



Testimony Before the Ohio Senate Finance Committee
H. B. 96 – Regarding School Transportation Policy and Funding
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TOLEDO OFFICE
525 Jefferson Ave.
Suite 300
Toledo, OH 43604

PHONE
(419) 255-0814

TOLL-FREE
(800) 837-0814

FAX
(419) 259-2880

TTY
(888) 545-9497

www.ablelaw.org

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Committee, thank you for giving ABLE the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of our clients. They have insight to offer about the state's school transportation policy and funding proposals in the operating budget. Advocates for Basic Legal Equality, Inc. (ABLE) is a non-profit regional law firm that provides free legal assistance in civil matters in 32 counties throughout Western Ohio. We help individuals and groups living on low incomes pursue justice and equal access to opportunity through individual advocacy and systemic reform.

I am an attorney in ABLE's children's education practice. Our education attorneys and advocates work with individual clients and community groups to address educational needs and improve school systems. From this, ABLE has an ear to the ground on school concerns. And within Dayton and other areas ABLE serves, school transportation has been in a critical state for a long time. I primarily serve the Dayton community. This was so even before last month's tragic loss of Alfred Hale at the Downtown Dayton RTA transfer station, or "the Hub" as Daytonians call it.

During the 2024-2025 school year, ABLE has had increasing numbers of clients with school transportation concerns in multiple school districts. Community groups and organizations have been listening to teens and families to understand their needs in the Dayton region. Today, ABLE is sharing their insights hoping to generate solutions that will improve their lives.

Safe, Reliable, and Efficient Yellow Buses

Dayton area families encounter difficulties with both yellow bus and RTA bus transportation. It is easy to forget that without school transportation, some students simply can't get to school.

Many students on either type of bus do not get to school reliably, arriving late and seeing penalties, like tardies and consistently missing some classes. Parents lose work hours to take their children to school – or parents, concerned about losing valuable education time for their children, hire a car to take them to school; they may pay more than \$20 each way.

One of our high school clients sometimes spends more than three hours commuting to and from school daily. Direct round trips would take 24 minutes. Her standard bus ride is about an hour, but only if each segment runs

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flawlessly. If anything goes wrong with the schedule, she waits longer at the hub. In these cases her time on and waiting for a bus would amount to about half of the instructional time in a school day. Between commute and classes, she may have more than a nine-hour day. Worse, she may arrive to school late, costing valuable instruction time and resulting in negative attendance.

Several of our clients are also transported on yellow buses. The buses may arrive late or they may simply never arrive. Parents receive texts and emails in the morning before school starts indicating that their bus will not come that day, with staffing shortages as the reason. In one school district, a lack of bus staffing caused the closure of schools for an entire school day.

School transportation is a complex issue, but fully funding school transportation would enable more reliability among bus drivers and staff, better training for drivers, and, ideally, yellow buses for all students through a thoroughly funded and planned system. ABLE respectfully urges this body to increase funding for school transportation so parents can feel secure that their children are in good hands when sending them to school.

Creating Comprehensive Solutions for Teens

Additionally, when students get out of school, there are few safe places for teenagers to be teenagers. In Dayton and beyond, there are no free, public spaces that can support hundreds of teenagers at once. Students used to go to the library, which does not have the capacity for that many teens at once. I pass Dayton's Hub on my way to and from the office and have seen large groups of teens just hanging out on corners. I, personally, have never seen any troubling behavior by these teens. Mostly a mix of typical teenage boredom and laughter.

The proposed policy prohibiting students from using transfer stations creates yet another place where teens are not welcome. Transfer station avoidance may have youth safety in mind, but it results in pushing them out of a public space. It sends teenagers a message they are the problem and are unwelcome in Dayton and other city transit hub spaces. Teens just need safe places to be teenagers – to hang out, make friends, play video games, do homework, and dream. ABLE respectfully urges this body to remove the public-transit transfer prohibition from the budget bill, in favor of community-supported, comprehensive solutions that the proposed Transportation Working Group will generate.

Transportation Working Group Can Be Even Better with Youth and Parent Members

ABLE supports this bill's proposal to create a Transportation Working Group to recommend comprehensive solutions and annually review school transportation. With this, the General Assembly recognizes the complexity of the problem and the need for long-term plans and solutions. However, we recommend adding parent and youth participation to the list of required group members. The current proposed participants include public officials and school representatives. Including the voices of youth and parents at the table will improve the

decisions. In our experience, children and families offer wisdom for sustainable, relevant solutions for families.

In Dayton, community advocates have engaged youth about school transportation concerns. They have creative, thoughtful, and actionable ideas – such as creating multiple transfer hubs, whether at schools or other locations. Students could be with people they know and fewer people at once. Community groups have suggested building youth centers near downtown transfer stations; these would offer safe, positive environments staffed with people qualified to meet student needs.

In sum, ABLE's clients' lives and students' education are disrupted by Ohio school transportation challenges. When given the chance, youth and families communicate what they want. In Dayton, students want safe and supportive places to be themselves after school. And families want yellow buses that take children home safely, reliably, and efficiently. This body has the power to improve both things by

- supporting spaces where youth can feel safe and welcome, and
- fully funding Ohio students' transportation needs so parents can trust that their children are in good hands.

Investing in Ohio's children will always bring returns on investment.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify and letting us share these client experiences. If you have any questions about this testimony or anything concerning school transportation or the needs of the low-income families that ABLE serves, we are happy to answer.

Respectfully,

Elizabeth Hudson

Attorney – Children's Meaningful and Appropriate Education