



Testimony Opposing the Transfer Restriction and Operator Penalties in House Bill 96

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**Chair Senator Jerry Cirino, Vice Chair Senator Brian M. Chavez,
Ranking Member Senator Paula Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Ohio Senate Finance Committee:**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a testimony today. I am here to express strong opposition to several provisions in House Bill 96 — particularly the restriction on student transfers at the central transfer hub and the imposition of vague and escalating criminal penalties on public transportation bus operators providing services to the eight most populous counties in this state.

As a transit executive with over three decades of experience, I can speak to the critical role public transportation plays in ensuring access to education, employment, healthcare, and opportunity. The central transfer hub is an essential infrastructure that supports the freedom of movement for thousands of riders each day — including students from low-income and underserved communities. Prohibiting transfers at this location would create unnecessary barriers to education and limit mobility at a time when we should be working to expand access, not restrict it.

Even more concerning is the legal risk this bill introduces — both to the agencies and to the dedicated professionals who operate these systems.

Federal Compliance and Funding Risk

The language in House Bill 96 may put Ohio's transit systems in direct violation of the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) regulations. Specifically, the FTA prohibits transit agencies from providing direct or exclusive transportation to and from schools. Forcing systems to reroute or segregate student riders could be interpreted as an attempt to create a school-specific service, violating federal policy.

This would be a red flag during the FTA's required triennial review process, placing agencies at risk of noncompliance and, consequently, loss of critical federal funding. Federal funds represent a substantial share of operating and capital budgets, supporting vehicle maintenance, safety enhancements, accessibility, and essential service to the public. Jeopardizing this funding could devastate transit systems across Ohio — hurting not only students, but all riders who depend on transit as a daily necessity.

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Criminalizing Transit Operators

Equally troubling is the inclusion of vague and escalating criminal penalties for transit operators who, in the course of doing their job, may be accused of violating this bill's provisions. These frontline employees are already tasked with managing complex routes, maintaining safety, and serving a diverse public under high-pressure conditions.

Imposing criminal liability on these workers — for actions as routine as allowing a student to board or transfer — is deeply unjust and wholly unwarranted. This could have a chilling effect on our workforce, discouraging qualified individuals from joining or remaining in transit roles due to fear of prosecution for simply following established agency policy or doing what is in the best interest of public safety.

Transit operators are not law enforcement officers or school officials; they are public servants trained to provide transportation — not to interrogate riders, assess their ages, or determine educational status. Holding them legally liable for inadvertently violating an unclear law not only endangers their livelihoods but compromises the integrity and function of the entire transit system.

In conclusion, House Bill 96 — in its current form — undermines transit operations, threatens educational access, endangers federal funding, and exposes hardworking employees to unfair legal risk. I respectfully urge the committee to remove these harmful provisions and instead support policies that enhance access, equity, and compliance across Ohio's transit systems.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome any questions.