



Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director
1217 S. Potomac Street
Baltimore, MD 21224
410-935-7281
marypat.fannon@pssam.org

BILL: HB 724
TITLE: Motor Vehicles - School Buses - Seat Belts
DATE: February 23, 2024
POSITION: Unfavorable
COMMITTEE: Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
CONTACT: Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director, PSSAM

The Public School Superintendents' Association of Maryland (PSSAM), on behalf of all twenty-four local school superintendents, **opposes HB 724.**

This bill requires every school bus purchased on or after October 1, 2024, and registered in the State to be equipped with seat belts that are accessible to passengers for every seat on the school bus. Likewise, every school bus in operation before October 1, 2024, must have seat belts that are accessible to passengers installed for every seat on the school bus by October 1, 2026. Local school systems must provide student instruction on school bus safety and the proper use of seat belts on school buses, as part of an existing program of safety education. A person may not operate a school bus that is equipped with seat belts unless the person and each occupant are restrained by a seat belt. A person convicted of a violation of this requirement is subject to a fine of up to \$50. As under current law, "seat belt" is defined as any belt, strap, harness, or like device. Persons responsible for pupils on a school bus may not allow any pupil to stand while the school bus is in motion.

PSSAM appreciates the intent of Senate Bill 724 and the sponsors' concern for the safety and well-being of our students on school buses. The safe transportation of our students is a top priority for all local superintendents. However, PSSAM respectfully opposes Senate Bill 724 for the following reasons.

Statistically, school buses are at least 40 times safer than any other form of ground transportation in preventing serious injury or death. School bus safety requirements are rigid and go well beyond those required for all other passenger vehicles. School buses are constructed with high back padded seats, compartmentalized seating, reinforced chassis, and front and rear bumpers. Compartmentalization provides a protective envelope consisting of strong, closely-spaced seats that have energy-absorbing seat backs. Local school systems adhere strictly to these guidelines. School buses have done an exceptional job of protecting students from serious injury or death in severe head-on and rear-end collisions.

The National Association for Pupil Transportation (NAPT) and the National School Transportation Association (NSTA) have jointly expressed concern to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration about the call for seat belts on school buses. NAPT and NSTA agree that, while they are not opposed to seat belts, they stressed that any mandate on the occupant restraints should wholly rely on scientific data and must not result in school districts cutting transportation service because of any budget shortfalls that may arise from being forced to purchase seat belts. NAPT and NSTA also express concern that students may not correctly wear the seat belts and that the restraints could impede evacuation in the event of an emergency.

Another concern we have relates to student behavior on school buses if seatbelts are installed. Although we implement numerous strategies and procedures to lessen the chance of inappropriate action on the part of students, we have apprehension about the possibility that a student could actually use a seat belt to inflict bodily harm on another student. This is in addition to the difficult task of ensuring each student is buckled and sitting in their seat for the entire ride.

PSSAM supports any measure to improve student safety. However, given the overall safety record of our school buses measured against the unfunded cost and the reasons detailed above, it is difficult for us to support this legislation in the present fiscal climate. Therefore, PSSAM **opposes** Senate Bill 724 as an unfunded mandate with significant cost to local school systems, and urges an **unfavorable** committee report.