

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2026 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
First Reader

Senate Bill 968 (Senator Gallion)
Education, Energy, and the Environment

Education - School Bus - Fire Safety Standards

This bill repeals the requirement that a school bus must be constructed with materials that enable it to meet all the criteria of the school bus seat upholstery fire block test established by the National School Transportation Specifications and Procedures adopted at the most recent National Congress on School Transportation (NCST). **The bill takes effect July 1, 2026.**

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: The Motor Vehicle Administration (MVA) can update its safety inspection procedures with existing resources. Revenues are not affected.

Local Effect: Potential reduction in local school system expenditures for school bus procurement beginning in FY 2027. Local revenues are not affected.

Small Business Effect: Minimal.

Analysis

Current Law: Type I and Type II school vehicles are yellow school buses. Both a Type I and Type II school vehicle must be designed and constructed to carry passengers and meet the same construction and seating space requirements. However, a Type I vehicle must have a gross vehicle weight exceeding 15,000 pounds and a Type II vehicle must have a gross vehicle weight of 15,000 pounds or less.

Under current law, a school bus (defined under Transportation Article § 11-153 as a Type I school vehicle) must be constructed with materials that enable it to meet all the criteria of

the school bus seat upholstery fire block test established by the National School Transportation Specifications and Procedures adopted at the most recent NCST.

Although current law specifies that only Type I school vehicles are subject to fire block safety tests, Maryland regulations under COMAR 11.19.02.31 and 11.19.03.29 require *passenger seats* on both Type I and Type II school vehicles to be constructed with materials that enable it to meet all the criteria of the school bus seat upholstery fire block test established by the National School Transportation Specifications and Procedures adopted at the most recent NCST. For *operator seats*, Maryland regulations only require Type I vehicles to be constructed with such materials.

The [17th NCST](#) convened in 2025 and updated its National School Transportations Specifications and Procedures, which include specifications for a school bus seat upholstery fire block test.

The school bus upholstery fire block test is performed with standardized school bus seating arrangements and ignition sources, which must be placed in each of three designated locations. The current school bus upholstery fire block safety test performance criteria include (1) a maximum time from ignition to flameout of eight minutes; (2) prevention of the flame spreading to any other seat in the test chamber for two of the ignition source positions; and (3) weight loss not to exceed 10% of the pretest weight of padding and upholstery. If the seating is equipped from a seatbelt webbing, such components are exempt from the maximum flameout time requirements provided they meet certain federal motor vehicle safety standards. The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) advises that removal of the fire block test requirements for school bus upholstery possibly decreases the safety of students on school buses by having seats that would be significantly more flammable than the current fire block test materials in school buses.

Local Expenditures: To the extent removal of the statutory requirement for fire block safety tests allows local school systems to procure school buses with less expensive seat upholstery, local expenditures decrease. For context, MSDE's 2025 Pupil Transportation Report indicates that there are 3,631 route vehicles owned by local school systems and another 3,684 contractor-owned vehicles in operation in the State. Local school system expenditures may directly decrease for future procurement of locally owned vehicles. In school systems with contracted vehicles, expenditures may decrease through lower contracted rates. However, MSDE advises that, because the bill would remove reference to existing national industry standards, local school system expenditures are likely only minimally affected.

Additional Information

Recent Prior Introductions: Similar legislation has not been introduced within the last three years.

Designated Cross File: HB 1610 (Delegate Kerr) - Rules and Executive Nominations.

Information Source(s): Maryland State Department of Education; Maryland Department of Transportation; Baltimore City Public Schools; Baltimore County Public Schools; Montgomery County Public Schools; Prince George's County Public Schools; Department of Legislative Services

Fiscal Note History: First Reader - March 16, 2026
jg/hlb

Analysis by: Michael E. Sousane

Direct Inquiries to:
(410) 946-5510
(301) 970-5510