Good Afternoon Assemblyman Palmesano,

My name is Michelle Clark, I am the Director of Transportation for two school districts in the 132nd district.  I am also the president of the Southern Tier Chapter of NYAPT.  I am writing to you today because it has come to my attention that the new version of Assembly Bill A9506 has omitted the STOP ARM CAMERA provisions that were originally in the Governor’s proposed budget.  This bill will help districts to ensure the safety of every student while loading and unloading from a school bus within the 132nd district and across NYS.  In both of my school districts almost daily we have motorists who do not stop when they approach stopped school buses with their red lights flashing.  It is estimated that daily across NYS there are 50,000 motorists illegally passing yellow school buses.  In most cases the school bus driver is too worried about the safety of the students to be able to write down a plate number or even the make/model/color of the vehicle.  I have been a school bus driver in that situation and even though you do everything as you are trained to do something happens and the motorist does not stop.  It is a complete feeling of helplessness when you know that the motorist has committed a crime and you were unable to catch the plate number.  Worse yet, as a parent and professional, you tend to replay the event over and over again in your mind; the thought of what could have happened can keep you up at night.

When we talk about illegally passing a school bus that is stopped with its red lights flashing we are not always talking about oncoming vehicles from the opposite direction.  We have to make sure that ALL vehicles have stopped before we can start the process of loading/unloading.  Once a student is off the bus we have taught the student to go out at least 10 feet and watch the driver for the universal signal to cross.  Once the student crosses to the driver’s side of the bus, the student needs to look left/right and left again before crossing the remainder of the roadway.  In the morning the students are taught to wait at the stop for the driver to come to a complete stop and wait again for the universal signal to cross.  We start teaching these procedures at ages 3 to 4 with our UPK students in both districts during our school bus trainings.  The students are also taught that if they hear a horn that means danger and to go back where they came from.

In the Odessa-Montour School District we have State Route 13, we share a portion of this road with 3 other school districts between Ithaca and Horseheads.  This is by far one of the most dangerous roads to load and unload students on.  We do not allow students to cross SR13 because of the dangers associated with the road.  Unfortunately, that does little to alleviate the elevated danger on this roadway every time we stop.  We have to be concerned with the vehicles coming from behind that do not or cannot stop because of their speeds.  This is a reality that we deal with daily on this route as well as many others in both districts.

While the stop arm camera bill will not stop the motorist in the act of passing illegally, it will allow the districts the ability to forward the information on to local law enforcement who can then ticket the individual that owns the vehicle, hopefully deterring them from repeating this very dangerous act.   Enforcement of Section 1174 of the Vehicle and Traffic Law remains limited, as the reality is that police cannot follow every bus every day.  And as stated above, this places the responsibility on the drivers, who cannot always document instances of illegal passing.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this matter.  I do hope that I have your support for including STOP ARM CAMERA provisions in the budget bill A9506, to help protect every student that rides a yellow school bus in NYS.

Michelle Clark

Director of Transportation

Watkins Glen Central School District

Odessa Montour Central School District