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In Regards to Inhumane School Bus Transportation

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Interested party House Bill 49

Chairman Cupp, ranking Member Miller, and members of the Finance Subcommittee. My name is Sam Lause, and I appreciate having the opportunity to speak here today, yet I'm also saddened at the same time to talk about the inadequate and inhumane school bus transportation that is offered to special needs children. I hope that through my testimony, ALL kids of special needs will be treated in a humane manner. I want to see these kids put on a better standard than kids who are not of special needs. Is this showing favoritism to them? No, it's not. A nation is defined by how we treat the less fortunate and may we all keep in mind it is more blessed to give than to receive.

I grew up in a family of six kids. One of them, my brother, is mentally challenged, and now, years later, I have a child that is "special needs". Or the way I like to think of it, she's the special one I need. Delyla has Down syndrome and is 8 years old. She's my sweetie wheatie, cuttie wootie, my comfie and cozy and cozy and comfie. Delyla has the biggest heart of anyone I know. At 2 months old, she went into congestive heart failure. They found out she had two holes in her heart and a faulty valve. At 3 years old, she always threw up; due to the heart medicine she was taking. At 4 years old, she had open heart surgery. At five years old, she had caps put on all her molars. And to this day, she has stomach/bowel issues, on and off. These are common physical conditions of children with Downs, and they also have many emotional needs. I mentioned my brother because when he was in school about 30 years ago, his bus ride took a shorter amount of time than that offered to my daughter, even though it was more of a distance to travel. This was 30 years ago. We are going backwards in providing for needs for children that are mentally challenged,

Throughout Delyla's education, she has spent countless hours on school bus routes. The latest bus route offered was for 1 hour and 45 minutes, one way, to school. She would also have to switch buses two times- all for what should be a 14 mile ride from our house. We live 14 miles from the school Delyla attended. Also, they wanted Delyla put into a harness that zipped up tight and strapped her into her seat. Delyla has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) at Van Buren School in Hancock County although we live in the McComb school district. After Delyla completed preschool at Blanchard Valley in Findlay we had an IEP meeting with Educational Service Center (ESC) for Delyla's next school placement. After reviewing several schools throughout Hancock County, we all agreed it would be in Delyla's best interest to attend Van Buren. McComb is still responsible for Delyla's transportation. The best McComb said they could afford to do was a 1 hour and 45 minute ride, one way. There are other kids in Delyla's class that also have an extensive amount of time on the bus. There is a child that comes from Riverdale and is on the bus for 2 hours, one way. After trying to modify Delyla's busing, I ended up having no choice but to homeschool her, as I could not justify subjecting her to 3.5 hours on a bus five days a week

on top of a full school day. This is unhealthy, inhumane and cruel to do to any child- let alone one who is special needs. For the life of me, I cannot figure out the logic in the bussing program.

Homeschooling Delyla or any child that is special needs is not the easiest task. Delyla knows some words and can now write every letter in the alphabet but still needs help with K, S, Z, and Q. She also writes her name and is good at writing numbers. While teaching Delyla, she gets distracted easily. From the research I've done, they say it helps if you have a separate area and desk so they know that when they're in this area, it is time to do school work.

I contacted multiple people in attempting to resolve this issue.

1. I spoke with bus driver, Karen Harden, and she said that she might get to my house at 6:20 am but most likely it would be 6:15 am due to the fact that she has to pick up kids in Hoytville at 6:00 am. She then would come to my house. Delyla starts school at 8:00 am at Van Buren. Karen agreed it was a long route.

2. I spoke to Meri Skilliter, superintendent of McComb School. I asked her to reimburse me for transporting Delyla, and she said she does not have to as long as she offers me transportation in lieu of that.

3. I contacted Ohio for Exceptional Children and spoke to a Bernadette Laughlin. She agreed that the bus route was too long for Delyla or any child, and agreed to help. She contacted both McComb and Van Buren and found that McComb is responsible to transport Delyla. After 3 months, I finally got an IEP meeting. The people present at this meeting were McComb's elementary principal Matt Davis, transportation director Luke Ewing, Delyla's teacher- Andrea Miller, and also Andrea's boss, Delyla's mom- Angie Zent and I. We talked and tried to come up with a solution, but McComb did not offer a reasonable solution. Matt Davis said that the school board would not listen to me until I at least tried putting Delyla on the bus. I told Matt I feel that this was inhumane and cruel to do, and I would not try it even once. I requested to be reimbursed for mileage to transport Delyla, but they refused.

4. I contacted State Representative Sprague. He agreed to meet with me and I explained to him everything we've gone through. I told Mr. Sprague how Bernadette Laughlin did not agree with the time Delyla would have to be on the bus, and Mr. Sprague agreed that the school bus transportation time was far too long. I suggested a law that states how long a child could be on the bus. Although Mr. Sprague did not think another law was necessary, he agreed that some common sense was needed. I agreed, but unfortunately I'm not finding any in the school districts. Mr. Sprague promised to make some phone calls, but unfortunately, all these avenues lead to a dead end.

Here are a few options that State Representative, Robert Sprague, and I tried.

1. Representative Sprague contacted the Superintendent of Educational Service Center Larry Busdecker. Larry heard everything that was done, but there was nothing more he could do.

2. Contacted State Support team and spoke with Lynn McMahan. She stated that she knew Bernadette Laughlin and was positive Bernadette exhausted every avenue. She stated that McComb's practice on this may not be sufficient but it is still within the laws.

3. I also contacted the Ohio Coalition which said if someone is on the bus longer than Delyla, there is nothing they can do. I then replied, "So if a child gets kicked on the bus then it's ok as long as the other child gets kicked". She laughed at my analogy and said, "Yes, sadly this is true."

During these several months trying to get this issue resolved, I've spoken to other people also having trouble with McComb's bussing. One parent told me how his son had his underwear taken off on the bus. After that, his son was terrified to get on the bus. The parents asked for the video of that day on the bus, but the school denied them to see it. These parents started home schooling. Another instance was where a girl kept getting picked on. She sought counseling from McComb's counselor, but the abuse continued. One day, she was getting off the bus after getting picked on again and she stated that she was going to shoot the windows out of the bus. McComb School suspended her, and these parents also started home schooling. I spoke to a township worker in my area when he was repairing the road. He stated how McComb's school bus drivers aren't even allowed to check their own oil and that they call Casey's mechanic shop, another town east of McComb, to check the busses out if there is any issue. He said in one season of servicing the busses at McComb, they were able to buy a brand new mechanics truck. This gentleman also home schools his child. After speaking to these parents, perhaps it is a blessing in disguise to not put Delyla on the bus. I was listening to a talk radio program and I heard how Wood County is lowering property taxes. They were able to do this by taking money from funds for transporting people with disability. I told that to a neighboring farmer/ truck driver, and he said, "Well, that's good they have to do something." I couldn't believe he said that. I replied, "Yeah but they can't be taking it from people who are less fortunate!" How much money do people need that we are now stealing from people with disabilities?

Here are some options to remedy this issue.

1- Make a law that states children cannot be on the bus for more than one hour, and school children with special needs should be at least 15 minutes shorter than regular school children. Also, children with special needs should not be held to the same standard when it comes to absenteeism or tardiness.

2- Reimburse parents for their time and mileage for transporting their children when the school district cannot comply with a transportation time limit or fulfill the requirements of the special needs child. Reimbursement can be made for, and not limited to, financial requirements of school material or to pay tutors. I also feel extracurricular activities are important as well. When Delyla attended Van Buren, they would go to the horse barn for the children to ride horses. Extracurricular activities, such as this for the children, should also be reimbursed.

3- Make a "standard" for individualized education programs for kids with special needs. I propose we use Van Buren's Individualized Education Program as a minimum "standard" or starting point.

3a- Special needs children do need and will have more teachers per population. In order to teach these children of special needs, many times, the teacher needs to be one-on-one with the child, and I feel one teacher for every three children of special needs would be sufficient.

4- For parents that homeschool due to schools not meeting the "standard", they will not be required to pay school tax of any kind. For instance, presently, I have to pay for all of Delyla's educational supplies and taxes on them, I have to pay approximately \$900.00 in school tax due to the county I worked in and 583.00 in school taxes which is payable threw property tax. This is more than being double taxed.

5- Make kids with special needs fully funded on a federal level.

6- Take away farm subsidies that are allocated to farmers and let that subsidy money be transferred to funds for children and adults of special needs. Paul Herringshaw is a farmer in Wood County. He stated that farmers do not need farm subsidies due to having bumper crops in the past years. He feels that they shouldn't be getting subsidies and is afraid a time will come when they need subsidy but there will not be any. I believe what Paul says about this.

7- Open a fully-funded tutor organization for kids with special needs. Doing this would allow special needs students' access to tutors when they are needed.

8- Build more schools and add on to existing schools for special need children.

9- Let's try and get to the root of the problem by doing research into what could be causing this increase in autism. The research would have to be done by workers and or a company that could not profit from the outcome of the findings.

I feel a lot of the transportation issue is because of the consolidation of schools. Now, due to this, the consolidation has left schools having to transport kids even longer and/or put on more busses. Unfortunately, schools opt out of putting more school buses on due to the cost. Also, kids of special needs should have the option to ride a bus with other kids of their nature, or there would have to be an assistant or multiple assistants on the bus that are trained to handle the needs of special needs children.

In 2014 the center for disease control reported an alarming increase in autism. They stated 10 years ago autism's estimated prevalence was 1 in 166. Today its 1 in 68- an increase of more than 100%. Further research from Autism Speaks states 1-45 children is a more accurate representation of autism prevalence in the United States. The CDC has acknowledged that its estimates has significant limitations. This research right here should have us stop and think. What are we going to do? I must say one thing. If we do not do anything now, it will be too late to do anything later. This is why I say we should start building more schools and offer more funding for kids with autism.

Matthew 18:6 says- " But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea." I feel after seeing all that is going on through transportation, schools different practices for IEP's, unjustified handling of funds for the disabled, a lack of teachers and bus assistance, I pray that we will see our role in this and work to change this situation.

This now concludes my testimony, and again, thank you for your time. I now ask if there are any questions or thoughts. Please feel free to ask.