

Submitted Testimony in Opposition – HB 3622
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Good morning Co-Chairs Berger and Barnhart and members of the Revenue Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to address this important issue. For the record, I am Chris Ellison, President of the Oregon Pupil Transportation Association and Director of Transportation, Greater Albany Public Schools.

It is my understanding that the proposed HB 3622 is intended to improve efficiencies through a change in the funding model for pupil transportation. The changes proposed in HB 3622 have me very concerned for several reasons:

1. Repealing the 1 and 1 ½ mile walk distances for students and allowing school boards to determine a “reasonable” distance for students to walk to school.

- a. The bill removes the mandatory nature of providing transportation as well as removing the specifics of distance. Allowing individual school boards to determine the distances for transportation may create statewide equity issues for student access to education. Do students now have to walk 5 miles to school in District A, but only ½ mile in District B? This bill transfers all risk from the state to local school boards without providing appropriate guidelines for service.
- b. Does this bill create safety issues? Yes – it will create inequities and create safety issues. Placing this responsibility on school boards makes this a very subjective process that may expose or create a liability exposure for the board members who make these decisions. The 1 and 1 ½ mile walk distances were put in place with oversight from ODE for a reason – student safety. What distances students have to walk to school should be thoroughly examined and not left open to individual decisions. ODE has a process in place that allows districts to examine safety related issues. Leaving the decision up to individual school districts without clear guidelines may put students at risk or in harm’s way. You cannot put a price on student safety.

2. Repealing the Bus and Garage Depreciation Fund, ORS.327.033

- a. It is a fact that new buses are safer and more efficient than the old buses they replace. By repealing the depreciation fund, districts have a disincentive to purchase new buses which maintains this safety and overall efficiency. This will also create a massive financial issue to districts in their debt obligations and ability in the future to replace buses, meet stringent emission standards as set forth by the Oregon Legislature, and recover costs for the garage.

3. Revises the method of calculating the transportation grant for the State School Fund distributions.

- a. Revising the method of calculating the transportation grant may prove to reduce the amount of state support and place a larger obligation on local districts. By moving to a block-type grant based on the previous three year period, this could provide districts an incentive to eliminate transportation services. The unintended result will be to punish many efficient school transportation systems. The average of the prior three years will have a negative impact on many school districts, large and small. The cost of doing business will still exist and now must be funded from the General Fund of the school district to provide the same level of service. This in itself forces an efficient district to examine their current service levels and reduce them or fund from monies that would go to the classroom.
- b. The economy has demonstrated great fluctuations and having a three year average may result in some unforeseen expenses, for example: predicting fuel prices, changing emission standards, or an influx of students that are protected by the McKinney-Vento Act.

4. This bill does not define service levels.

Again, it is my understanding that the proposed HB 3622 is intended to improve efficiencies through a change in the funding model for pupil transportation. The logic then would imply that school districts would alter their behavior and practices in response to this change which would result in improved efficiencies and provide districts with flexibility in their spending decisions. I would agree that all districts should be as efficient as possible in their business practices. How does this bill directly help them improve if there are inefficiencies? One funding model does not fit all districts, hence the current 70-80-90% reimbursement schedules.

I believe that this bill would lead to unintended consequences:

Now, when school districts are facing dramatic reductions, to add yet another variable that will have unintended consequences seems to be another difficult hurdle.

The proposed change in the funding model again does not have definitions or explanations to outline service levels or standards of efficiency. If the desire is to have more efficient, less costly transportation services, then help districts by educating and enlightening them in expected services levels, best practices, performance measures, and ways to gain improvements.

Changing the funding model without education and training may not yield the intended results - but simply shift the burden and negatively impact the classroom.

While the (noble) desire is to offer choices for districts to determine how they spend their money and improve the level of savings, it has been my experience as a manager that simply telling people to change does not prove to be effective. You must clarify your expectations and desired outcomes; provide training, tools, and resources to affect sustainable improvement.

My recommendation is to define funded service levels and acceptable expenses, clarify benchmarks and performance measures, and train and educate school districts in methods of efficiencies. I urge you to collaborate with pupil transportation and instructional professionals by designing toolkits for desired outcomes.

In closing, I would like to point out and remind the committee that the yellow school bus is by far the most efficient and safest form of land transportation in the world. The school bus is seven times safer than the family car. One school bus does the work of 36 cars (*source: American School Bus Council*). Oregon school buses travel over 67 million miles per year. Oregon should be proud that there have been no student fatalities in the last 35 years. Again, you cannot put a price on student safety. Thank you very much for your time and for allowing me to speak on this bill.