



## **Testimony to the Senate Education Committee**

Subcommittee on Support Services and Transportation

**Presented by**

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**On behalf of the**

**Pennsylvania School Boards Association**

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Good afternoon. My name is Joanne Yarnall. I am the transportation manager at the West Chester Area School District and a past president of the Pupil Transportation Association of Pennsylvania (PTAP). PTAP is an affiliated group of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association, and I am speaking to you today from my dual perspective as a pupil transportation professional and on behalf of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA).

PSBA is a nonprofit statewide association representing the 4,500 elected officials who govern the commonwealth's 500 public school districts. It is a membership-driven organization pledged to the highest ideals of local lay leadership for public schools.

Transportation to and from school each day plays a critical role in a student's life. A system that is safe and efficient makes life easier for the students, their families, the community, and for the school district. Districts treat that responsibility very seriously, and they work very hard to meet the needs of all their students. They must comply with federal and state laws and regulations concerning operations, buses and equipment, driver training, licensing, criminal background checks, and more. When it comes to student transportation and safety, every detail is important in implementing the transportation operations for the district.

In my school district, the West Chester Transportation Department is responsible for transporting 17,000 students to 16 public schools and 150 nonpublic and charter schools over 75 square miles each day. Our bus service is contracted with two providers, and although our contracted carriers supply the drivers and buses, the West Chester Area School District generates the annual bus routes using a computerized routing software package and develops transportation policies and guidelines. Our Transportation Department maintains comprehensive records including daily miles driven and number of students on each bus. The Pennsylvania Department of Education uses this information to calculate a state subsidy for a portion of our transportation costs.

In 2014-15, school districts across Pennsylvania spent \$1.4 billion for pupil transportation, which includes over \$195 million for transporting students to nonpublic schools. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, on a statewide average, the pupil transportation subsidy covers approximately half of a school district's transportation costs. That leaves the district to pay the remainder as both the state and school districts are facing budget challenges.

As you know, Gov. Wolf has proposed a \$50 million cut in funding for pupil transportation for fiscal year 2017-18. The budget bill passed by the House of Representatives last month under House Bill 218 includes that cut. Other pieces of the proposed budget that are included in House Bill 218 are a \$100 million increase for the Basic Education Subsidy and a \$25 million increase for special education. As school boards are in the process of finalizing their budgets for the coming year, these numbers are important.

Let me be clear -- The proposed increases for basic and special education subsidies are needed and appreciated by school boards. If there is no increase in Basic Education Funding in the new budget, some school districts could see a reduction in BEF funding from 2016-17. And increasing costs for special education instruction and services have become a major cost driver in district budgets.

Other major cost drivers in school district budgets are the staggering increases in pension costs and payments for charter school tuitions. The proposed decrease in transportation funding will be equal to about an 8% decrease in every district's transportation budget. Looking at the big picture, the proposed subsidy increases contained in House Bill 218, along with the decrease in transportation funding, will result in a net loss to most school districts. Simply said, school boards cannot afford a decrease in transportation funding and urge you to oppose such a plan.

School districts have been asked to think about cost-saving measures in pupil transportation. The options are few, as a cut in transportation funding does not reduce the need or costs for school districts to provide transportation to their enrolled students, as well as mandate for transporting students attending charter and nonpublic schools.

However, less funding means that school boards will be forced to make tough decisions regarding their transportation services. Those decisions will have to balance cost savings with safety concerns of students and the wishes of parents and the community.

For example, districts could be forced to cut the number of buses being run, cut the number of bus stops and/or condense routes. The impact of these options present numerous concerns, particularly for rural areas where condensing routes would be extremely difficult. Children could spend much more time on buses that would have to make many more stops at many more locations. In some cases, children could spend hours on a bus getting to and from school. In other instances, particularly for students going to nonpublic or charter schools, there could be additional transfers. In nearly all cases, these options mean children would be walking to further distances to the nearest stop. For families, it means earlier schedules, concerns about hazardous routes, concerns with participation in before- and after-school activities, and disruptions in family schedules.

One very expensive consideration where no cuts can be made is with the transportation of students with disabilities. These students have very specific requirements, including specialized vehicles, and the need for specialized services during the ride.

Vehicles used for students with disabilities are under-reimbursed by the state in relation to the size of the vehicle and the actual number of students that can ride on a specific vehicle. Let me give you one example from my district. Vehicles used for special needs use seats for aides and nurses. For example, we run one vehicle in West Chester for three students. Each student has his or her own aide or nurse. Two students are in wheelchairs and one student uses a seat. This is a 30-passenger vehicle and we can only claim seven riders for reimbursement purposes (three for each lift space and one seat).

You may not be aware that school districts must provide extended school year programs during the summer to certain special needs students that need extra help. Districts must provide transportation to school for these students, but receive no reimbursement from the state.

Another expensive mandate that cannot be cut is for districts to provide transportation to students attending nonpublic schools within 10 miles of the district boundaries, and to students attending charter schools located within the district boundaries. I mentioned earlier that we transport students to schools over 75 square miles each day. When we travel outside of the district, that number increases to 750 square miles, which adds a tremendous expense to our budget.

One suggestion for cutting transportation costs is to reduce the 10-mile requirement that is under Section 1361 of the School Code. I asked several districts in southeastern Pennsylvania to look at an approximate savings if the mileage was reduced to five miles outside of the district. For one year, it was estimated that:

- West Chester SD would save about \$700,000
- Colonial SD would save about \$519,000
- North Penn SD would save about \$414,000
- Great Valley SD would save about \$150,000
- Warren County SD (northwestern PA) would save about \$22,000

This sampling shows the potential for significant savings to all districts. This seems to be a more reasonable approach to reducing costs instead of a \$50 million cut. The savings from a reduction in the 10-mile mandate could be used in other aspects of a district budget – including costs for buses and equipment, fuel, insurance, driver training, licensing, criminal background checks and more.

In closing, I would emphasize to you that school districts need flexibility to make decisions regarding pupil transportation. Above all, the safety of students must be the catalyst for making these decisions over cost considerations. The lowest cost for providing a service, especially transportation, should not necessarily be the deciding factor. School boards are accountable and transparent regarding transportation costs. Their budgets are made public and adopted at a public meeting. They must be responsive to the issues and concerns raised by students, parents, taxpayers and the general community. And they are ultimately liable in every legal sense for the success or failure of their transportation systems. Every transportation decision, every transportation dollar spent must answer the question: What is the safest, best response for the children we serve?