



**Joint Education Oversight Committee
Student Transportation Testimony
Jason E. Warner, Greater Ohio Policy Center
November 17, 2016**

Chairman Hite, Vice Chairman Patterson and members of the Joint Education Oversight Committee, I want to thank you for providing me this opportunity to speak to you today about the issue of student transportation in Ohio.

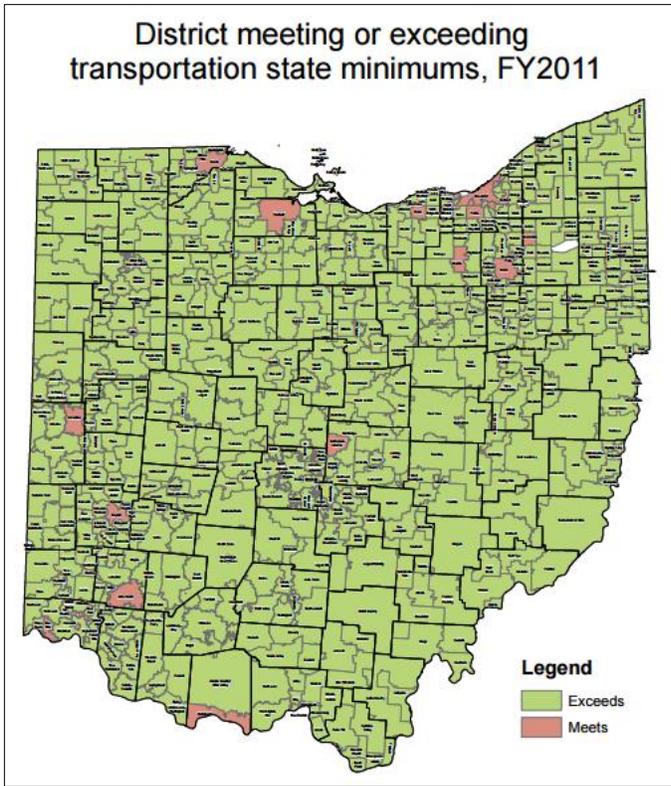
My name is Jason Warner and I am the Manager of Government Affairs at the Greater Ohio Policy Center. Greater Ohio is a nonprofit nonpartisan organization that is valued for its data-driven research. Our mission is to champion revitalization in Ohio to create economically competitive communities.

Education is a fundamentally important component in ensuring that Ohio has the opportunity to compete economically not just nationally, but around the world as well. And one of the most important components of a great education is the assurance that students can get to school in a safe and efficient manner. Over the course of two hearings, you have heard testimony from school leaders from Ohio's urban core, suburban and rural school districts about the challenges they face in transporting students to school on a daily basis. Far be it for me to challenge these officials and the knowledge that they bring to the table around these issues. But while the focus of these hearings has been centered around the traditional yellow school bus, I am here today to highlight alternatives to that most iconic symbol of school transportation and how an expanded view of school transportation can help to provide solutions to this issue.

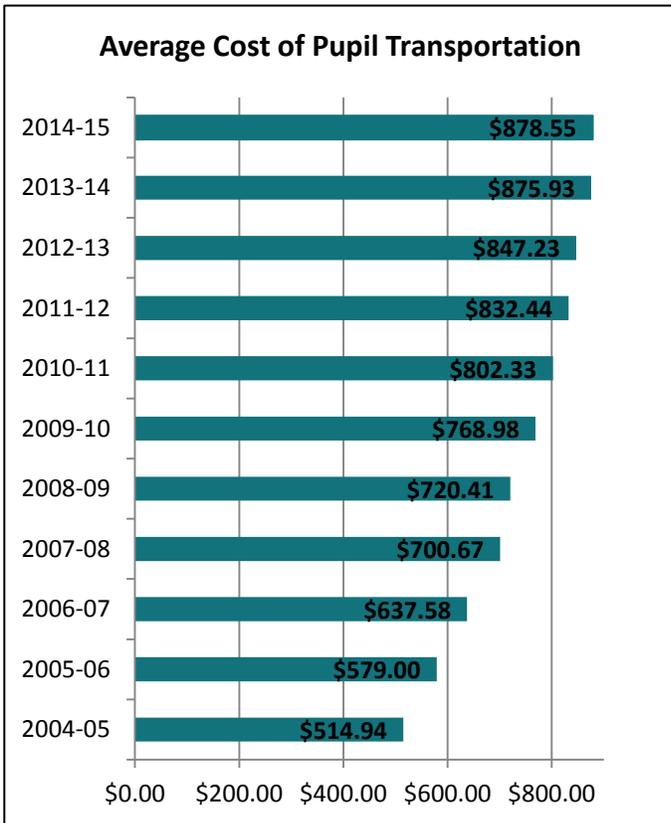
Background: History & Statistics of School Transportation in Ohio

Historically, students have utilized a variety of school transportation methods beyond the traditional yellow school bus, including walking, biking, parent/family transportation, even skateboards. Though these have not been provided by the local school district, they none the less meet the definition of student transportation, and come at little to no cost to the local school district.

At present, the Ohio Revised Code only defines student transportation as that which is provided via a district owned or operated school bus (ORC 3327.01). Ohio law mandates that all students in grades K-8 who reside 2 miles or more outside of a designated public school building be provided with student transportation. Since that mandate was first enacted in 1914 (initially only for 'rural and village school districts'), it has expanded, to include all elementary students (1921), private school students (1965) and community school students (1997). While the statutory requirement of mandatory transportation for students residing two miles or more from a school has not changed since it was first enacted 102 years ago, the number of school districts transporting students who reside closer than 2 miles has.



ODE Pupil Transportation. E. Farfan May 2011



Source: Ohio Department of Education

The map, at left, shows the number of school districts in Ohio which as of FY2011 (the most recent year available), currently exceed, or provide service above and beyond, the transportation state minimum of 2 miles or further away from a school building. Very few school districts only meet the state minimum, and roughly a handful of districts currently provide no transportation to students (excluding those that require it due to medical/physical requirements) due to the district strategically locating all school facilities less than two miles from all students.

It is easy to see why school bus transportation is popular and is viewed as the most beneficial option for student transportation. As has been highlighted by previous witnesses, it is convenient, especially for parents who are not available to take their child to school, it maximizes safety for the students, and it is dependable. But the one thing it is not, as has been demonstrated to this committee, is cheap. Ohio spent an average of **\$878.55 per student** for transportation during the 2014-15 school year.ⁱ Ten years ago, Ohio spent an average of \$514.94 per student – this represents an increase over the past decade of **more than 58%** for student transportation.ⁱⁱ

GOPC recognizes and agrees with the school districts and organizations that you have heard testimony from in the prior hearings that Ohio needs to do more to ensure students have access to safe and reliable forms of transportation, and we also agree that we must do more to ensure that we are doing it in a cost-effective manner. But as with so many other issues in education, we should not be limiting ourselves to a one-size-

fits-all policy. Greater Ohio Policy Center believes that any conversation about school transportation also needs to include expanding our definition of what school transportation is and providing local school districts with the tools necessary to help them develop a comprehensive travel plan that is tailored to meet the unique needs of their own school districts.

The Future of School Transportation

We believe that a key component to that conversation includes the incorporation of an active transportation policy into the current definition of school transportation. Active transportation – human powered mobility such as walking and bicycling – increases physical activity, provides balanced transportation choices, and fosters economically vibrant communities with a high quality of life.

In 1969, almost half of American students walked or bicycled to school. But that number has shrunk to a mere 13%.ⁱⁱⁱ Physical activity and recreational opportunities in schools have decreased during the same time period, creating new challenges for students' academic achievement, cognitive skills, behavior, and attitudes.^{iv} The overall decrease in daily physical activity corresponds with a dramatic increase in childhood obesity that has resulted in a nationwide health epidemic,^v including in our state, where we have found that roughly a third of all third graders are overweight or obese.^{vi}

At the same time, research on the safety of children walking and bicycling to school began in the U.S., and was highlighted by the release of the U.S. Department of Transportation publication "School Trip Safety and Urban Play Areas" in 1975. A steady decline in the number of students utilizing active transportation led to the formation of the Safe Routes to Schools initiative in the 1990's, with the goal of encouraging initiatives to reduce the number of children killed or injured while walking and bicycling to school.

Safe Routes to Schools as Cost Efficient and Safe Solutions and an Ohio Case Study

Ohio's Safe Routes to Schools initiative is led by the Ohio Department of Transportation and in the 10 years of program existence, had awarded \$64MM to 550 infrastructure, non-infrastructure and planning projects across 72 of the state's 88 counties, from major cities (Toledo, Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati) to suburbs (Chagrin Falls, Oregon) and small towns and villages (Village of Lucas).^{vii}

The Chagrin Falls school district is a perfect example of an active transportation focused Safe Routes to Schools program being successfully implemented. About 35 percent of the district's intermediate school students (grades 4-6) live within a mile of the school, and around 66 percent live within 2 miles. The town has an area of just 2.1 square miles (Note, the Chagrin Falls Exempted Village School District has an area of 12 square miles). Despite this, only 17 percent of intermediate school students walked or biked to school in 2009. Factors that lead to this enormous disparity in student transportation included physical barriers, including a lack of sidewalks, unsafe intersections with a lack of crossing guards, and policy barriers such as a prohibition on middle schoolers biking to school because there was no safe way for bikes to enter the school grounds without entering the flow of traffic from the adjacent high school.

With the support of a Safe Routes to Schools grant, the district was able to work with the village to install sidewalks where they were lacking, walking and biking paths on the school grounds to alleviate the issue of bike access to the campus, worked with the local police department to recruit and train 25 volunteer crossing guards, launched a Safe House program with 30 residences in the village marked as a 'Safe House', complete with identifying garden flags where students can take refuge, if needed, and made necessary safety improvements in coordination with the local government, designating "No Right on Red" policies during school hours at key intersections and enlisted the support of local law enforcement to enforce speed limits and yielding to pedestrians in crosswalks during school arrival and dismissal periods.

The successful implementation of this policy over a four year period resulted in a 54 percent increase in the number of students who regularly walk or bike to that same school, reducing the need for school bus purchases in the future.^{viii}

Active Transportation as Needed Policy in Ohio

This is just a single example of what can happen when an active transportation program is implemented in a school district that takes a comprehensive approach to ensuring student safety in getting students to school; and not all projects have to be as involved as what Chagrin Falls implemented. By modifying Ohio's current definition of student transportation, the legislature can empower local school districts to invest new or existing funding for school transportation in a wide variety of projects beyond the acquisition of new school buses. Programs can include local government partnerships on engineering projects to improve street crossings or the installation or expansion of sidewalks. Road improvement projects to add bike lanes or install signage that makes it clear that roadway need to be shared or that students frequent the routes during school days.

Programs can also include non-engineering projects that can range from educational programs for students and community members about bike safety, projects that encourage students to be more active by walking or biking to school, purchasing materials and recruiting community members to participate in 'Safe House' programs or volunteer crossing guards, or even implementation of so-called 'Walking School Bus' programs.

Walking School Bus programs follow a 'safety in numbers' concept, where a large number of students, under the supervision of one or more parents or adult volunteers, walk the students to school along a designated path. Students can either join along as the 'bus' passes along the path, or the students can meet at a preassigned location and all walk together. The Cincinnati Public School District has experimented with a walking school bus program, the Allegiance Project, which was "designed to bridge that gap for our walking student population, providing them a safe, reliable and fun form of transportation to and from school each day."^x While the Allegiance Project is current on hold because of a funding slag through the national grant utilized to support it^x, changes along the lines we are outlining today would make it easier for CPS and other school districts to fund these programs on their own, without the support of grants.

But by broadening our definition of school transportation to include more than the traditional yellow school bus, we can allow school districts to explore options that will be effective for their own communities, permit for innovative ideas, and promote healthier, more active lifestyles not just for students, but for the community at large.

This is not a one-size fits all solution. Active transportation and Safe Routes to Schools focused programs will not help to solve transportation issues in districts that cover several hundred square miles, nor will it help to alleviate issues of how to transport students electing to use school choice programs. But by broadening our definition of school transportation to include more than the traditional yellow school bus, we can allow school districts to explore options that will be

effective for their own communities, permit for innovative ideas, and promote healthier, more active lifestyles not just for students, but for the community at large. If a school district works with the local community to install more sidewalks in areas around school buildings, those sidewalks won't be rolled-up and stored away at the conclusion of the school day. As an equal benefit, sidewalks are typically far more cost effective, with a concrete sidewalk costing an average of \$6.32-\$8.07 per square foot^{xi}, and can last with normal wear and tear for anywhere from 10-25 or more years.^{xii}

Conclusion & Recommendation

*Expand the definition of school transportation to include **ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION** as an eligible use of transportation funding.*

The Greater Ohio Policy Center strongly encourages the committee to give serious consideration to ways to innovate student transportation beyond focusing on the traditional yellow school bus. By granting local school districts the ability to appropriate transportation dollars to projects beyond the purchase of buses, districts will have the ability to flex dollars in more effective, efficient ways – not to mention make those dollars go further by spending them on projects that will last twice as long as the usefulness of said school bus. A number of agencies, including the Ohio Departments of Transportation and Department of Health are already working on the implementation of an effective statewide active transportation policy, and GOPC believes that changes to the state definition of school transportation with the inclusion of an active transportation policy should similarly be made in conjunction with changes that the legislature may ultimately implement based on what it has heard in these hearings.

I have included with my testimony recommended language that could be considered to make the necessary changes to Ohio's current student transportation definition to empower school districts to create comprehensive transportation policies that are uniquely crafted to meet the needs of their residents. I hope this information proves helpful and valuable to you, and I would certainly invite you to reach out to Greater Ohio if you would like more information about how this could be implemented.

Chairman Hite, Vice Chairman Patterson and members of the Joint Education Oversight Committee, thank you for this opportunity to share with you our vision for how Ohio can become a leader in re-

imagining what school transportation looks like in the 21st Century. I would be happy to answer any questions that the committee may have.

ⁱ "Reimbursement Analysis Reports, FY05-FY15", Cost Analysis & Reimbursement Reports, Ohio Department of Education (Accessed November 4, 2016). <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Finance-and-Funding/School-Transportation/School-Transportation-Finance/Cost-Analysis-Reimbursement-Reports>

ⁱⁱ "State by State Information on School Transportation Expenditures as Compared with Safe Routes to School Funding," Safe Routes to Schools, (Downloaded October 24, 2016).

http://saferoutespartnership.org/sites/default/files/pdf/state_spending_on_busing_FINAL.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ "2009 National Household Travel Survey (NHTS)," U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration. (January 2010). <http://nhts.ornl.gov/publications.shtml>

^{iv} Singh A, Uijtdewilligen L, Twisk JWR, et al. "Physical Activity and Performance at School: A Systemic Review of the Literature Including a Methodological Quality Assessment." *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, 166(1): 49-55, 2012. <http://archpedi.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=1107683>

^v Church TS, Thomas DM, Tudor-Locke C, et al. "Trends over 5 Decades in U.S. Occupation-Related Physical Activity and Their Associations with Obesity." *PLoS ONE*, 6(5): e19657,

2011. www.plosone.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0019657; Ogden CL, Carroll MD, and Flegal KM.

"High Body Mass Index for Age Among US Children and Adolescents, 2003-2006." *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 299(20): 2401-2405, 2008. <http://jama.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=1028638> ; Goran MI,

Reynolds KD, and Lindquist CH. "Role of Physical Activity in the Prevention of Obesity in Children." *International Journal of Obesity*. 23(Suppl 3): S18-S33, 1999. www-hsc.usc.edu/~goran/PDF%20papers/R22.pdf

^{vi} Childhood Obesity, Ohio Department of Health. (Accessed November 4, 2016.)

<http://www.odh.ohio.gov/features/odhfeatures/Childhood%20Obesity/childhoodobesity.aspx>

^{vii} "Safe Routes to Schools in Ohio, 10 Years of Improving Safety", Ohio Safe Routes to Schools, Ohio Department of Transportation, (2016).

<http://www.dot.state.oh.us/Divisions/Planning/ProgramManagement/HighwaySafety/ActiveTransportation/Pages/SRTS10.aspx>

^{viii} "Chagrin Falls, Ohio: Comprehensive Safe Routes to Schools Program build around village cooperation and core goals of safety and encouragement," Garvey, Kathryn. <http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/program-tools/success-stories/chagrin-falls-ohio-comprehensive-safe-routes-school-program-built-arou>

<http://walkingschoolbus.cps-k12.org/>

^{ix} <http://walkingschoolbus.cps-k12.org/>

^x <http://local12.com/news/local/funding-for-safety-program-put-on-hold>

^{xi} http://www.homewyse.com/services/cost_to_install_concrete_sidewalk.html

^{xii} "How long should concrete driveways or sidewalks last?." Concrete Works, (March, 2015).

<http://www.concreteworksnj.com/how-long-should-concrete-driveways-or-sidewalks-last/>