

Testimony before the House Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education

Co-Chairmen Cupp and Patterson and members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education, I thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today on the transportation component of the “Fair School Funding Plan for Ohio”. My name is Kevin Lillie, and I am the Treasurer/CFO for the Geneva Area City School District in Ashtabula County. It has been my privilege to serve as a transportation subgroup co-chair along with Dalton Summers, the Superintendent of the River View Local School District in Coshocton County. We have also utilized the services of Pete Japikse, who has worked many years in the pupil transportation field for public school districts, the Ohio Department of Education, and currently as a consultant with the Ohio School Boards Association.

Over the past 15 months, the transportation subgroup has reviewed the current transportation funding formula, the level of transportation services and funding offered in other states, stakeholder input, and the challenges faced by Ohio’s public schools, both urban and rural. Ohio public schools are required to provide transportation for students attending nonpublic and community schools located both within the district and outside the district that are within 30 minutes of their assigned public school. Public schools are obligated to provide transportation service to these schools on any day they are open, regardless of the public school’s calendar, and are also required to meet their attendance times regardless of conflicts with the public schools attendance times. Because of the limited control public schools have over the times, days, and riders on these buses, the cost is much higher than transporting public school students. As costs have continued to rise and state funding has been reduced, some public schools are finding the need to cancel transportation service for some of their own public school students in order to continue providing the mandated transportation for school choice programs.

State funding for transportation, once at the higher of 60% or state share for many years, decreased to 50% in FY 2016, 37.5% in FY 2018, and now 25% for FY 2019. Without sufficient local funding to meet these new transferred costs, districts have been forced to cancel services that communities depend upon or reallocate funding that was previously dedicated to educational services. For many years until FY 2009, the state provided a bus purchase subsidy to assist districts with the replacement of school buses. Since this assistance ended, the rate of bus purchase in Ohio has dropped significantly, and as a result, the buses used on school routes have increased in age and become more costly to operate. Still the yellow school bus is the safest, most cost effective and efficient way to get students to and from school. With this in mind, the transportation subgroup has prepared the following recommendations necessary for the continued safe transportation of students to and from their educational services in Ohio.

- 1) Resolve transportation service requirements for asynchronous calendars and bell time conflicts by eliminating the requirement to provide transportation on days the public

school is closed unless funding is provided by the other school or the state and establish a drop-off window of up to 30 minutes before school and 30 minutes after school.

- 2) Limit the transportation obligation of public schools to serve only nonpublic, community and STEM schools located within the public school district boundaries, unless funding is provided from another source.
- 3) Create a grant program that promotes collaboration among school districts to develop efficiencies in transportation that reduce operating costs.
- 4) Grant local boards the authority to operate their buses for trips other than educational purposes provided the costs for these trips are paid by the local community group or government entity requesting the service.
- 5) Modify the transportation funding formula for bus riders to fund all students transported, reward efficiency, report the greater of the morning or afternoon ridership, include a funding adjustment for districts transporting a higher percentage of nontraditional students, fund transportation at the greater of 60% or the district's calculated state share paid through a single funding stream, and require ODE to continue funding all other types of transportation such as payment in lieu of.
- 6) Move transportation funding outside the funding formula and exempt from any caps or guarantees.
- 7) Once restored to 60%, eliminate the supplemental funding calculations.
- 8) Increase the set-aside for special education transportation, which has not been increased since 2009. Special education transportation is the most expensive form of transportation with costs per student exceeding \$5,000.
- 9) Re-establish a school bus purchase assistance program to award a \$50,000 subsidy per approved bus to be considered restricted funds only to be used for bus purchase.

The transportation subgroup has carefully considered the many services currently offered for Ohio's families and their students and reviewed an exhaustive set of aspects of pupil transportation. We have included consideration of the needs of all district types (rural, urban, and suburban). The subgroup firmly believes that continuance of the many mandated services is dependent on adequate funding being provided to districts. Many of our recommendations are targeted to decrease operating costs and reducing the total cost of transportation. We hope that you will consider these recommendations in their entirety.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide this testimony, and I will be happy to address any questions.

Respectfully,
Kevin Lillie, Treasurer/CFO
Geneva Area City Schools