



**Testimony to Joint Education Oversight Committee (JEOC)
September 22, 2016
The Ohio 8 Coalition**

David Romick, Co-Chair of the Ohio 8 Coalition and President of the Dayton Education Association

Chairman Hite, Vice Chair Patterson, and members of the Joint Education Oversight Committee, on behalf of The Ohio 8 Coalition we appreciate the opportunity to share with you our testimony related to school transportation. My name is David Romick and I am Co-Chair of the Coalition and President of the Dayton Education Association. Also with me is Steve Simmons, Transportation Director at Columbus City Schools who, along with me, will be available for questions when I complete my testimony. The Coalition first spoke to the issue of school transportation funding in 2012 has continued to do so before every relevant committee in both chambers every year since then. As a result, we are pleased to be here today to outline the state of transportation in our districts and to provide insight and perspective on the solutions to the challenges we face with regard to this issue. Specifically, the state's existing funding approach and overall policies related to student transportation – which will help to address the gap between school district student transportation costs and student transportation reimbursement levels from the state.

Although the data outlined in my testimony is specific to the Ohio 8, we have found over the years that school districts around the state are faced with similar if not the same challenges and concerns as our districts when it comes to transportation. Quite simply, we are charged with getting our kids to and from school (regardless of where they attend school) safely and in the most efficient and timely manner. We want to provide the best service possible and as we have discussed among legislators for years there are several policy and operational barriers that prevent us from doing what is best for kids. From our concerted effort on this issue, especially since 2012, we know that this is something all schools--rural, suburban, urban, traditional public or public charter schools regardless of location or type agree upon. Let me be clear, fixing it for one type of school or district and not for the others does **nothing**. We must fix it for **all children** to allow all districts to meet their charge of getting children to schools safely and in an efficient and timely manner.

So what are those policy and operational issues? My testimony will outline 4 major challenges, how those impact our schools and students and suggested solutions to those challenges.

1. State reimbursement vs. costs

State funds to support student transportation have not kept pace with actual costs of aging bus

fleets, maintenance, and fuel. Currently, none of The Ohio 8 Coalition school districts is fully reimbursed for what they actually spend to transport students. Included with my testimony is a simple chart that outlines the gap between district costs and state reimbursement rates among other statistics that might be of interest. A few to highlight are as follows:

Each of our school district's transportation expenses range from a low of \$4,422,890 in Canton to a high of \$51,772,367 for Columbus.

The range of state reimbursement to school districts for transportation costs begins at \$3,286,092 in Canton and goes up to \$36,799,481 in Columbus. Transportation reimbursements, in every Ohio 8 district, are significantly lower than the district's total expenses. For example, Cincinnati Public Schools spent \$30,285,087 on transportation but only received \$6,798,329 in reimbursement from the state- that's only 22% of total expenditures. Leaving Cincinnati to cover \$23,486,758- money that could be better used to support the needs of our students.

2. Breadth and depth of urban student transportation

The numbers below reflect the significance of our daily student transportation operation. Some of our districts rival the local public transit system. We offer this information to help better understand that a long-term solution is needed to address such dynamic and sophisticated operations.

Number of Daily Riders

The range of daily riders is wide within Ohio 8 Coalition member districts; the range is from 4,758 daily riders in Youngstown to 31,700 daily riders in Columbus.

Number of Daily Miles

The range for number of daily miles traveled is from 4,739 miles in Canton to 75,273 miles in Columbus.

Size of Fleets

The Ohio 8 Coalition has a wide range of fleet sizes from 66 buses in Youngstown Public Schools to 845 buses for Columbus City Schools.

2. Bell schedules

State policy related to bell schedules has made it difficult for districts to find efficiencies and keep costs down. Specifically, state regulation states that transportation departments within public schools are prohibited from setting standard times to begin and end a school day for non-public or charter schools buildings. To provide a real world example of the challenges related to bell schedules I would site the reality at Dayton Public Schools. Presently, DPS transports to more non-DPS school buildings (charter, private, and parochial) than DPS buildings. This ratio is 31-30 for the 2016-2017 school year. Complex routing demands, combined with our district's inability to set and align bell schedules outside of our buildings means that we must coordinate a transportation system that responds to different start and end time for 31 different schools—this is in addition to the 30 DPS school buildings. This is a logistical nightmare and as you can imagine by way of the numerous variables, is near

impossible to achieve efficient routes, use of equipment, and most important of all, reducing the amount of time children spend on the bus.

Of additional concern is the lack of school year coordination that our districts face when working to support transportation requirements for charter and nonpublic students. Our transportation experts can speak in more detail to these challenges but generally speaking since charter schools are not required to align their school year start and end dates to ours we find ourselves running transportation departments nearly all year long. In Toledo there are schools that operate for 11 months of the year, which means our transportation department must as well. In the current environment nothing, from bell schedules, to school year, to holidays or breaks is required to be coordinated with the public school district. This often leads to staffing challenges, issues with scheduling bus maintenance, and certainly dramatically increased costs.

3. Excise tax

The existing motor fuel/excise tax that supports reimbursement for student transportation amount has sat at just 6 cents for several years. The excise tax supports mass transit and school bus transportation; and when it was established it addressed the needs of mass transit and schools buses when the use of highways wasn't what it is today nor did it take into consideration transportation to such a wide swath of public, charter, private and parochial schools. This rate does not reflect the reality of student transportation in 2016-- thousands of miles that we cover each day and the complex routing demands required to transport children over thousands of square miles each. Although certainly a more complex issue, fuel tax levels must be addressed to establish an updated and truly equitable school transportation formula for the long term.

4. Special education supplement:

District transportation departments strive to maximize efficiency by including as many students on all buses to the greatest extent that is both possible and feasible. This means that we fill all buses with students regardless of the "student type." The current funding guidelines state that if a bus ridership is comprised of 50% or greater special needs students, the entire bus is to be counted as "special needs" for funding purposes. However, if a school district decides to put a special education student on a school bus with traditional students, they lose the higher reimbursement rate for that special education student, even if additional assistance is required for that special education student. For instance, Columbus City Schools allows regular education students to ride special education buses to utilize the bus to its capacity. When this is done, CCS typically loses the special education funding because more regular education students ride the bus than special education students. As we seek to mainstream more special education students onto traditional student buses and vice versa, we must still be able to address their unique needs. Districts have the ability to report which students have special needs, and with improved technology, this task becomes both less burdensome for reporting and more accurate for accountability. **Rather than use a formula based upon assumptions, it would make more sense to provide funding based upon the needs of the student.** We employ this rationale in making other determinations – why should transportation be any different?

Impact

Even with our best efforts to route responsibly the gap between expenses and reimbursement, required complex routing, and limitations to setting and aligning bell schedules results in our transportation operations running at a deficit. Over the years most of our districts have competitively bid portions of our transportation services to private companies. But even this approach has a catch. Private companies still have the same demands and costs as school districts relative to gasoline, maintenance, drivers, and repairs. Each year those costs increase yet state reimbursements (and by extension contract costs) have not kept pace so we are left with a limitation on how competitive our bidding process and related cost savings can truly be. In the end, districts make up this gap with funds that could be better used to support the needs of our students.

We know this is not a simple issue. And over the years we have seen pieces or parts of this problem addressed within various legislative remedies. While we appreciate those attempts, they have just nibbled around the edges- injecting a few dollars here and there, or moving transportation funding in and out of the formula, but never getting to the root of this issue. We need a long term, sustainable solution for all school districts. Having worked with the Coalition of Rural and Appalachian Schools and being so close in proximity to larger suburban districts we know that the gap between expenses and funding are significant for all of us. As I mentioned earlier, we want to fulfill our charge of getting all children to their school safely and in an efficient and timely manner. This truly is about all kids getting what they need when they literally are taking the very first or very last steps in their school day—on and off our buses.

The Ohio 8 Coalition transportation experts are prepared to support the effort of this committee on this important issue. Our transportation staff are some of the best in the state and are ready to assist in developing a set of suggested solutions to the challenges we face. In the interim, we recommend that you keep the following recommendations in mind as you continue your work on this issue:

- Reconsider the limitations of school districts to set and align bell schedules;
- Evaluate the state excise tax reimbursement;
- Gather a small group of school district student transportation directors to help craft detailed solutions to the challenges within this dialogue including but not limited to:
 - the realities of present day routing; public and non-public school transportation;
 - the cost and use of payment in lieu of transportation;
 - the significant gap between state contribution and district expenditure over time;
 - funding transportation inside or outside of the funding formula;
 - challenges and costs related to replacing aging bus fleets; and
 - policies related to special education student transportation.