Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan and members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

FROM: Richard Keith Kaplowitz

My name is Richard K. Kaplowitz. I am a resident of District 3. I am submitting this testimony in support of SB#0968, Education - School Bus - Fire Safety Standards

The [National School Transportation Specifications and Procedures](#) (NSTSP), developed by the National Congress on School Transportation (NCST) and published by [NASDPTS](#), provide recommended, voluntary standards for school bus safety, design, and operations across the US. The latest 2025 manual, updated by the 17th NCST, includes guidelines on bus inspections, electric/hybrid vehicle requirements, student safety, and emergency procedures. ¹

Maryland follows these voluntary guidelines based on current law. Instead, this law will authorize the Motor Vehicle Administration, with the advice of the Department, to mandate they adopt regulations to promote fire safety standards of school buses. This will remove the voluntary component of the law in favor of requiring we provide fire safety standards for our school bus fleets based on the most current requirements to meet this challenge.

As reported by the Brooks Learning Center: ²

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), school buses are the safest mode of transportation for getting children back and forth to school. That's mainly because school buses are designed to be safer than passenger vehicles in avoiding crashes and preventing injuries. Also, school buses keep an annual estimated 17.3 million cars off the roads surrounding schools each day. NHTSA has developed guidelines for state and local governments to use for developing policy for school buses, including fire safety and driver inspections and reporting on the condition of the fire equipment. NHTSA recommends a comprehensive program that ensures school buses are operated and maintained to achieve the highest possible level of safety. NHTSA developed Highway Safety Program Guideline Number 17, Pupil Transportation Safety, which provides states with guidance for identification, operation, and maintenance of school buses.

This bill will repeal the requirement that a school bus be constructed with certain materials that enable it to meet all the criteria of the school bus seat upholstery fire block test established by the National School Transportation specifications and procedures adopted by the most recent National Congress on School Transportation. Better standards exist and this bill will encourage their adoption as the standard for Maryland.

I respectfully urge this committee to return a favorable report and pass SB0968.

¹ Google AI Search "national school transportation specifications and procedures"

² <https://www.brooksequipment.com/email/2015TechSeries/SeptemberTechSeries9-29-15.pdf>

SB 968 Favorable with Amendments Written Testimony

Uploaded by: Marty Lostrom

Position: FWA



March 13, 2026

The Honorable Brian Feldman
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
Senate Office Building, Annapolis, MD

Re: FAVORABLE with Amendments– SB 698 - Education - School Bus - Fire Safety Standards

Dear Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and Members of the Committee:

The Maryland School Bus Contractors Association (MSBCA) supports Senate Bill 574. MSBCA serves as the voice of the private school bus companies that contract with local Maryland school systems in 20 of Maryland's 24 jurisdictions. MSBCA members own and operate over 3,600, or 51%, of the school buses transporting school children across our state. MSBCA contracted school bus routes travel over 58 million miles each year while remaining fully committed to the safety of the students we transport.

SB 968 is a simple request to modify one COMAR requirement to exempt the driver's seat of a school bus from using outdated material. Please note - This change would only affect the driver's seat and not the passenger seats in the back of the school bus.

MSBCA was asked by fellow members of the MDOT/MVA School Transportation Safety Advisory Committee to seek this legislation, The group's justification for this request includes:

- **State Comparison:** Currently only 6 states are confirmed to still require this.
- **National Change Recommendation:** This change would align Maryland with National Congress on School Transportation (NCST) revisions in May 2025. The NCST Congress which includes National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services (NASDPTS), National Association for Pupil Transportation (NAPT), National School Transportation Association (NSTA), School Transportation section, National Safety Council (NSC) and School Bus Manufacturers Technical Council (SBMTC) met last May in Iowa. From that meeting new changes were recommended on a variety of issues regarding student transportation including this request.
 - Verification Link to new NCST new recommendations in 2025 <https://nasdpts.org/NSTSP-Documents>. Forward to Page 70 were the NCST language states: *"SEATS AND RESTRAINING BARRIERS A. Passenger Seating 1. School bus design capacities shall be in accordance with 49 CFR, Part 571.3, Definitions, and FMVSS No. 222, School Bus Passenger Seating and Crash Protection. 2. All seats shall have a minimum cushion depth of 15 inches, a seat back height of 24 inches above the seating reference point and must comply with all other requirements of FMVSS No. 222. 3. All **restraining barriers and passenger seats shall be constructed with materials that enable them to meet the criteria of the School Bus Seat Upholstery Fire Block Test.**"* This no longer includes the driver's seat.
- **Alignment and Consistency:** Per COMAR Small Bus Type II (under 15,000 lbs.) School Buses this material on the driver's seat is not required. This change would now apply to Large School Bus Type I (over 15,000 lbs.) School Buses.

- **State Fiscal and Policy Impact:** This bill is not expected to result in any fiscal impact on the State. A minimal administrative effort may be required to update COMAR.
- **Local Impact:** There would be modest cost savings for both school districts and bus contractors.
 - This change would save approximately \$350 per bus related to the purchase of new school bus, plus an additional cost of the “wear and tear” replacement.
 - The covering may have to be replaced with cracking because of use and cold weather. This replacement varies from \$50-100 per seat per replacement.
- **Driver Retention:** The shortage of school bus drivers is well known in every part of this state. This change would greatly improve driver retention.
 - Most school bus drivers are older (71% between 45-69) and spend approximately 6-7 hours a day sitting on a school bus. We have been told this material is like "sitting on a church pew versus a lazy boy chair".
 - Seats with these materials are harder and crack during cold weather. Repairs include taping the seat, leaving glue, or patched areas often causing additional discomfort and complaints from drivers.
 - The added comfort and breathability of the seat is highly sought after.

In conclusion this simple regulation change to COMAR that is widely accepted nationally, will allow for consistency, costs savings and driver retention with no impact to safety of the students, drivers, and our equipment.

Thank you for your time and consideration of SB 968.

Sincerely,

Steve Nelson

Steve Nelson
President

Martha "Marty" Lostrom

Martha “Marty” Lostrom
Executive Director

MDSP_Opposes_SB0968.pdf

Uploaded by: Nicole Jordan Jones

Position: UNF



State of Maryland
Department of State Police
Government Affairs Unit
Annapolis Office (410) 260-6100

POSITION ON PROPOSED LEGISLATION

DATE: March 17, 2026

BILL NUMBER: Senate Bill 968

POSITION: Oppose

BILL TITLE: Education – School Bus – Fire Safety Standards

REVIEW AND ANALYSIS

This legislation seeks to remove a Maryland law requiring school buses to meet the fire block test for seat upholstery, a specific national fire safety standard established by the National Congress on School Transportation (NCST).

Under current law, school buses must be constructed with materials that meet the school bus seat upholstery fire block test established by the National School Transportation Specifications and Procedures adopted by the National Congress on School Transportation.

The Office of the State Fire Marshal (OSFM), an integral part of the Maryland Department of State Police (MDSP), has major concerns about Senate Bill 968. This legislation repeals that requirement. As a result, Maryland law would no longer require school buses to meet this national seat upholstery fire safety test. Instead, the Motor Vehicle Administration (MVA) would retain general authority to adopt regulations promoting school bus fire safety standards.

The fire block test provides a critical defense for high-risk populations, including children and students with disabilities. These passengers often lack the physical or developmental capability for rapid self-preservation during a fire. Seat upholstery accounts for one of the largest fuel loads in a school bus cabin. When seat materials are not fire-rated, a small ignition source can lead to rapid fire spread and the production of toxic smoke. By requiring materials that pass the fire block test, Maryland ensures that seat cushions resist ignition and significantly slow the growth of a fire. This passive fire protection provides the necessary time for passengers to evacuate before a cabin becomes untenable.

The 17th NCST updated the National School Transportation Specifications and Procedures manual in September 2025. These updates reinforce the importance of enhanced fire-blocking materials to prevent flames and toxic gases from entering the passenger compartment. The fire block test is the primary mechanism to verify that these materials perform as intended under emergency conditions. Repealing the mandate to follow these national procedures would disconnect Maryland from these vital safety advancements specifically designed to prevent catastrophic cabin fires.

Standardized fire block testing remains the benchmark for protecting vulnerable citizens during transportation. Maintaining this specific requirement is essential to the safety of Maryland students and to ensuring that Maryland school buses continue to meet these life-saving criteria.

State of Maryland
Department of State Police
Government Affairs Unit
Annapolis Office (410) 260-6100

POSITION ON PROPOSED LEGISLATION

The Maryland Department of State Police understands that amendments may be submitted to modify the bill as currently written. If the proposed amendments address the concerns raised by the Office of the State Fire Marshal, the Department will withdraw its opposition. However, if the bill remains unchanged, the Maryland Department of State Police will oppose the legislation as written. We respectfully ask that you consider this letter as you deliberate on Senate Bill 968.

SB0968 - State Board & MSDE - Oppose.docx.pdf

Uploaded by: Stefan Redding-Lallinger

Position: UNF

TO: Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

BILL: Senate Bill 968 – Education - School Bus - Fire Safety Standards

DATE: March 17, 2026

POSITION: Oppose

The Maryland State Board of Education (State Board) and the State Department of Education (MSDE) respectfully oppose Senate Bill 968 – Education - School Bus - Fire Safety Standards. This legislation seeks to remove Maryland’s statutory requirement that school bus seats fulfill fire-block testing standards aligned with the National School Transportation specifications. This bill would replace the explicit mandate and fail to ensure comparable protection for Maryland students.

Currently, Maryland law (Education Code §7-808) mandates that school bus seats meet the criteria of the school bus seat upholstery fire block test as adopted by the National Congress on School Transportation. Senate Bill 968 looks to remove this statutory guarantee and instead charges the Motor Vehicle Administration with adopting “regulations to promote fire safety standards”. This creates a vague directive that does little to ensure a high standard of continued safety for students on school buses.

It is vital that Maryland retain clear and enforceable safety mandates in statute. Statutory clarity helps maintain accountability across manufacturers, operators, and enforcement agencies, preventing any erosion of student safety through regulatory changes or interpretations. Transportation safety experts have long recognized fire-block seat upholstery as a low-cost, high-impact measure that can slow fire spread and provide critical extra time for evacuation in the event of an emergency. Removing this mandate would weaken a proven safety safeguard that has been in place for more than a decade and aligns with nationally recognized best practices.

Without the explicit statutory mandate for fire-block tested seats, there is no assurance that any future standard will reflect the rigor of nationally recognized safety benchmarks. Shifting this responsibility to an undefined regulatory process creates uncertainty and opens the possibility of weakened protection during future rulemaking. Most importantly, removing this requirement disregards lessons learned from past relevant tragedies and the subsequent recommendations from the National Transportation Safety Board emphasizing the need for stronger fire-resistant seating materials.

Maryland has a responsibility to maintain the highest level of protection for children who rely on school transportation every day. The State Board and MSDE respectfully request that you consider this information as you deliberate **SB 968**. For further details, please contact Laurel Cratsley, Interim Executive Director of Government Affairs at laurel.cratsley@maryland.gov.