



**Board of Education of Howard County
Testimony Submitted to the Maryland House of Delegates,
Environment and Transportation Committee
Ways and Means Committee
February 29, 2024**

**Board of Education
of Howard County**

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**HB0196: UNFAVORABLE
Motor Vehicles - School Buses - Seat Belts**

The Board of Education of Howard County (the Board) opposes **HB0196 Motor Vehicles - School Buses - Seat Belts** as an unfunded mandate on local school systems.

HB0196 initially requires schools to include instruction on school bus safety and the proper use of seat belts on school buses within a program of safety education. After removing provisions related to allowable instances of students standing on buses, HB0196 also prohibits the person responsible for students on a bus from allowing those students to stand on a bus while in motion.

Addressing use of seat belts on school buses, HB0196 requires all buses purchased after October 1, 2024, to be equipped with seat belts for every seat on a bus. For those buses in operations before October 1, 2024, seat belts must be installed on every seat on a bus by October 1, 2026. The bill further prohibits a person from operating a school bus equipped with seat belts unless each occupant is restrained by a seat belt.

Seat belts are currently used on special education transportation buses in Howard County. Moreover, school bus safety education is addressed both through the Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) curriculum and the HCPSS Transportation Office. Specifically, a kindergarten health education curricular objective includes instruction that takes place during the Safety and Violence Prevention unit and includes identifying ways to stay safe when riding in a vehicle or bus. School bus drivers in Howard County also discuss bus safety with riders in conjunction with two bus evacuation drills conducted systemwide by the Transportation Office each school year. While the use of seat belts on regular school buses has been debated under prior introductions of similar bills, and staff supports the potential to improve safety for all students, two specific areas of concern with HB0196 are costs and logistics.

The Maryland Association of Pupil Transportation has indicated there would not be enough supplies available by October 2026 to outfit all Maryland school buses with new seat belts along with replacement seats to accommodate the belts. They have estimated for school transportation personnel that the cost to retrofit a 12 row school bus would be approximately \$23,000. Additional costs of \$15,000 per bus would be added for the manufacture of new buses, which for Howard County would be factored into future transportation services bids with costs spread over the term of the contract. As a legislative platform, the Board opposes unfunded mandates such as HB0196.

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From a logistical perspective, staff have a concern for requirements under HB0196 that prohibit a driver from operating a school bus unless all occupants are restrained. While drivers are currently instructed to inform students they need to be seated, and should buses include seat belts the same expectation for use would apply, but the specific language barring operation of the bus if a student refuses to comply could cause extensive delays in bus routes.

For these reasons, we urge an UNFAVORABLE report of HB0196 from this Committee.