

HB1491 Written Testimony - Environment and Transportation Committee (3/12 at 1:00 p.m.)

Education - Interjurisdictional Safe Pathways Commission - Establishment

Baltimore County Student Councils

Ella Sohn - Eastern Technical High School Student

Chair Korman, Vice Chair Guyton, and members of the Environment and Transportation Committee:

My name is Ella Sohn and I am a student from Baltimore County. I write to you on behalf of students in Maryland to request a favorable report on House Bill 1491.

For many students, transportation does not pose itself solely as a logistical issue, but as a systemic barrier that inhibits access to education. In the Baltimore County Public Schools system specifically, we have already seen a consistent disparity in funding for academic resources, transportation, and overall educational equity, which have contributed to our rates of absenteeism, which generates lower engagement in school content and thus has institutionally led to lower graduation rates. Research corroborates that unsafe commuting routes only further the inaccessibility of maintaining a high-quality education by contributing to absenteeism, while expanding safe routes to school leads to improved attendance and student well-being.

I have seen this issue firsthand, and have had peers suffer the consequences. Recently, Maryland experienced one of the largest winter storms in recent memory. When Baltimore County Public Schools reopened roughly a week later, many sidewalks and neighborhood roads remained covered in snow and ice. Students in my community had to walk in the street because sidewalks were still blocked, while others tried to walk on icy paths that had not been cleared. I remember watching some students walking precariously on 3-foot-tall mounds while on the bus to school. That should not be a problem that any student has to face just to complete the legal and educational obligation of attending school. BCPS stated that students could be excused for any weather-related absences, but that disallows students from being caught up with their schoolwork and overloads more tasks onto them.

House Bill 1491 addresses this gap by creating a statewide framework to identify resources, align agencies, and develop long-term solutions for safer school travel. By bringing stakeholders together and establishing a clear reporting structure, this commission would help ensure that infrastructure improvements are strategic, coordinated, and equitable.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the committee to issue a favorable report on House Bill 1491. Thank you for your time and consideration.