

# **Position Paper Re: HCPSS Walking to School Policy**

**Allen Dyer**

**Candidate for Board of Education**

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## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Contact: Allen Dyer, 410-531-3965, [aldyer@lawlab.com](mailto:aldyer@lawlab.com)

On September 28, 2006, Nancy Parlette approached me while I was attending a back-to-school night at Clarksville Middle School. Mrs. Parlette expressed safety concerns regarding students who currently walk to school on a route that has no sidewalks. We discussed the safety aspects of the situation and she asked me what I would do if I were elected to the Board of Education. I told her I would draft and propose a sidewalks requirement for students who walk to school in Howard County. I also told her that it would be necessary to coordinate with other Howard County Government agencies in order to analyze the cost of such a policy.

As additional background, about two years ago I was contacted for help by another parent at another school about a similar situation so I know there are a series of loopholes in *Policy 5111, Pupil Transportation*, that allows the central office to force students (including elementary school students) to walk to school pretty much regardless of the risks involved. That earlier experience resulted in the parents having to drive their young child to elementary school every morning because the central office failed to provide any help in getting sidewalks constructed on the route to school. Based on that experience, I know that financial considerations are given high priority by central office staff so, to be effective in protecting student safety, the Board of Education must provide clear and unambiguous direction via its policies.

The current loopholes in the *Pupil Transportation Policy* read as follows:

Policy No. 5111 — Section I. Policy Statement:

... The Board of Education's responsibility for students walking to and from school shall begin when the student enters upon, and end when the student exits from, school property.

Policy No. 5111 — Section III. Definitions:

S. Suitable Pathways and Walking Routes - Road shoulder, pathway, right-of-way, sidewalk or other surface which pupils can walk without being required to step on the portion of the road used by vehicles except:

1. Residential streets in a community with little or no transient traffic.
2. Roads/streets with speed limits of 30 miles per hour or less.

The current standard that determines whether transportation will be provided is:

Policy No. 5111 — Section IV. Standards:

D. When considering the need for and/or implementing school bus service, the staff shall consider:

1. Reasonable levels of safety.
2. Program efficiency.
3. Economy of operations.
4. Equity of service.
5. IEP or 504 plan requirements.

Providing a reasonable level of safety shall be the major staff consideration.

I approach all safety issues with the same initial question: What is the acceptable risk? I do not see safety as the elimination of all risk and, indeed, I cannot conceive of a situation where ALL risk could possibly be eliminated. On the other hand, once an analysis of risk is made, the decision maker (whether it be a parent, a principal, a Board of Education member, or the Maryland General Assembly) can make a judgment as to whether the level of risk is acceptable.

I, personally, believe any life threatening risk to our children should receive the highest attention. I don't hesitate to say that I will always place the safety of children way above standardized test scores. Accordingly, if elected to the Board of Education, I would propose *Policy No. 5111*, Sections I., III. S., & IV. D. be amended to read:

*Policy No. 5111 Pupil Transportation*

(PROPOSED) Section I. Policy Statement:

... The Board of Education's responsibility for students walking to and from school shall begin when the student enters upon a suitable walkway and shall continue so long as the student remains upon that walkway or on school property. Conversely, its responsibility shall end when the student exits the suitable walkway at the end of the school day.

(PROPOSED) Section III. Definitions:

S. Suitable Walking Routes - Where pupils have a pathway, right-of-way, sidewalk or other surface upon which they can walk without being required to step on the portion of the road used by vehicles.

(PROPOSED) Section IV. Standards:

D. When considering the need for and/or implementing school bus service, the staff shall consider:

1. Acceptable risk.
2. Program efficiency.
3. Economy of operations.
4. Equity of service.
5. IEP or 504 plan requirements.

No plan that would place any pupil in a position of unacceptable risk shall be implemented.

The Howard County Board of Education is responsible for providing safe transportation to school or, in the alternative, insuring there is a safe walking route for pupils that walk. In particular, the Board must make sure that, while it is always necessary to be frugal with taxpayer dollars, budgets must not be balanced by placing our children in a position of unacceptable risk.

**Safety First, Safety Last, Safety Always.**

Authority: Tamara Dyer, Treasurer for Allen Dyer, Candidate