



Governor's Proposed Education Budget Could Drastically Alter School Bus Transportation in Pennsylvania, including Elimination of Free Busing by School Districts

The Pennsylvania School Bus Association (PSBA) and 700 private school bus contractor companies employing 60,000 Pennsylvanians are extremely concerned about the future of pupil transportation throughout the Keystone State.

Gov. Tom Corbett's proposal to include school bus transportation funding with a new Student Achievement Education Block Grant (SAEBG) would replace a well-established funding formula and destabilize pupil transportation both now and in the future. That reimbursement formula that the Department of Education now uses ensures safe, reliable and efficient pupil transportation service.

The dedicated funding provides:

- Adequate transportation services from school districts to eligible pupils
- A fair calculation to account for each eligible pupil
- Compensation for increases or decreases in ridership
- A cost escalator to compensate for rising transportation costs for fuel and equipment

The state transportation reimbursement formula also provides the ability to replace and maintain school bus equipment. New and well-maintained fleets ensure safe transportation and significant environmental benefits through reduced exhaust emissions and increased fuel economy. Without this funding formula in place, many school districts may defer maintenance and acquisition of new buses. Deferring these actions will certainly decrease reliability, result in additional vehicle breakdowns, and put student safety at greater risk.

The ramifications of Governor Corbett's budget proposal, particularly his call to eliminate the funding formula and place transportation funding in a block grant to school districts, are already being seen in school districts across Pennsylvania as they work to prepare preliminary budgets for the 2012-2013 school year.

Under the Governor's budget we may see the end of school busing in Pennsylvania as we know it as school districts may choose to use money previously dedicated for transportation costs for other purposes.

There are four main reasons why the existing formula and funding mechanism should be retained:

- To maintain pupil safety
- To help control property taxes
- To protect local jobs and businesses
- To maintain a healthy environment

355 N. 21st Street · Suite 200 · Camp Hill, PA 17011
717-975-1951 · (fax) 717-975-1953 · www.paschoolbus.org

Safety

The federal Department of Transportation promotes school buses as the safest mode of transportation for getting students to and from school: Students are about 50 times more likely to arrive at school alive if they take the bus than if they drive themselves or ride with friends. Students are much safer riding the bus than being driven by a parent, and are about 20 times more likely to arrive at school alive if they take the bus than if a parent drives them.

School buses are designed with safety in mind. They feature flashing lights, specially trained drivers, bright colors, stop signs, reinforced sides and size and height standards.

It's frightening to note that teen drivers account for 58 percent of all student fatalities occurring during normal school travel hours, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHSTA). Adult drivers account for another 23 percent. School buses account for just 1 percent.

In addition, school buses represent 25 percent of the miles traveled by students but account for less than 4 percent of the injuries, according to the Transportation Research Board.

Keeping buses on the roads (and cars off of them) will pay benefits in terms of safety. In Pennsylvania, 31,511 registered school buses carry more than 1.5 million children each day, making the school bus industry the largest form of mass transit in the Commonwealth. And every school bus – which carries 49 students, on average - eliminates approximately 33 cars on the road during rush hour.

Elimination of busing, a move some school districts across Pennsylvania are already considering and, in some cases, are being driven to make, will put our students at risk.

Business and Employment Impact

Pennsylvania is a leading state nationwide in terms of using the private sector to provide pupil transportation. In all, 85 percent of the state's 500 school districts use services provided by private school bus contractors to ensure their students arrive at school safely. Many of these school bus contractors are local, family-owned businesses that have been providing these services for generations. Throughout the state, these private school bus contractors employ roughly 60,000 Pennsylvanians as drivers, administrative personnel, and mechanics to help safely transport the Commonwealth's children to and from school and school-related activities. In many cases, these contractors are one of the largest employers in their community.

Reducing or completely eliminating pupil transportation services will drastically reduce the number of school bus companies in Pennsylvania.

Currently there are approximately 700 private companies providing pupil transportation to the 500 school districts. Under the Governor's block grant proposal, many small school bus transportation providers will be forced out of business – either because districts have eliminated busing service or because the funding available to districts will no longer keep pace with costs. This latter scenario will force cutbacks by districts that will make these small businesses unsustainable. In the past, many of these smaller, Pennsylvania-based, operators have been acquired large corporations with national or foreign ownership.

The current transportation subsidy formula that Governor Corbett is attempting to eliminate provides for an inflation increase which is essential at this time of unstable fuel prices and other associated costs.

Property Tax Increases

Faced with declining state revenues, many school districts have been forced to increase property taxes on a regular basis. For the upcoming 2012-2013 school year, the amount of money placed into the block grant for schools for transportation funding represents a 1 to 2 percent increase, far less than 4 to 5 percent increase in bus transportation costs projected by some school districts due to rising costs of fuel and other set expenses.

With many school districts already facing cuts in other funding, those school districts that do feel it is important (or in some cases necessary) to continue to provide transportation will have little choice but to increase property taxes on local residents, already a sore subject with many homeowners.

As a result, we will likely see an increasing number of school districts go up to the maximum school tax increase allowed by law without the requirement of a voter referendum.

Environmental Impact

School buses help save fuel and reduce emissions. The 31,511 registered school buses in Pennsylvania travel an average of 12,731 miles annually, or about 400 million miles annually combined. Those buses use about 57 million gallons of diesel fuel per year at an average cost of \$4.28 per gallon. That comes to \$245.31 million in annual fuel costs – or \$159 per student.

If all those students were instead transported by private vehicle – and it would take 1.03 million of them – the fuel cost (at \$3.95 per gallon for regular gasoline) would be \$1,095 per vehicle. That's a net community savings of fuel of about 226.8 million gallons and a fuel cost savings of \$878.4 million.

Elimination of bus routes and bus service will also result in increased congestion on roads, as each school bus is the equivalent of taking 33 passenger vehicles off the roads to transport students to school.

Other Impacts

Students who take school buses have decreased levels of truancy, as well as increased likelihood of performing well academically in school. If half the battle is showing up, the school bus is helping us win that battle. According to the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, 20 percent of the children questioned about why they were truant from school said it was because they missed the bus.

Without school buses, families would have yet another obstacle impeding their children's education. Some parents might be able to drive, but others would be forced to let their children get themselves to school, essentially gambling with their children's safety and well-being.

Conclusion

We all know that if students are not attending class, they cannot achieve. School buses are not just a safe and convenient way to get to school, but a vital instrument in keeping our children in the classroom and improving our education system.

Creating a larger block grant will not create meaningful flexibility for a school district. Required mandates for social security and basic education will draw away from transportation.

Many transportation objectives are achieved with the state's current pupil transportation subsidy. It enables Pennsylvania's school districts to continue meeting the necessary standards associated with maintaining safe school bus fleets and affords them a benchmarking mechanism that rewards them for operating an efficient system. The current subsidy achieves this by providing a standard of efficiency in the utilization of each vehicle, instituting penalties for practices that are either non-reimbursable or inefficient. In addition, the subsidy reimburses school districts on the basis of district wealth and the size of the pupil transportation operation.

If the proposed SAEBG would be enacted there is no way of telling if adequate funding from the state will keep pace with transportation needs and expenses in the future. In addition, school districts currently in growth phases due to population increases, would not see any increase in available funding for transportation costs even though their needs may have increased exponentially compared to other school districts in the state.

About PSBA

The Pennsylvania School Bus Association (PSBA) represents private school bus contracting companies and individuals. Our primary focus is safely transporting Pennsylvania's future, its children.

Contact:

Selina M. Pittenger
Executive Director
PA School Bus Association
717-975-1951
Email: smpittenger@paschoolbus.org
Website: www.paschoolbus.org