

TESTIMONY TO THE PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION SUBCOMMITTEE
OF THE
HOUSE FINANCE AND APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
Richard A. Hall

March 19, 2015

Good Morning Chairman Cupp, ranking member Phillips and the remaining members of the committee. I am Richard Hall, Superintendent of the East Guernsey Local School District. I want to thank each of you for the opportunity to speak to you this morning. When I became Superintendent over seven years ago, the opportunity did not exist for a rural Superintendent to address legislators like we are doing today so you have my appreciation for that. As a point of reference, I have been in my district for 27 years and a product of the East Guernsey Local School District.

East Guernsey Schools is a rural district consisting of 239 square miles located in eastern Guernsey County in the heart of the Buckeye Trail. For those of you that might be familiar with the area, Salt Fork State Park is in a part of the district and is in our back yard so to speak. While I could discuss with you the fact that five (5) out of seven (7) years that I have been Superintendent, we have made significant cuts to staff and programs due to continued deficit spending in the district or I could talk about the fact that Buckeye Trail High School has been Nationally recognized as a Blue Ribbon School by the United States Department of Education and our other buildings have been designated a School Of Promise by the Ohio Department of Education more than once. While all of those things are important and noteworthy, that is not my purpose here this morning. What I do want to discuss with you is how East Guernsey like many other rural districts is a victim of geography. Like other districts it is always our goal to balance transportation efficiency with the amount of time a youngster rides a bus to and from school each day. For example, we have students who ride the bus an hour and 40 minutes to school in the morning with a repeat of the same scenario at the end of each school day. If I may offer suggestions, here is what we believe that you can do to have a positive impact in addressing the school transportation issue.

- School bus purchases should be restored in the state budget outside of the existing formula.
- Transportation needs to be outside of the existing formula, and not subject to the cap or guarantee.
- Transportation should be funded by a new formula that represents the elements we believe best serves the needs of our districts.

I have included near the end of my written testimony a more detailed explanation of how a revised or new funding formula could work to alleviate some of the financial burden placed on districts related to school transportation.

Regardless of the programs and innovative opportunities that are available for students, each day starts and ends with getting students to and from school. We encompass 239 square miles with sixteen (16) bus routes, and as a result, is a very expensive endeavor for our district and other districts like us, resulting in transportation costs being over 1.1 million dollars to East Guernsey in FY14, which was 11% of the operational budget. In being one of the larger districts in the state geographically, it is very difficult for us to sustain an updated bus fleet. Nearly 60% of our

fleet is 10 years or older and the average mileage of the bus fleet is in excess of 151,000 miles. It should also be noted that our bus fleet travels approximately 1,642 miles per day to pick up a ridership of 640 students.

Specifically to East Guernsey Schools the district has experienced four consecutive failed levy attempts in recent years. The last operational levy in the district was passed in 1996 and was not renewed in 2001. In an attempt to update a dilapidated bus fleet, the district was forced to move all 3.3 of their inside millage to the Permanent Improvement fund and dedicate those dollars to purchasing new buses. As they say, desperate times call for desperate measures and that is the case here. In reality, by moving inside millage, this resulted in an un-voted tax increase to the tax payers of the East Guernsey Local School District.

The district is always looking for ways to reduce our astonishing transportation costs. We realize the importance of having an efficient transportation operation and have been and will continue to take steps to become more efficient. One cost controlling factor that has been in existence for many years is that we outsource our transportation maintenance locally at a huge cost saving to the district. To verify that we are being as efficient as possible, we asked Peterman Bus Company to submit a proposal to take over the management of the bus fleet. After they completed an analysis of the district, they declined to even submit a proposal indicating that there was no feasible way for them to offer a cost saving to the district because of our geography.

As a district we have also implemented a Transportation Committee to look at ways the district can continually become more efficient. The committee consists of bus drivers, Transportation Supervisor, a Board of Education Member and myself as Superintendent. We feel that by involving bus drivers in the process, ideas can be implemented to improve routing that has and will lead to greater efficiency for the transportation operation of the district.

The district is currently undergoing a yearlong transportation study under the expertise and watchful eye of Pete Japiske of the Ohio School Boards Association and former Ohio Department of Education employee. I am sure many of you are familiar with his name and have an awareness of his knowledge related to school transportation. We will be implementing many if not all of his recommendations to improve our transportation efficiency in the district once Mr. Japiske's report is complete.

The district is also part of the Straight A Transportation Grant. This grant provided the necessary resources for 22 districts to install GPS units and RFID card readers on their bus fleet. The purpose of this is to find real time undisputable data that can be used to improve routing efficiency and reduce overall operational costs due to consistent monitoring of the transportation operation from a bird's eye view, so to speak. As a few examples, the GPS units allow districts to look at mileage, fuel consumption and idle times of the fleet. For the sake of time, I will not go into any more detail about this but I think you get the picture of what we and many other districts are doing to look at how to become more efficient in transportation operations. I hope that up to this point I have provided you with a clear picture of what rural districts wrestle with daily related to the costs associated with transportation.

Despite all of these efforts that our district has taken, we still have kids on the bus for 100 minutes each way every day and our transportation costs still use up 11% of the operational budget. To be candid, any of the suggestions that I and asked you to consider earlier in my

testimony will require additional funding. Simply, moving money from one hand to the other is not the answer. It will take additional dollars to adequately fund transportation costs.

With that being said, we ask that you consider revising the existing formula or accept a new funding formula proposal from a committee knowledgeable about school transportation. It is vital that the formula is fully funded so that there is no proration that would prohibit the appropriation from being high enough to cover transportation costs. For instance, the formula should:

- Provide funding for EVERY child who rides a bus-not just those students required by state law to be transported.
- Reward schools for efficiency (schools that maximize the number of students utilizing each school bus throughout the day).
- Incentivize (rather than mandate) that students within one to two miles of their school be transported (the state only requires schools to transport K-5 students who live more than two miles from school).
- Incentivize school districts to provide transportation for high school students, even though the state does not require this practice.
- Contain provisions to compensate districts for transportation of students to schools which are not part of the district (i.e., private schools and community schools).
- Include an adjustment to better support rural districts with low density and low wealth and low density.

While I am expressing my point of view from a rural district perspective, what we are asking you to consider can positively impact nearly every district in the State. For me the bottom line is this: Regardless of the programs and opportunities for students that we have in place it all starts with having the adequate resources to get students to and from school in a timely and safe manner each day. Since we cannot dictate where families live, we have no choice but to pick them up and take them to and from school regardless of the cost. I hope that you will think about and give consideration to the ideas that we have brought before you here this morning.

On behalf of the East Guernsey Local School District and the other districts that I have been asked to represent, in which many of those folks are here with us today, I sincerely thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this morning.

Respectfully submitted by:

Richard A. Hall
Superintendent
East Guernsey Local School District

