

Dear Mr. President:

In accordance with Article II, Section 17 of the Maryland Constitution, I have today vetoed Senate Bill 124 – Education – Public Schools – Firearms Safety and Accident Prevention and Education Program.

As introduced, Senate Bill 124 represented a rational approach to the very sensitive issue of teaching our children about gun safety. The legislation, appropriately named for John Joseph Price, would have required each public school to have a mandatory gun safety education program as part of its health education instruction. The program could have been tailored to meet the unique needs of each school system and could have been based on multiple existing programs. The State Board of Education would have been responsible for approving the program.

Earlier this year, I indicated my support for the creation of a responsible gun safety education program as a component of a school's health education curriculum. I have long been concerned about the tragic impact that gun violence and accidental shootings have on our communities and, most importantly, our children. In the 2000 Session, I sponsored, and the General Assembly passed, child safety legislation that has placed Maryland in the forefront of the national effort to reduce gun violence, especially among our youth. The debate in the 2000 Session highlighted the need to protect children from the inherent danger associated with firearms. Part of that need can be met through proper education.

It is with some regret that I must veto Senate Bill 124 based on changes made in the legislative process. I especially regret that this veto may compound the disappointment of advocates who have invested a tremendous amount of personal time in this effort and who have experienced personal tragedy related to firearms. Their efforts to enact a responsible bill resulted in a bill that may do some good; but I believe that there are provisions in the bill that run counter to the goal of gun safety education.

Particularly disturbing to me is the provision in the final version of the bill that permits a county board to implement a program for students in grades 7 through 12 that involves "the display or handling of ammunition and an actual handgun, rifle, shotgun, or other firearm at an established sport shooting range." I have reservations about explicitly sanctioning, and arguably encouraging, the sending of bus loads of 13 year-old boys and girls to a shooting range to handle real guns and ammunition. For many young impressionable children, handling weapons in this setting may lead to a heightened interest and contribute to the glorification of guns in our society. I believe that other provisions of the bill that prohibit the display and handling of ammunition or firearms on school premises embody the spirit of the original version of Senate Bill 124 and represent a safer and more appropriate approach to teaching students about gun safety.

In addition, I prefer the original provisions of the bill, which required the teaching of gun safety within the health education program to the final version of the bill, which allows a county board to implement its gun safety program in conjunction with "a community or civic organization," such as the National Rifle Association. Once a policy is established to require the teaching of gun safety, or any other mandated curriculum, it should be the responsibility of the teachers to conduct the instruction.