

TO: House Committee on Environment and Transportation
BILL: House Bill 1491 – Education - Interjurisdictional Safe Pathways Commission - Establishment
DATE: March 12, 2026
POSITION: Information

The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) is providing this information for consideration regarding House Bill (HB) 1491 – Education - Interjurisdictional Safe Pathways Commission - Establishment. This legislation would require MSDE to establish an Interjurisdictional Safe Pathways Commission within the Department.

For many years, identifying, coordinating, and securing funding for “safe pathways” for students traveling to and from school, such as sidewalks, crosswalks, bike lanes, pedestrian bridges, traffic-calming measures, and school zone signage, has been the responsibility of Local Education Agencies (LEAs), as they are best positioned to identify and address issues within their respective communities.

Under COMAR 13A.06.07.03, each local board of education has the authority to oversee the safe operation of its student transportation system, including establishing the “non-transported boundary” for each school. Students who reside within this boundary are not eligible for school-provided transportation and may walk, bike, use public transportation, or be transported by parents or guardians.

If a parent or student identifies an unsafe route, they may submit a request to the local transportation office for review. The office determines whether the route meets the criteria for unsafe conditions that warrant transportation services.

Tasks such as assessing existing routes, identifying gaps, developing strategic plans, pursuing funding (including public-private partnerships), and fostering community engagement are currently managed at the local level by each county and school system. These efforts require detailed knowledge of local road networks, traffic patterns, land use, and engineering standards, as well as close coordination with county and municipal transportation and public works agencies. MSDE does not currently possess the extensive engineering or local infrastructure expertise required for the successful implementation of a statewide commission and achievement of its intended goals.

Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Program:

This proposed bill intersects with ongoing efforts already being undertaken by MSDE, the Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT), and LEAs through programs designed to improve safe routes to school and address transportation challenges in our communities.

One resource currently available to LEAs is the **Safe Routes to School (SRTS)** program, a collaborative effort between the State of Maryland, local jurisdictions, and LEAs.

The SRTS program, administered by the Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) State Highway Administration, is federally funded and supports both infrastructure and non-infrastructure projects. Infrastructure investments include sidewalks, crosswalks, bike lanes, ADA curb ramps, traffic-calming measures, and signage near schools. Non-infrastructure efforts include education campaigns, walking school buses, traffic safety workshops, and outreach to students, parents, and law enforcement.

Funding requires a minimum 20% local match and is allocated through competitive grant cycles. Through this program, LEAs can work with local governments to identify and fund improvements to student travel routes.

The Interjurisdictional Safe Pathways Commission:

As outlined in HB 1491, implementation of the Commission would necessitate a statewide effort to collect, compile, and maintain data from more than 1,400 schools to inventory existing safe pathway infrastructure. This scope of work would require the development and ongoing management of a comprehensive data system, as well as sustained coordination across multiple jurisdictions and agencies. In addition, the Department would need sufficient internal capacity to support commission coordination, stakeholder engagement, data analysis, and required reporting.

The proposed October 1, 2026, effective date presents operational challenges, particularly given the breadth of work required to stand up the Commission and initiate its activities. The first report is due December 1, 2026, which allows limited time to complete foundational tasks such as establishing membership, developing processes, and collecting meaningful data. These implementation considerations warrant careful evaluation to ensure feasibility, sustainability, and alignment.

HB 1491 underscores the importance of student safety, a priority that MSDE shares with its LEA partners. However, the bill would place significant new responsibilities on the Department, despite the existence of established programs that already support safe student travel at the local level. Initiatives such as Safe Routes to School are designed to leverage local knowledge and interagency coordination, where understanding of community-specific infrastructure and needs is strongest.

MSDE recognizes that safe pathways for students remain a challenge in some Maryland communities. Current efforts led by MSDE, MDOT, and LEAs are actively addressing these concerns, and any new statewide initiative should build upon and complement these existing efforts.

The State Board and the Department respectfully request that you consider this information as you deliberate **HB 1491**. For further details, please contact Laurel Cratsley, Interim Executive Director of Government Affairs, at 410-767-0906 or at laurel.cratsley@maryland.gov.