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BILL: Senate Bill 155  
TITLE: School Vehicles – Seat Belts - Requirements  
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POSITION: OPPOSE  
COMMITTEE: Judicial Proceedings  
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Senate Bill 155 requires school vehicles registered in the State and purchased on or after July 1, 2018, regardless of the date the school vehicle was manufactured or assembled, to be equipped with specified seat belts for every seat on the school vehicle; and provides for the application of specified requirements relating to seat belts on school vehicles.

PSSAM appreciates the intent of Senate Bill 155 and the sponsors' concern for the safety and well-being of our students on school buses. The safe transportation of our students is always a top priority for all local superintendents. However, PSSAM respectfully OPPOSES Senate Bill 155 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 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.

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

In addition, Senate Bill 155 requires that seat belts shall be either 3-point belts or integrated toddler seat belts. In our local school systems, a single bus transports high school students, followed by middle school, and finally elementary school students. We have a concern as to what impact "integrate toddler seat belts" would have on the timely and effective transportation of students ranging from age 3 to 21 years of age.

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.

Finally, 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 155 as an unfunded mandate with significant cost to local school systems.