



September 16, 2020

Ohio Senate Education Committee
Proponent Testimony for S.B. 350

Chair Lehner, Vice-Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony for S.B. 350. My name is James Ragland, and I serve as the Director of Provider Outreach for School Choice Ohio. School Choice Ohio is a nonprofit organization that educates parents statewide on the availability of educational options in Ohio and advocates for quality educational opportunities for every child.

In my position, I work with more than 1,000 schools and special needs therapy providers, many of whom have students and their families affected negatively by school transportation issues. Although state law requires that districts transport eligible chartered nonpublic and community school students to and from school, in recent years, these students and schools face growing challenges that negatively impact students, families, and school operations.

School Choice Ohio supports this bill's attempt to provide temporary relief from the use of public transit for transportation but doesn't address the growing use of payment in-lieu to deny students transportation. Several other transportation issues require attention, but this bill addresses an immediate hazard.

In a July 8, 2020 letter to district superintendents, State Superintendent DeMaria reminded districts that:

*"Traditional public schools are legally responsible for the transportation of not only their own students, but eligible students who reside in the district and who attend community schools and chartered nonpublic schools. **Nothing in state law allows a school district to prioritize the needs of its own students over the needs of community school or chartered nonpublic school students.**"*

Unfortunately, data suggests that districts have indeed prioritized one group of students over another. As you can see from the chart below, community and chartered nonpublic school students, all eligible for transportation under state law, account for approximately 97% of students denied transportation and instead offered payment 'in-lieu' of transportation. (Type IV indicates payment in lieu)

	Total Students Reported	District Students Type IV	Community /Nonpublic School Students Type IV	Total Students Type IV
FY 2016	834,638	762	16,080	16,842
FY 2019	822,580	574	17,816	18,390

These statistics become all the more significant when you consider that during the 2018-19 school year (FY2019), district enrollment was more than six times the enrollment of than that of site-based community and chartered nonpublic schools combined (1,579,460 v. 250,607 students).

Yes, these families choose to enroll their children in non-district schools, but these families contribute to local tax revenues as well as income and sales taxes that provide the lion's share of funds that make up the state's general revenue fund.

There are other stories to share that strongly suggest that school transportation could benefit from increased oversight.

- Young students dropped off outside their nonpublic school more than an hour before school starts and more than 30 minutes before the building is even open, and adult supervision is available.
- Parents requesting transportation months before the beginning of the school year receive no response, until being notified more than a month into the school year that transportation is denied.
- Districts refusing to provide families or schools with a copy of the required analysis that precedes any declaration of impracticality.

These are a few of the issues experienced by families just this year.

We understand the challenges faced by districts and schools due to COVID and the potential impact on school transportation. Some of these issues we've mentioned will take time to address; others need attention now. As we work together on more meaningful and lasting reforms that ensure the safety of all Ohio children, School Choice Ohio supports providing additional school transportation resources for the 2020-21 school year. One such option may be using a portion of the CARES Act funding. Under federal law, the Department of Education can retain up to 10% of the state's allocation. We respectfully suggest investigating using the state-level CARES Act funds to assist with transportation costs during the 2020-21 school year.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to address this complex issue. I would be happy to respond to any questions you may have.