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Ohio House Transportation Committee

House Bill 279: Written Opposition Testimony

Ohio Education Association

October 10, 2023

Chair McClain, Ranking Member Grim, and Members of the Committee, my name is Scott DiMauro. I am a high school social studies teacher from Worthington with 16 years of classroom experience and currently serve as President of the Ohio Education Association (OEA). On behalf of the nearly 120,000 members of the OEA, thank you for the opportunity to provide written opposition testimony on House Bill (HB) 279, a bill that would require every bus purchased, owned, leased, or rented by a school district to be equipped with occupant restraining devices (seat belts) for every student transported on the school bus.

OEA is opposed to HB 279 as it has been shown that seat belts do not necessarily increase student safety because school buses are specifically designed to be extremely safe without restraints. While safety should always be a top priority for school districts when transporting students, OEA believes that continued research and development of safety features for passengers in school buses should be conducted before implementing broad top-down mandates like those contained in HB 279. Additionally, OEA urges that the Ohio General Assembly await the findings of the Governor's Ohio School Bus Safety Working Group, which includes input from state safety officials, law enforcement, representatives of school district administrative organizations, parents, bus drivers and school employees, prior to passing a measure like HB 279.

OEA has historically opposed mandatory seat belts in school buses, as buses are designed to be extremely safe without seat belts with the design concept of "compartmentalization." This concept includes specialized safety elements such as narrow rows of padded seats, smooth surfaces, and an elevated seating plane, to keep school bus passengers safe without the need for seat belts.

The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) states that, "...seat belts play an important role in keeping vehicle passengers safe, but since school buses are different by design, they have a different kind of safety restraint system." Compartmentalization plays a large role in the NHTSA's assessment of the best way to provide crash protection to passengers of school buses. NHTSA guidance states that via compartmentalization:

"...the interior of large buses protect children without them needing to buckle up. Through compartmentalization, children are protected from crashes by strong, closed-spaced seats that have energy absorbing seat backs...[furthermore] large school buses

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are heavier and distribute crash forces differently than passenger cars and light trucks. These differences help bus passengers experience much less crash force than those in passenger cars, light trucks, and vans.”¹

Additionally, seat belts on school buses carry their own safety risks. Students might become trapped upside down in rollovers or other possible injuries related to the restraint. In cases of emergencies or fires on the bus, a safety restraint may prevent students from safely evacuating a bus in a timely manner. Students might also use safety belts as weapons to harass or injure fellow students. While driving, students may unbuckle their safety belts without alerting the driver or other guardian onboard the bus, causing a safety risk to themselves and their fellow passengers.

Finally, HB 279 does not provide funding to support the extremely high cost of mandatory seat belts on every school bus. The Legislative Services Commission (LSC) Fiscal Note for HB 279 estimates that school district costs would increase by between \$282.2 million and \$376.3 million to retrofit the existing bus fleet.

However, the cost of retrofitting buses is only one of the funding issues contained within HB 279. OEA is concerned about the extra responsibility that will be placed on bus drivers, aides, or other staff to ensure that bus passengers are properly restrained, while maintaining already time taxed bus routes due to transportation staff and vehicle shortages. Districts would need to hire additional transportation staff to both comply with the requirements contained in HB 279 and ensure that students are picked up and dropped off to and from school in a timely manner.

In conclusion, OEA is opposed to HB 279 and urges that the Ohio General Assembly consider the recommendations of the Governor’s Ohio School Bus Safety Work Group before passing a measure like HB 279. Additionally, as OEA represents thousands of school transportation professionals, enclosed are comments from members on this matter from across the state.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide comments on HB 279. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions related to OEA’s position on this bill.

¹ <https://www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/school-bus-safety#:~:text=Through%20compartmentalization%2C%20children%20are%20protected,have%20energy%2Dabsorbing%20seat%20backs.>

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Supplemental Member Comments on HB 279

“Seat Belts are a hazard on a full-size bus especially if don’t have an aide, who is going to make sure that everyone is seat belted-in – it’s a time issue, we are going to need more time in bucking and unbuckling, to meet compliance with HB 279. We can barely make it to our second school without seat belts. And Kids don’t want to be necessarily seated belted together as well – it’s going to start conflict. Most accidents are not flip-overs, they are back-ends, side tire hit, etc., in these cases, we must get the kids out fast. A bus can fill up with smoke in 45 seconds and electrical fire smoke can make them very ill.”

Barb Armour, Brunswick Local School District Bus Driver

“For the most part it’s a bad idea. Trying to get 60 kids out of a bus with seatbelts in a minute is unrealistic. In a stressful situation with kids stressed out fumbling and with different abilities, it seems very unlikely that a bus driver can maintain kid safety and track students out of the bus at the same time. And you don’t get to pick where these situations might occur and that that could put kids at risk.

I have students that are unable to exit the bus on their own because of disabilities including pre-school age students that would be completely relying on the driver’s assistance in getting out during emergency. If we had to unbuckle students, we’d also be unable to manage students as they exit the bus – our students push and pull each other and it makes it dangerous for all, if an adult is not supervising. Lastly, kids sometimes will re-enter a bus to retrieve forgotten items – this will be difficult to monitor if you are unbuckling children.”

Stephanie Griffith, Northeastern LSD (Clark County) Bus Driver

“Imagine trying to choose what child you will have to save? In a situation where you need to get 24 seats, 2-3 students out of those seats, and your seat belt cutter fails after the second cut – the blade either breaks or is too dull. I have removed seats of numerous old buses, kids were using them as weapons, and had to change my blade after two seat belts unless it broke on the first one. It takes the removal and replacement of 5 screws to change the blade.”

Jennifer Hein, Brunswick Local School District Bus Driver

"Putting seat belts on a school bus is not the safest way to transport children. If an accident happens or a fire starts, they could put lives and danger due to the need to quickly evacuate the bus. Not to mention, there is a shortage of drivers, bus aides, and buses. With seat belts and mandates, the state will be limiting the already short amount of time allotted due to staffing shortages for children to get to and from school."

Margie Stevens, Lancaster City Schools Bus Driver and OBI Instructor