Testimony to the Senate Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education

Columbus, Ohio May 24, 2017

Senator Hite, Senator Sykes and members of the Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education, thank you for the opportunity to present information for the Committee’s consideration.

The issue that we would like to focus on today is school bus transportation. The proposed budget will cut state funds for local districts to maintain school bus service. In Southeastern Ohio and other rural areas of Ohio this is a serious problem. Due to the low density of population, school buses must travel many miles to pick up only a few children. Combining routes to reduce buses is not feasible as some students now ride over an hour one way. Furthermore, the roads being travelled by aging buses are not smooth, city streets but hilly, often gravel roads that cause buses to wear out more quickly.

In a few short weeks we have been able to collect some 400 plus signatures of support representing virtually every school district in our county. In addition, we have solicited letters of support to Chairman Hite from representatives of the Coalition of Rural and Appalachian Schools (CORAS). We are grateful for their support.

Many people with whom we spoke were surprised to learn that their representatives were even considering cutting funds for schools buses. Perhaps the committee would like to know, that in one of our local districts in Washington County the school buses travel a distance equal to driving to New Mexico each day. This particular district spent nine percent of its total budget on transportation in 2016. A neighboring district in Monroe county spends eleven percent of their budget on transportation. This fact is not unique among other rural districts throughout Ohio and illustrates the challenge of rural school districts in general.

The uncomfortable truth is that transportation is just one of the added costs of education for rural districts who serve a large number of poor families. Does the Ohio Senate

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really want to tell poor children that they don’t need to attend school, that an online school such as ECOT will serve their needs, or that parents must drive to a school 20 miles away?

The simple truth about cuts to transportation funding is that in Southeastern Ohio, the buses will still run. We have no other choice! School boards will be forced to cut course offerings for high school students and allow larger classes for elementary students. The extras like music, physical education and art will be provided infrequently and once again the children who live in poverty will have fewer opportunities.

We are fully aware that revenues are down while balancing the state budget remains the law. Rural districts are not asking for an increase in funding but to simply keep what we have. The rural districts with declining enrollment are already being hit by decreased funding from the Education Foundation money and the TPP dollars as well. The additional cuts to transportation which were not anticipated further promote the notion that traditional public school districts are under siege from State government.

Education Works does not intend to stop our advocacy efforts whatever the final budget outcome may be. Education is not something that is negotiable, not in a democracy where an educated electorate is critical. Nor can the preservation of public education be left only to our elected officials. The local community has a vested interest in the maintenance of adequate and equitable funding for schools statewide. Every cut to public education increases the likelihood that poor children will remain poor and that education as the great equalizer of opportunity will be lost for generations of Ohio children.

The petitions we gathered are attached to this testimony. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Teresa Porter for Education Works Southeast Ohio

May 24, 2017