

## **GONGWER**

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### **Education Oversight Panel Witnesses Push For School Transportation Funding Changes**

Varied bell schedules and aging bus fleets are contributing to schools spending significantly more to transport students than they receive in the state budget for that purpose, the Joint Education Oversight Committee heard Thursday.

Transportation is the first issue the panel has chosen to research, partly by bringing in experts and district leaders to explain the current issues schools are facing in getting students to class efficiently, safely and cost effectively.

Pete Japikse, transportation consultant with the Ohio School Boards Association, told the panel that Ohio's 14,000 school buses travel about a million miles each day carrying 800,000 students to and from school. Those totals give Ohio the fifth largest school transportation network in the country, he said.

Despite their reach and the important role busing plays in students' lives, districts aren't seeing enough state support to manage their fleets efficiently, he said.

Since 2009, schools haven't received state subsidies to purchase buses, which can cost as much as 90,000 each, Mr. Japikse said. The funding formula has also changed numerous times over the last several years, resulting in some integral, stakeholder-agreed-on aspects of the model to be lost.

According to the Ohio 8 Coalition Co-Chair David Romick, schools of all sizes and locations are finding it difficult to keep up with their routes without taking money from other areas of the budget.

Columbus City Schools spends more than \$51 million annually - the most of any school in the state - to cover 75,000 miles each day and receives about \$37 million in state transportation dollars each year, he said. Cincinnati Public Schools receive \$6.7 million from the state but spend more than \$30 million each year.

"Our districts make up this gap with funds that would be better used to support the needs of our students," he said, adding: "We need a long-term sustainable solution for all districts."

Creating a funding scheme that can help schools purchase new buses would allow districts to see cost savings, Mr. Japikse suggested, because newer buses get better gas mileage and don't require costly fixes.

"We can break the cycle by helping put new rolling stock out there to help districts operate more cost effectively," he said.

He proposed creating a \$20-million cost-sharing program that would help schools with the highest need pay for new buses.

**Rep. Ryan Smith** (R-Bidwell), who urged the committee to take up the issue of transportation funding, said helping schools acquire new buses "seems like (it) would be a great investment whatever amount of money we decide to put in should we go down this path."

Making changes to the funding formula would also allow schools to save transportation dollars, Mr. Japikse said. Currently, there is no separate line item for transportation expenses, so the dollars that would be set aside for that are subject to caps and guarantees.

Also, the per-student funding model only allots dollars to those students who live more than a mile from the school, despite the fact that most districts transport all students because of safety concerns.

Mr. Romick seconded those suggestions, adding that increasing a long-unchanged excise tax reimbursement rate of 6% and ensuring special needs students are funded at a higher amount even when riding with students attending the public school would also be welcome changes.

The lack of uniform school start times and a district's inability to require the other schools its buses serve to coordinate schedules are also issues putting a major dent in transportation budgets, he said.

School districts presently transport all students in their districts to whatever schools they are enrolled in - whether that be charters, private schools or another district with open enrollment - so long as they're within a 30-minute distance of the home school.

"This is, put simply, a logistical nightmare and as you can imagine, by way of the numerous variables, it's near impossible to achieve efficient routes, use of equipment, and most important of all, reducing the amount of time the students spend on the bus," Mr. Romick said.

Columbus City Schools Transportation Director Steve Simmons said his district transports students to and from more than 102 district buildings and 120 other schools students are enrolled in.

The buses run year-round to accommodate the varying school calendars, which feature two bell times at Columbus schools and 21 start times at schools outside the district, he said.

**Sen. Tom Sawyer** (D-Akron) asked if the state should have a policy that dictates start times. While witnesses said that would be preferable, it would likely be controversial.

Witnesses had the same response to operating regional transit systems instead of school-based buses, which **Rep. Andy Brenner** (R-Powell), questioned the possibility of.

However, Mr. Japikse said there are some efficiencies to be found when nearby districts cooperate with one another to purchase fuel in bulk and store their fleets.