



State Representative Bernie Willis

District 74

H.B No. 279- Sponsor Testimony

House Transportation Committee

2023

Chairman McClain, Vice Chair Dobos, Ranking Member Grim, and fellow members of the House Transportation Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on behalf of H.B. 279. This life saving legislation seeks to require occupant restraint devices to be installed on ALL Ohio school busses within the next five years.

A tragic incident occurred in my district six weeks ago today where a school bus was struck by another vehicle enroute to our Northwestern Local Elementary School, resulting in the bus rolling and coming to rest on its top. In this mayhem, Aiden Clark, an eleven-year-old schoolboy, was ejected from his seat and the bus and was fatally injured. Many other students aboard this bus also sustained serious injuries including one young girl who was also ejected and had to be rescued by brave passersby who helped to roll the bus off her severely injured body. While we will never be able to bring peace to the parents who lost their son on this tragic day, we can take measures to ensure an incident like this never occurs again. It is for this reason that I am introducing this crucial legislation.

The premise of incorporating seatbelts on school buses is currently seeing a revitalized push by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) as they have recognized and reported that school bus related deaths and injuries have risen dramatically over the past decade, seeing hundreds of children injured or worse per year when left unfastened to their seats. This is not a matter that is simply formed out of opinion but is supported by years of data. From 2008 to 2017, there were 317,994 fatal motor vehicle traffic crashes. Of those crashes, 1,113 (0.4%) were classified as school-transportation-related. Fifty-two percent of school-transportation-related crashes from 2008 through 2017 occurred in rural areas. Within this same time frame, there have been 1,241 people killed in school-transportation-related crashes —an average of 124 fatalities per year. Twenty-one percent (264) of these fatalities were of school-age children (18 and younger). Occupants IN school transportation vehicles accounted for 10% of fatalities.

While I personally do not consider this life safety issue for children to be a financial issue, we are asking the necessary questions to ensure that we know how much this law could cost. Recent estimates to have seatbelts installed on school busses reveal that the cost of installment would only be 2.5% of a school district's transportation budget. The following estimations and assumptions have been considered and are revised from our co-sponsor request last month based on refined data.

- New busses- the cost for 3-point seatbelts adds roughly \$500 per seat. Factoring in labor for installation, at half an hour per seat, would be an additional \$100.
- Retrofitting would cost the same if the bus is currently seatbelt ready. If not, it would add an additional \$150-\$200 per seatback replacement plus labor.
- The cost per bus would be roughly \$16,800 to retrofit or add seatbelts.
- About 23k school busses in Ohio. 15% have seatbelts of some kind. That leaves roughly 20k without this level of protection. Total bill could be close to \$400M.

We believe that this amount is well worth the potential saved lives of children who we entrust to our local school districts every day. Parents should never be put in a situation where they have to worry about their children's safety while enroute to school. This legislation is crucial to help resolve this and make sure that the "what ifs" are covered.

We have been in contact with the Dept of Public Safety and expressed our support of the Governor's School bus Safety Working Group. While that group's work will not be complete for a few more months, we want to have this simple legislation in work pending any requested amendments which we are open to make once those recommendations are released. The goal is to reduce the timeframe to get legislation to the Governor's desk. With that in mind we would appreciate your help in pushing forward with this legislation.

I thank you for your consideration of House Bill 279, and I am happy to attempt to answer any questions you may have.