

Committee: Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs
Testimony on: HB 19 - "Safe Walk to School Act"
Organization: Climate Parents of Prince George's
Person Submitting: Joseph Jakuta, Lead Volunteer
Position: Favorable
Hearing Date: April 5, 2022



Dear Mr. Chairman and Committee Members:

Thank you for considering our testimony in support of HB 19, the "Safe Walk to School Act". Climate Parents is a campaign to reduce climate change causing pollution in our schools and our group is active in Prince George's County. In particular, we are currently working directly with Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) technical staff and other advocates to develop a Climate Action Plan for PGCPS as part of a Prince George's County Board of Education Focus Workgroup.

Schools that are safe to walk or bicycle to are an important asset for our children. Studies have found that increased physical activity leads to improved academic performance.¹ There is numerous evidence linking health and well being with increased physical activity.² As students age and mature, being able to access school on their own also allows for more opportunities for extracurricular activities, an increased relationship with the learning environment, and a greater sense of independence.

There are other benefits from decreasing the number of vehicles at schools, which would happen if schools were safer to walk or bike to. There would be a decrease in the amount of vehicles idling at pick up and dropoff, which cleans the air and thus very important for people suffering from asthma.³ Decreasing the number of vehicles also will lead to less accidents involving personal vehicles and students, which is a concern given the high rates of distracted driving that have been observed at schools.⁴ In fact, a 2009 survey found that 30 percent of people cited dangerous walking conditions as the largest impediment to walking to school behind distance.⁵

Since April 2021 the previously mentioned Focus Workgroup has completed a great amount of fact finding, including conducting multiple surveys of students. While electric buses are the most popular transportation solution and necessary for most students, there is a significant number of students that must walk or bike due to their proximity or cannot bus home due to extracurriculars and need safe routes (estimates from 2009 found nationally that about 13% of students walk or bike).⁶ The PGCPS students made it clear that having safe routes to school, with good sidewalks, bike lanes, crossing guards, and other safety features is vitally important to their ability to safely arrive at school and return home. The "Safe Walk to School Act" would be a large step in the right direction towards making their trips safe.

¹ Center for Disease Control. 2010. "The Association Between School-Based Physical Activity, Including Physical Education, and Academic Performance." https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health_and_academics/pdf/pa-pe_paper.pdf

² American Health Association. "What's the Link Between Physical Activity and Health?" <https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/cardiac-rehab/getting-physically-active/whats-the-link-between-physical-activity-and-health>

³ Department of Energy. "Reducing Vehicle Idling Time at School Helps Kids—and Parents—Breathe Easier." <https://www.energy.gov/energysaver/articles/reducing-vehicle-idling-time-school-helps-kids-and-parents-breathe-easier>

⁴ Safe Kids Worldwide. "Alarming Dangers in School Zones." https://www.safekids.org/sites/default/files/alarming_dangers_in_school_zones.pdf

⁵ Safe Routes to School. http://guide.saferoutesinfo.org/introduction/the_decline_of_walking_and_bicycling.cfm

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There is also support at the administrative level in PGCPS for this type of approach. At their March 24, 2022 meeting the Board of Education discussed several environmentally related school bills that would assist the school system.⁷ PGCPS's CEO Dr. Monica Goldson spoke of the long-term benefits that safer routes to schools would bring, specifically it could allow for bus routes to be eliminated and thus reduce the impacts of bus driver shortages in the longer term. This could happen since some bus routes are necessary to transport students that live near to the schools, but cannot walk due to unsafe walking conditions.

Our students deserve to be able to get to school safely. If they live too close to be bussed, have to stay late for football practice, want to come early for tutoring, or just want to walk home with friends, we should remember that almost all of them cannot drive and they need to be able to access their schools safely.

We encourage a FAVORABLE report for this important legislation.

⁷ March 24 Prince George's County Board of Education Meeting. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrjTeLypLRY>