

New York Association for Pupil Transportation

Testimony
Joint Legislative Hearing on Education
2020-2021 Executive Budget

Our Priorities...

Safely Transporting School Children
Protecting School Transportation Workers
Helping Manage School Transportation Costs

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On behalf of the more than 600 school district members of New York Association for Pupil Transportation we want to thank you for allowing us to present our recommendations and testimony in response to the 2020-2021 Executive Budget proposal.

NYAPT would like to express our unequivocal **opposition to certain provisions within Governor Cuomo's education budget proposal (A.9506/S.7506)**, which would place arbitrary, and potentially safety-threatening limits on the growth in school transportation spending beginning fiscal year 2021-2022.

We respectfully ask that you work to remove specific school transportation provisions from the final agreed upon state budget, which can be found on **page 21, lines 33-35, of A.9506/S7506 and page 22, lines 25-33**, of the same budget bills. These provisions would arbitrarily cap student transportation aid at the greater of inflation (CPI) or inflation plus district enrollment growth in the out years – 2021-2022.

As a professional association dedicated to the safe transportation of more than 2.3 million children riding a school bus each day in New York State, we have prided ourselves on managing ever-growing costs while providing the safest and most efficient school transportation possible to local taxpayers.

School transportation spending is a vital educational expense that New York families rely on to ensure their loved ones are taken "safely" to and from school. Like many other vital services provided by our state government, any growth in school transportation expenses should be prioritized above non-essential state

spending. Unfortunately, this is not the case under the Governor's current executive budget proposal.

NYAPT members work closely with their school superintendents and school business officials to effectively manage costs. Unfortunately, with all that we do to control costs, there are still times when school transportation costs exceed expectations due to state and federal mandates and cost-drivers beyond our control.

The **biggest factors that contribute to increased costs in school transportation** are driver shortages, state mandates that require school districts to transport children with special needs, children in foster care and homeless children, children enrolled in charter schools and private and parochial schools. These are all very important transportation requirements; but their unpredictability cannot be understated for budgeting purposes.

Under the Governor's executive budget proposal, the unpredictability and uncontrollable nature of the aforementioned school transportation cost-drivers would not be covered; and **school districts would be forced to make cuts to school transportation**, this could reduce school transportation service across the state and potentially threaten the school district's ability to provide the safest transportation possible for school children.

Specifically, Governor Cuomo's executive budget proposal calls for the use of either the approved operating expense for school transportation for the base year or a figure based on the Consumer Price Index – **both of which have proven to not be accurate predictors of year-to-year increases or decreases in school transportation costs.**

NYAPT believes strongly that rather than arbitrarily capping student transportation aid, the state should **give school districts the legal authority and flexibility they need to adapt to ever-growing mandates and evolving student population.**

There are commonsense efficiencies and changes our members would implement to help reduce the cost of school transportation if the state of New York would recognize these cost-savings opportunities and provide school districts the proper legal authority to implement them.

Some of these **cost-saving measures include** allowing districts to **co-own facilities**, which would encourage districts to share services, reduce redundancies, and help district save money. Related to this concept, the state should also **incentivize school districts to share services** and reduce cost by allowing them to retain a portion of the savings realized through their shared service agreements without reducing their state aid.

Another student transportation cost-savings initiative the state legislature could embark on is **removing unnecessary and outdated mandates**. Specifically, it's time to **remove the back-lit school bus sign requirement**. Today's reflective sign and LED technology has made this legal requirement obsolete. Allowing for reflective signs will reduce the price of a school bus sold in New York State and would also strengthen the resilience of the school bus by reducing potential corrosion points and reduce long-term maintenance costs. We support Assemblyman MacDonald's bill, which would allow reflective school bus signs to be used; and believe it should be part of this year's state budget.

New York State should also **remove the mandate that requires an antiquated brake pressure device, called a wigwag**, to use on a school bus. Today's technology has rendered this mechanical device obsolete. Allowing school buses to use warning lights and messages similar to today's automobiles would save money and reduce maintenance costs. New York State is the only state in the union that mandates the use of a mechanical wigwag system to alert the school bus driver of an air brake system malfunction.

New York State must also address its requirements for the transportation of **homeless and foster care children** mandated by the **Office of Children and Family Services and local counties**, and transportation of **children with disabilities**. There are much smarter ways to allow school districts to approach the safe and efficient transportation of these children, but we need the flexibility and laws to do it prudently.

Finally, NYAPT would like to address two additional proposals put forth by the Governor in his budget proposal. First, we would like to **recommend that school transportation funding for pre-school be included in the Governor's \$15 million increase** in state aid for pre-school services. Second, NYAPT also stands in **opposition to moving BOCES funding an expense-based aid into the foundation aid formula**.

Thank you for this opportunity to inform you of the harmful school transportation funding proposals being put forth in the Governor's executive budget.

We hope you will strongly consider our cost-savings recommendations as you negotiate the 2020-2021 state budget.

We are available to discuss these recommendations with you further should you need additional information or insight.

Thank you.