

My name is Natalya Catalina De La Cruz-Van Natta, and I am the Community School Site Coordinator at Ducketts Lane Elementary School (DLES) in Howard County. I am writing today to express my enthusiastic support for House Bill 486, which seeks to designate an official Ruby Bridges Walk to School Day and Maryland School Pedestrian Awareness Day across the State.

At DLES, we have seen that when we provide students with a reason to walk together, the impact on our school community is immediate:

- **Student Engagement:** Our students didn't just walk; they engaged with the Civil Rights Movement in a way that felt personal and active. Feedback from staff noted that students felt a renewed sense of agency, understanding that their own presence and "steps" carry historical weight. Students Pre K- 5th were able participate in a multitude of activities that fostered this work.
- **Community Spirit:** We saw a significant increase in the number of students walking to school that day, which fostered unity among neighbors who rarely interact during the morning hustle. We were also able to include our bus riders through a partnership with our county transportation department. These students were dropped off at a designated "walking stop" to complete the journey on foot with their peers. This inclusive approach brought smiles to many faces and allowed the entire student body to come together in a new way.
- **Positive Climate:** The energy leading up to the event was incredible. Students participated in a week-long spirit week that connected Ruby Bridges' walk to the power of bravery and kindness. Families and students commented that it was a unique opportunity to start the school day on an impactful note, centered on shared values.

However, events like Ruby Bridges Walk to School Day also highlight a critical practical need: pedestrian safety. At DLES, our families and staff care deeply about the safety of our scholars as they navigate local roads. By establishing an official Maryland School Pedestrian Awareness Day, the State provides a necessary platform to advocate for safer crosswalks, better signage, and the driver awareness required to keep our children out of harm's way.

Supporting this bill is about more than just a date on a calendar; it is about building a foundation for values like bravery, inclusion, and safety for every Maryland student. It encourages schools to take a morning to "walk in someone else's shoes" while ensuring the physical paths they walk are safe. I have seen the pride on our students' faces as they walked through our school doors on Ruby Bridges Day, and I want that for every child in Maryland.

I respectfully urge the committee to support House Bill 486. Thank you for your time and for your dedication to our students.