

TESTIMONY OF Mike Folks, Superintendent, USD 379 Clay County School District,

January 25th, 2017

Representative Swanson and fellow Representatives of this Committee:

Thank you for taking the time to hear my testimony today on HB 2008. As superintendent of a county-wide school district that is one of the top 10 largest geographically in the state with 632 miles, one that transports approximately 750 students daily between in-town and out-of-town routes, and has 20 regular education and 5 special education routes, employing 30 drivers, this bill is of personal interest to me.

First of all, I would be remiss if I did not state the safety of our students should always be the highest priority, and it is our responsibility to continue to look for ways to make our students safer riding a school bus. Currently, six states require school buses to be equipped with seat belts and this same conversation we are having is happening in many other states.

In my research on student safety, I found that students are 70 times safer on a school bus than riding in their parent's car. According to a report from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, nearly 500 children and teens die each year in car accidents during school hours; only about four are killed each year while riding school buses during those same hours. Simply stated, school buses are one of the safest forms of transportation available!

School buses are carefully designed to protect students like eggs in an egg carton "compartmentalized", and surrounded with padding and structural integrity to secure the entire container. The seat backs are raised and the shell is reinforced for protection against impact.

Would adding seat belts make buses safer? Depending on the type of accident a bus is involved in would be a variable in answering this question. In head-on, rear-end, water, and most other typically crashes, I believe the "compartmentalization" is very safe.

Even though you cannot put a price tag on student safety, adding seat belts to new bus purchases at an estimated price of between \$8,000 and \$10,000 per bus, this would be another strain on our budgets and another unfunded mandate by legislators. Would we be better served by increasing driver salaries, driver training, and other personnel improvements?

If legislators feel seat belts should be mandated in school buses, some additional financial aid should be included. One idea would be to lower the transportation eligibility from 2.5 miles from a student's attendance center to 1 mile.

My conclusion and solution on this matter are both data driven. Currently, I do not have enough research and data to support this bill. Personally, as a school superintendent there are too many unanswered questions. Questions that remain are things such as, will we need

additional monitors on buses to help with seat belts? Can students get out of a seat belt quickly in case of an emergency? Are there enough safety improvements to justify the additional cost of seat belts? Is adding the additional responsibility to drivers to insure students are buckled-up adding stress or helping them with behavioral concerns? I need more study and clarification before I can support the added cost of this bill. Do we need to continue to research, collect data, have sample districts volunteer, and continue our discussion on how bus seat belts can improve student safety? Absolutely! Even though I do not support approving the current bill at this time, I remain “neutral” on the idea of adding seat belts to buses.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share, and best of luck in your future discussions.