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BILL: House Bill 341
TITLE: Maryland Student Transportation Act
DATE: February 16, 2017
POSITION: OPPOSE
COMMITTEE: Environment and Transportation Committee
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House Bill 341 requires specified school vehicles in the State to be equipped with seat belts; prohibiting a person from operating school vehicles unless the person and each occupant are restrained by a seat belt; authorizing a local school system or a nonpublic school to establish policies regarding the restraint of pupils by seat belts on school vehicles; and requiring the operator of a school vehicle to notify the local school system or the nonpublic school the student attends if the student fails to comply with seat belt requirements.

PSSAM appreciates the intent of House Bill 341 and the sponsors' concern for the safety and well-being of our students on school buses. Safe transportation is always a top priority for all local superintendents. However, PSSAM respectfully **OPPOSES** House Bill 341 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. They 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. We 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 stress 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 seatbelts. Currently there are only four states that have mandatory seat belt laws. NAPT and NSTA also expressed worry that students may not correctly wear the seat belts and that the restraints could impede evacuation in the event of an emergency.

Additionally, PSSAM has recently learned that there has been concern by local fire chiefs about the mandatory installation of seat belts. Their concerns stem from the fact that there are more fires reported on school buses than major traffic accidents. They believe that seats belts could hamper the efforts of students, particularly young children, to quickly exit the bus if a fire were to happen.

Again, PSSAM understands the intent of House Bill 341. At this point, there are too many conflicting questions and no definitive answers. We would like to offer a reasonable solution to this ongoing controversy. We suggest that a workgroup be legislated that would delve into the multiple issues, analyze data, and report their findings. The workgroup report would better inform all interested parties of the facts and figures and help guide us to a unified and unbiased conclusion on the use of seat belts.