

Virginia committees pass bill allowing ads on school buses, reject seat belt bill

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Virginia General Assembly committees voted on several school bills Wednesday, Jan. 24, 2018.

RICHMOND

Schools may get a new revenue stream if the General Assembly approves an eye-catching concept: advertising on school buses.

As school divisions struggle to keep up with budget demands, Del. Israel O'Quinn, R-Washington, has come back with a semi-annual bill that usually fails.

But rewritten with a narrower focus on what types of ads could be displayed –and where – HB 809 passed out of a subcommittee on 10-0 vote.

The bill would let school boards put ads between the rear wheels and the end of a bus. The ads would not be sexually explicit or involve gambling, politics, tobacco, alcohol or food and beverages that don't meet the "Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010."

"It helps raise new dollars that state nor local government has to provide," O'Quinn said Wednesday. School boards could choose where to use the money.

Del. Glenn Davis, R-Virginia Beach, said he tried to get Virginia Beach to put ads on school buses when he was a councilman.

"It's a good model," he said.

No one testified in opposition, but the group Campaign for Commercial Free Childhood has opposed similar attempts in other states, saying ads cover only a fraction of a percent of school budgets and the effects are detrimental.

"The financial plight of schools is extremely worrisome, but turning school buses into traveling billboards... is not the answer," the group says on its website.

In a 6-4 vote, subcommittee members rejected the idea of requiring seat belts on school buses.

Opponents called it an unfunded mandate, even though the bill would give school districts a 18-year window before seat belts would become mandatory.

Del. Paul Krizek, D-Fairfax, said the cost would be "pennies per ride" over the life of the bus.

"Any time we can make it safer, we should," Krizek said. "Cheap safety features make a big difference."

House members questioned whether it would take longer to load and unload kids and place an added burden on drivers.

Only six states have made seat belts mandatory on school buses, and opponents say doing so has had negligible results. They argue that buses are already many times safer than cars.

Students would be allowed to bring sunscreen, considered a drug by the FDA, to school under a bill that passed unanimously out of the House education subcommittee.

Currently, students have to bring a note or prescription from a doctor.

Del. David Yancey, R-Newport News, said the bill would help prevent sunburn and skin cancer.