

## **March 19, 2015 Testimony to the Primary and Secondary Education Subcommittee of the House Finance and Appropriations Committee**

Good morning Chairman Cupp, ranking Member Phillips, and Committee members.

My name is Dan Leffingwell and I am the Superintendent of Noble Local Schools (Noble County). I am in my second year as Superintendent, my 27<sup>th</sup> as an educator. Prior to this position I served 15 years as a High School Principal. I am here today to ask you to consider funding transportation costs outside the formula, and fully funding new bus purchases outside the formula as well.

I am honored for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the Noble Local School District, and the Coalition of Rural and Appalachian Schools (CORAS). Many Superintendents who represent CORAS are here today in attendance as well. It is my intent to be brief and concise, while trying to communicate a “story of difficult choices” that Districts often have to make, and attempt to provide some options for improving the climate in which such choices are made, specifically through the transportation portion of the funding formula.

Noble Local is unique, but not unlike numerous other districts in that transportation funding does not accurately reflect the actual costs. Depending upon the number of miles traveled, the number of riders, and the number of buses in your fleet, the actual costs often exceed the funded amount which further burdens the general fund, and reduces funds that could enhance educational opportunities for our students. Deciding to purchase a bus, or choosing to add, or continue a quality educational program is often a decision that has to be made. The cost to purchase a bus is equal to or greater than the cost of employing a teacher.

Noble Local Schools ranks number one out of 600 plus Districts in “low density ridership”, as we travel across nearly 230 square miles and pick up only 700 students. Even though we travel many miles, we do not have a single stop light in our district. We are truly a rural and remote area. Due to the nature, and geographical size of our District, we have to “single route” buses to avoid students being on the bus no more than an hour and a half each trip. Because of this, we maintain a fleet of 19 buses, and still have students that spend at least 3 hours on a bus each day. Transportation accounts for nearly 10% of our total budget!

Our District last received “new money” from our voters in 1992 and we do not have a fund to support permanent improvements to support necessary facility upgrades required for aging facilities. According to the Ohio County Profiles Report from the Department of Development, Noble County is designated as a “distressed” county, and ranks among the lowest 10% of counties in the Country. Nearly 1 in 5 of our residents has an annual income of less than \$20,000.

Despite being a depressed county, our district is expected to receive a nearly 1% reduction in State aid according to the Governor’s most recent proposal. Our District’s property valuations have increased,

and our resident's CAUV tax has skyrocketed! On paper we appear "less needy", but there could not be a worse time to approach our voters and ask for additional millage. In fact our voters rejected a bond issue in 2005 that would have been funded 88% through State aid and another bond effort in 2010 failed when State aid was reduced to 82%. Today, that same project would only receive 44% in State aid.

Noble Local, like many other districts, has learned to be creative with our budget in an attempt to maximize each dollar to increase opportunities for students. In fact, we were able to purchase two buses in 2014, due to our ability to successfully manage our health care plan. We chose to use "premium holidays" to fund the purchase. This year we are fortunate to be eligible for another "premium holiday", and will use that money to put new roofs on our high school. We are thankful for healthy employees! Because of this, we are able to purchase buses, and complete capital projects! What happens if this opportunity is not available to us in the future?

I recognize that you cannot control every aspect of funding and budgeting within our District, or any district for that matter. You can, however, make a difference by considering changes to transportation funding for the future.

In our district, we attempt to budget for one new bus purchase per year at a cost of approximately \$90,000. At that rate we will upgrade our fleet every 19 years! Having 19 year old buses on the road, many of which have high mileage and even higher maintenance costs are not helpful to a District's budget.

In the future I would suggest, recommend, and strongly encourage you to fully fund transportation from outside the formula, and fully fund the purchase of new buses. I do not believe that transportation funding should be subject to the cap or the guarantee. This would provide consistency across the State for all districts, and varying transportation costs would not eliminate educational opportunities for students.

Moving transportation funding outside the formula would improve the "climate", or circumstances in which we make choices. Rather than simply choosing to get students to and from school vs deciding whether or not we can afford to keep an Art teacher in grades K-8, or possibly add an AP course, of which we have none at this time, we might possibly be able to do both! Providing funds to purchase new school buses would allow us to possibly enhance educational opportunities, rather than sacrificing necessary programs to support transportation. Our students, all students, deserve to have more than just a "ride to school".

At the District level we will continue our attempt to maximize resources to the fullest extent in regard to transportation, and all other areas, as evidenced by the 22 rural Districts, and supported by several ESC's in eastern and southeastern Ohio, currently using Straight A funds to examine transportation efficiencies in our region. We will always work to maximize operational budgets to enhance opportunities for our students. Your support is vital to this process.

On behalf of Noble Local Schools, and CORAS, I appreciate you taking time to listen to our concerns. Thank you!! (If it would be suitable to the Committee I would like to take any questions after testimony related to transportation has concluded and we could all respond accordingly.)

Dan Leffingwell

Superintendent

Noble Local Schools