



NYAPT

NEW YORK ASSOCIATION FOR PUPIL TRANSPORTATION

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STATEMENT OF THE NEW YORK ASSOCIATION FOR PUPIL TRANSPORTATION

2012 LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON THE EXECUTIVE BUDGET PROPOSAL:

ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION

JANUARY 23, 2012

HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THE NEW YORK STATE SENATE AND ASSEMBLY:

The New York Association for Pupil Transportation is a non-profit professional association dedicated to the representation, support and development of the women and men who are responsible for the safe and efficient transportation of 2.3 million children to and from school each day. The work of our members is important and educationally valuable work that we take very seriously. Our key and measurable objective is to ensure that every child arrives at school and returns home safely every day.

Attaining that objective takes the effective and successful execution of many elements including selection of school bus equipment, retention of qualified school bus drivers and support staff, and planning of efficient and safety-sensitive routes and schedules. And the list goes on.

All of these elements must be addressed by every school district in the state and reflected in their delivery of school transportation services---whether those services are delivered by the district itself or through a competitively selected private contractor. Ultimately, the responsibility for the safety of our children lies with the leadership of our school districts and the sound management and diligence of the school transportation supervisor.

Comments Regarding the Executive Budget Proposal

Transportation Aid Levels

State support through Transportation Aid allows our school districts to provide critical transportation services to over 2.3 million children in our state and communities. Those services are vital to ensuring access for those children to the “sound, basic education” to which they are entitled. Riding the “yellow bus” is cost-effective, energy-efficient and environmentally sound.

The \$1,675.71 Billion included in this budget is an increase of \$64.02 million over last year’s budget, which is a smaller increase than the year-to-year increase between the 2009-2010 budget and the 2010-2011 budget.

We understand as professionals that school bus transportation, by its nature, can be costly. School bus riders (our children) do not arrive at a terminal to board the school bus. The school bus comes to them, often to their doorstep. The school bus often travels large distances outside the school district to transport students with special needs or homeless students or students attending private and parochial schools. School buses are equipped with specialized equipment designed to keep children safe and secure during their ride to school and home.

We continue to make concerted efforts to streamline transportation services and to deliver those services in smart and efficient ways. The evidence shows that the year-to-year increase in school transportation aid (which is expense based) has decreased each year since 2009 and we are proud to assist in the overall redistribution of funds to the classroom.

Later in this statement we will offer an expansive list of practical steps that the state can take to reduce the costs of school transportation. We are confident that those recommended steps will save the state and local taxpayers an estimated \$200 million in the first year of implementation. We urge the Legislature and the Governor to recognize the real costs of school transportation and to collaborate with our members in addressing and removing costly mandates.

School Bus Driver Training Program Funds

The appropriation of \$400,000 in training funds is a continuing priority for the school transportation providers in our state. This is the only source of funding for school bus driver preparation and training and amounts to just 17¢ per student to ensure this training is available. Given the complex nature of their work, maintaining support for such training is vital to the safety of our children.

We applaud the continued support for this program funding by the state and encourage the Senate and Assembly to include these funds in the adopted state budget. We are eager to work with the Education Department to ensure that (1) these funds are used creatively and efficiently to train and prepare our school bus drivers and (2) these funds are used to develop timely and cutting edge training materials and products for our school bus drivers.

Our association is undertaking an extensive survey of our members to help in the identification of training needs. We will share the results and findings of that survey with the State Education Department and encourage the Department to use these findings to inform its decisions related to fund utilization. We are also aware that data about school bus accidents is collected for learning purposes and we will continue to urge the Department to incorporate that data into decisions about driver training to better ensure the safety of our children.

Centralizing Purchases of School Buses

The Governor has proposed to centralize the purchasing of school buses in ways that he suggests would leverage the state's buying power to reduce the cost per unit of school buses. Centralizing the purchase of school buses represents a significant change in the way school districts buy school buses and we advise caution as such a proposal advances.

NYAPT understands the premise behind this proposal and would welcome measures that lower the cost of doing business without (1) compromising safety for our children and (2) restricting the flexibility of school districts to purchase school buses that meet their specific local needs. We also note that there are variations between and among school bus models that address the different needs of school districts in transporting their students. It is crucial that purchasing options and decisions allow school districts to purchase from a diverse range of school bus models and brands.

A final comment relates to the effective date of the centralized contract provisions. Section 7 of the Article VII legislation amends section 3602, subdivision 7, paragraph c of the Education Law to require school buses purchased after June 30, 2012, be purchased pursuant to a centralized contract. Clearly, that centralized contract does not yet exist. If this provision is to be advanced, it is important that a practical and manageable transition period be incorporated in the interests of efficiency and sound purchasing practices.

Consolidating DOT Regions

While this is not specifically an Elementary/Secondary Education issue, we would express our concern that enlarging the regions through which the Department of Transportation does its work could make the completion of some of their work more difficult. Particularly, we are concerned that larger regions could make it more costly (in terms of travel distances) for school bus inspections to be scheduled and completed.

We understand the direction of the state to re-deploy staff resources to attain efficiencies and urge the Governor and the Department to consider the practical implications of this proposal for consumers of the services of this important state agency.

Advancing Performance Based Inspection Requirements

The Governor's proposal recommends that the Department of Transportation develop a performance-based inspection system for trucks and buses. This would include yellow school buses purchased for the purpose of transporting our school children.

The proposal, as we understand it, would require more intensive inspection schedules and rigors for carriers whose inspection and maintenance records are sub-standard. It would follow that the inspection schedules for carriers who meet or exceed DOT standards would follow a less intensive inspection schedule.

It is important to state here that the State Department of Transportation has executed their school bus inspection system with the full cooperation of school districts and private school bus carriers. They have performed their responsibilities successfully and with a dedication to safety that we have come to respect.

This proposal gives us pause because we believe that the semi-annual inspection of all school buses is a crucial element in our state's school bus safety record. Our preference would be to continue the inspection program in its current form or to incorporate a role for local inspectors to assist the Department in fulfilling its inspection responsibilities in appropriate ways. This model is utilized by the Department of Motor Vehicles in its Article 19-A Certification program and the Education Department in its School Bus Driver Instructor program.

Short of either of those options being implemented, we will work closely with the Department of Transportation to minimize the impact of these changes on the safety of our children.

Recommendations Regarding Mandate Relief

We renew our call for the state to address numerous areas in which costs could be reduced through mandate relief or allowing better management of school systems that are otherwise costly. We have found that at the fundamental level of transporting student "A" from home to school and back again, school transportation services offer a quality and necessary service at a reasonable cost. We estimate that their average cost per student for basic transportation services is between \$750-900 per student per year. The costs of transportation increase significantly as the price of diesel fuel rises with the overall price of petroleum products nationally. We are not immune from such increases and they are completely beyond our control. As would be the case with any other product or service, the costs of transportation also increase when we add routes and services for special purposes. No matter how we count it, it is going to be more costly to send a school bus 10 or 20 miles out of the school district to transport one or two children. That transportation will directly affect the average cost per student. Moreover, the cost of transportation is increased by the cost of mandated equipment on the school bus and we as a profession along with the state must review all elements of the school bus in terms of effectiveness and overall return on expenditure. We believe that the education system also needs to work more closely with transportation providers to ensure that calendars and schedules are such that transportation can be provided most efficiently, without compromising the instructional day or services.

The state has embarked on several pilot projects intended to demonstrate the efficacy of regional delivery of school transportation services. We are aware of these pilot projects and are concerned that they will not generate the savings intended or anticipated while adversely affecting the services that are currently being provided in a quality and efficient manner for our children.

The mandate relief recommendations in the attached will yield clear and significant savings and should garner more attention than regional pilot projects, which can only speculate as to savings. For example, lessening the mileage radius for transporting students in non-public schools unquestionably will save significant money. Also, removing the mandate for seat belts as standard equipment on a large school bus will save significant money for taxpayers at all levels. We ask only that our recommendations be given the due consideration that they deserve.

In Closing

The transportation of 2.3 million of our school children each and every day is a daunting task that is carried out with diligence and dignity by thousands of dedicated women and men every day in our state. Transportation and the yellow bus do not attract a lot of political attention because we tend to put our shoulders to the wheel each day and just get the job done for the children. We seem to have gained significant attention as the state and school districts seek ways to reduce costs and to return more dollars to the classroom. We understand that reality and have done our part in recent years to reduce the costs of transportation by eliminating late runs and sports runs and changing routing and stop selection processes. We have changed our practices on maintaining school buses and in replacing school buses in favor of less costly approaches. And we have successfully reduced the year-to-year increase in this “expense-based aid” category again this year.

Transporting our children is a promise we make to parents and children to ensure that they have access to the sound basic education to which they are entitled. It is costly to transport human beings and it is especially costly to transport our children for whom we take special measures in terms of equipment, driver preparation, route selection, and other safety measures. We urge the Legislature and the Governor to recognize this and to work with the school transportation community to effect change and efficiencies only in ways that will not compromise the quality of our services or the extent to which they afford our children access to their learning experiences.

Respectfully submitted,

Peter F. Mannella
Executive Director



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RECOMMENDATIONS BY THE NEW YORK ASSOCIATION FOR PUPIL TRANSPORTATION

MANDATE RELIEF AND EFFICIENCY IN SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

Transporting Students with Different Needs (Non-Public, Homeless, Special Education)

We estimate that it costs between \$750-900 to transport children from home to school and home again on a daily basis over the 180-day cycle of the school year. That means that the cost of home-to-school transportation costs \$4.15-\$5.00 per day per student. We believe most would agree that is not an expensive proposition on average.

School transportation services do get more expensive when we factor in that we are transporting small numbers of children to special education programs at distances as high as 50 miles, non-public schools and other locations at distances as high as 15 miles and homeless students to their schools of origin at distances as high as 50 miles. These are so-called 'low incidence' routes and, as a result, have fewer children with the same costs as routes that have full school buses. The costs only naturally are going to be higher.

With that understanding, in the past two years, we have recommended the several steps listed below to the State Education Department and the Regents, to the Governor, to the Legislature and to the Division of the Budget.

We first want to observe that each of these recommendations could adversely affect a core principle that our profession has consistently endorsed. We believe strongly --- and research demonstrates --- that children are safest when they are riding a yellow school bus to and from their schools. So it is difficult for us to make proposals that could potentially result in some students not being able to ride on the yellow school bus on a consistent basis.

This is a demonstration from us that we understand the depths of the State's and our local school districts' financial situations. We offer these recommendations understanding that we must argue for maintaining transportation services for the greatest numbers even if that means affecting the levels of services to smaller numbers of students. Our hope would be that some day such services will be revisited and we could again have all students have access to the safety inherent in the yellow school bus.

Accordingly, our recommendations in this area include:

Reduce from 50 miles to 25 miles the maximum radius for transporting special needs students.

Currently, school districts are required by state law and regulation to transport students up to 50 miles to attend a school or program defined in their IEP. The transportation of one student to a school 50 miles from their residence is a costly venture as well as difficult on the child. On a political level, it contributes to the oft-repeated scenario of "empty buses" on the roadways. We recommend that the state limit to 25 miles the distance to which a school district is required to transport a child to a special education school or program. Exceptions can be made to accommodate needs of the child, but the assumption would be to try to place a child

in a program closer to their residence and not farther. The cost savings are estimated at \$35 million per year. (2010-11 survey).

Reduce non-public school transportation distances from 15 miles to 10 miles. The transportation of non-public and parochial students also is a low-incidence situation, with smaller numbers of students being transported as far as 15 miles to attend their school of choice. This transportation service is also an expensive proposition and accounts for upwards of 25% of many school transportation budgets. One downstate school district estimated that non-public transportation comprised over 60% of their transportation budget. Transporting one or small numbers of students 15 miles to a school means that that school bus is a dedicated route and the costs are inherently higher. A change in this item could save \$72 million per year (2010-11 survey).

Allow for an annual (prior to the start of the school year) re-assessment of the circumstances determining a student's status as homeless. Federal law requires the transportation of students who are homeless up to a distance of 50 miles from their school of origin. It does not require that these students be afforded such transportation on an unlimited basis. We are recommending that such students be re-assessed at the end of each school year to determine if they could more appropriately attend a school nearer to their current residence. We do not recommend moving children to a new school district in the middle of a school year, but we do recommend encouraging a change before a new school year begins. The estimated costs savings if this change were implemented could be about \$20 million annually (2010-11 survey).

School Bus Equipment: Reducing Mandates

School buses are the safest vehicles for the purposes of transporting our children to and from school. Research and safety records bear out that statement. A critical element in the safety of the school bus is the design and equipment installed on each bus. These are determined at the outset by the Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards for school buses and these standards are further complemented by additional requirements mandated by the State of New York. Some of these additional equipment requirements are unique to New York and others are areas that other states viewed as noteworthy and incorporated into their own or even federal standards. We believe this is a time during which we should identify areas of the "New York" school bus that might be modified for changes that would result in lower costs without compromising the safety of our children.

We are recommending that the State of New York **repeal the 1987 law that requires seat belts to be installed on all large school buses in the state.** There are many reasons for this recommendation including the fact that 95% of all school districts do not exercise their option to require the actual usage of those seat belts. This means that equipment costing an average of \$6,000 per school bus is going unused. Moreover, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) that has jurisdiction over such matters has not mandated the installation and use of seat belts on large school buses and has recently denied a petition that would have required such installation and use. These facts and our knowledge of the inherent safety imparted by the school bus seat compartment leads us to make this significant recommendation. Clearly, NHTSA requirements for installation and use of seat belts on smaller school buses would remain in effect. The cost savings would be approximately \$6,000 per large school bus affected at the time of replacement.

Additionally, we are recommending that the state **repeal the requirement** that school buses be equipped with 'back-lit' signs that read "SCHOOL BUS" and that operators be allowed to use signs made of reflective material that meets federal safety standards and guidelines. This option is allowed in nearly all other states and could save some \$6 million over several years (2010-11 survey).

We are also recommending the **repeal of a 2007 law that mandates the installation of so-called ‘fire suppression’ devices** on all school buses transporting students who use wheel chairs and other mobility devices. This law has never been fully implemented and school bus safety technology and driver training mitigate the need for such devices. Moreover, the devices are of questionable benefit in the case of the most common school bus fire incidents. Their cost, which far exceeds estimates offered at the time of enactment, is significant and no reasonable cost-benefit analysis demonstrates their value over time. We estimate the savings in this area to be approximately \$4,000-\$5,000 per school bus affected.

School Management: Recommendations for Efficiency

We are also making recommendations that would improve administrative and management matters at the school district and regional levels. These changes would have a positive effect on the costs related to school transportation services. It is our observation that the yellow school bus is a vehicle for providing access for students to their education. Our school buses provide that access at the direction of the state (through laws and regulations) and at the behest of local school boards (through policy and program design).

Transportation services are not provided by accident or based on the needs of the transportation staff---they are provided for the children based on the priorities of state and local policy makers. The costs of transportation are directly and indirectly affected by each decision made by those leaders that requires an expansion or contraction or variation on transportation services.

Provide incentives to facilitate and remove disincentives for shared services between and among school districts. There have been numerous calls and recommendations for ‘regionalizing’ and ‘consolidating’ school transportation services for efficiency purposes. Our association recognizes that there are ways in which some services can be coordinated or consolidated among willing school districts where such efforts will yield financial and operational benefits to the involved districts. But we also believe that the calls for regional transportation strategies are not founded in serious cost savings analysis. We believe that the state could accomplish more by allowing school districts to engage in shared services and pooling of services with no harm to their transportation aid. When districts share services and include financial transactions in the sharing process, there is an adverse effect on transportation aid that results from the need to offset aid by the amount of the financial transaction. This must be re-visited and a different approach sought out.

Require April 1st annual deadline for submittal by BOCES of Special Education placements and transportation needs. School budgets and transportation routes are established for the optimal efficiency and greatest service to children. When last minute placements of students are put in place, there is often a dramatic change in routing and scheduling of school buses and this leads to significant expenses that were not included in the transportation budget. Requiring BOCES and special education providers to submit transportation needs on a timely basis will allow for those routes to be incorporated into the daily flow, rather than be added after the fact.

Require involvement of school transportation professionals in CSE discussions relating to provision of special services for students with disabilities. Currently, the CSE develops an IEP for each student and these IEPs often include instructions for special transportation services and personnel. The transportation staff is not consulted on a standard basis about more efficient ways to accomplish the objectives of the IEP and unnecessary or higher transportation costs are incurred as a result. We urge consultation with the school transportation team prior to implementing elements of the IEP that relate to or effect transportation. We estimate that some \$7 million could be saved each school year in this area.

Adopt standardized school year calendars within BOCES districts to allow for efficiencies in the delivery of school transportation services. The fact that some districts are open while others are closed or that private schools and parochial schools are open when public schools are closed (and vice versa) results in significant costs for district transportation budgets. We recommend that the BOCES superintendent be

empowered to work with all school programs to arrive at a mutually beneficial calendar for the year that will respect the needs of students but potentially save some \$10 million in transportation costs each year.

Require local BOCES to collaborate with school districts, non-public schools, BOCES and other programs on improved coordination of 'bell times'. The reality of transportation is that it takes real time for school buses to arrive at a destination and real time for the students to get onto or depart a school bus. When "bell times" for schools, BOCES programs, parochial schools and other activities are not efficiently coordinated, the result is multiple buses on the roads where fewer buses might otherwise be needed. One of our members in a downstate area analyzed the bell times for schools in his area and found that 3-5 minute adjustments in the bell times of several of the parochial and BOCES program would have save over \$1.5 million per year! Savings as much as at \$27 million per year are possible across the state. We recommend that coordinating such analysis and activities is an appropriate role for BOCES superintendents.

*FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON THESE MANDATE RELIEF ITEMS,
PLEASE CONTACT PETER MANNELLA AT 518-463-4937 OR EMAIL AT peter@nyapt.org*