

Committee: Education, Energy, and the Environment
Testimony on: SB 200 - "Safe Alternative Routes to Public Schools"
Organization: Climate Parents of Prince George's
Person Submitting: Joseph Jakuta, Lead Volunteer
Position: Favorable, with Amendment
Hearing Date: February 7, 2024



Dear Mr. Chairman and Committee Members:

Thank you for considering our testimony to SB 200, "Safe Alternative Routes to Public Schools." 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 recently worked directly with Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) technical staff and other advocates to develop a first in the national School Climate Change Action Plan.

In our work developing a Climate Change Action Plan for PGCPS, one of the main solutions to reducing vehicle emissions was to encourage more walking and biking to school. This is particularly important for students that live within the non-transportation areas, which are defined as being within 1½ mile for elementary school students and 2 miles for middle and high school students in Prince George's County.¹ However, one of the barriers to walking and biking to school is feeling unsafe, which is largely due to dangerous driving. When students and their parents do not feel it is safe to get to school by other means, they drive independently, which results in more localized air pollution at the entrance of schools, more wasted time for parents, and more chances for vehicles-on-pedestrian collisions at schools.

In Prince George's County, we know firsthand the tragedy that comes when students walking to school are not kept safe. In November 2023, two of our students were killed in a crosswalk by a driver as they walked to school. While this particular legislation will likely not have prevented that specific tragedy, there are numerous close calls every day on the roads that would be affected by this legislation.

We are supportive of this approach of requiring annual examinations of safe routes to schools and to require counties to implement missing sidewalks necessary to create safe routes to schools. This will be a positive step towards making walking to school safer for students. However, several areas of improvement are needed in this legislation to more holistically solve this:

1. The legislation also needs to require the look at crossing guards as well and require counties to provide funding for crossing guards deemed necessary in the report.
2. There needs to be a requirement that all reports are approved by a state body, most likely the State Board of Education, so as to avoid counties simply issuing reports that find no infrastructure improvements are needed.
3. An article needs to be added to Transportation similar to what is being proposed in Local Government § 12-506.1 (C) that would require implementation by the State Highway Administration (SHA). Over half of the schools in Prince George's County have a state highway within 500 feet of the school grounds and numerous schools are built so that their entrances are directly on state highways. There will be no

hope of having safe routes to school if County officials need to plead with the SHA to make the roads they manage safe for students. This of course does not remove the need to keep § 12–506.1 (D) for roads under municipal control, but for this legislation to achieve the goals it strives for, SHA must be mandated to follow the recommendations in the plans.

We do applaud that this legislation has been brought forward. We cannot live sustainably if our students cannot access their places of learning by safely walking or biking there. Each student that does not have access to LEA provided transportation should be able to get to school safely. We need a stronger version of this bill to put Maryland on the path towards that reality.

We encourage a FAVORABLE report, with AMENDMENT, for this important legislation.