



LAILA'S GIFT
Celebrating One Gift at a Time

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House Ways and Means Committee

Re: HB1328 – Public Safety - Department of State Police - School Mapping Data Program

Position: **SUPPORT**

Dear Madam Chair Wilkins, Vice Chair Feldmark, and Members of the Committee:

I am a mom and caregiver to a child, Laila, who lives with a rare genetic syndrome, is nonverbal, and has autism. I am also the founder of Laila's Gift, a nonprofit organization that supports children with special needs and their families, and through this work I speak with caregivers across our state who are navigating many of the same safety challenges my family faces.

Maryland's public schools currently serve approximately 895,668 students across 24 jurisdictions, including Baltimore City and the state's 23 counties. These students range from Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 12, with the core school population between the ages of 5 and 17, although Maryland law allows students to attend public school through age 21.

Within this large student population are thousands of children with autism and intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) who face a unique and serious safety risk known as elopement, also referred to as wandering.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the most recent surveillance data estimates that 1 in 43 children in Maryland has autism, or approximately 2.3% of children. When that prevalence is applied to Maryland's public school enrollment, it suggests that more than 20,000 students in Maryland public schools may be on the autism spectrum.

Studies show that approximately 49% of children with autism attempt to elope from a safe environment, and for some families this behavior can occur as often as once per week. Through my work supporting families across Maryland, I regularly hear from caregivers who describe living with this risk every day. Some parents share that their children attempt to elope daily, creating a level of vigilance and fear that many people may never fully understand.



When these statistics are applied to Maryland's public school population, it suggests that more than 10,000 students across our public school system may be at risk of wandering or elopement.

When elopement occurs, the consequences can be devastating. National data examining reported elopement incidents shows that 17% resulted in death, with drowning identified as the leading cause, accounting for 91% of fatalities in 2024. When these statistics are considered alongside Maryland's student population and the number of children with autism who may be at risk of wandering, it underscores that **thousands of children in our state face the potential danger of autism-related elopement and the life-threatening risks associated with it.**

Research also shows that elopement behavior in children with autism often begins as early as age four. This means the risk frequently begins during the years when children first enter the school system through Pre-K and early elementary programs. Many children with autism may have limited understanding of danger, limited verbal communication, and an intense drive to explore their environment, which can make wandering particularly dangerous.

This is why mapping nearby bodies of water within a one-mile radius of schools is so critically important. National autism and search and rescue experts consistently emphasize that water should be one of the first places searched when a child with autism goes missing, because many children who elope are naturally drawn to water sources.

When a child leaves school grounds unexpectedly, every minute matters. First responders, school staff, and families must rapidly determine where a vulnerable child may go. Nearby ponds, retention basins, creeks, drainage ditches, or lakes can become immediate areas of concern, yet these hazards are not always clearly known to those responding in the moment. Mapping these water sources in advance ensures responders can prioritize high risk locations immediately, saving precious time during an emergency search.

By proactively mapping bodies of water near schools, Maryland can:

- Provide first responders with immediate situational awareness during search efforts
- Help schools develop more effective safety planning and emergency protocols
- Reduce critical response time during elopement incidents
- Identify environmental hazards that may require additional safety planning or monitoring

With nearly 896,000 students enrolled in Maryland's public schools, and thousands potentially vulnerable to elopement beginning as early as age four, this measure represents a practical, data driven step to improve safety.



Mapping nearby bodies of water is not a complex policy change. It is a common-sense safeguard that recognizes the real risks families and schools face every day.

For many families, including my own, the fear of a child wandering toward water is not hypothetical. It is a reality that shapes how we plan, how we protect, and how we advocate.

Taking this step ensures that when a child goes missing, responders immediately know where the highest risk locations may be. That knowledge can save precious minutes and, in some cases, save lives.

House Bill 1328 represents a practical and compassionate step toward protecting vulnerable students by mapping nearby bodies of water and strengthening emergency preparedness for schools and first responders.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Committee to issue a favorable report on House Bill 1328.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Warm regards,

Shari Bailey
Founder, CEO, Caregiver
Laila's Gift