



TO: House Committee on Education
FROM: Stacy Michaelson, Government Affairs Administrator
DATE: February 22, 2023
RE: HB 3014

Chair Neron, Vice-Chairs Wright and Hudson, Members of the Committee:

For the record, I'm Stacy Michaelson and I represent the six school districts in East Multnomah County: Centennial, Corbett, David Douglas, Gresham-Barlow, Parkrose, and Reynolds; as well as Multnomah Education Service District. Collectively these districts serve roughly 40,000 students from highly diverse backgrounds.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 3014. I reached out to Rep. Neron about this concept after hearing from my districts about their challenges with student transportation. As it turned out, Oregon Walks had submitted a nearly identical request to Rep. Pham, so we have combined efforts on this bill.

For some history, my work on this topic began just over a year ago when Parkrose School District alerted me to a challenge they were having. The district had operated with a supplemental transportation plan for years, allowing them to serve students within the standard "walk zone" and to be reimbursed for those costs. If you've spent any time in Parkrose, it's immediately apparent why it would be unrealistic and unsafe to expect students to walk to school; the neighborhood includes a mix of busy, high-speed streets and narrow side streets lacking sidewalks. Unfortunately, in the 2021-22 school year, they were too short-staffed to operate all of their bus routes.

In an effort to not leave students without a safe method of getting to school, the district looked to short-term solutions. They purchased TriMet passes for all school students using ESSER dollars. Metro awarded a grant to help with the coordination of walking and biking groups. These were indeed short-term solutions as they relied upon one-time funds. Once those funds went away, the district would be left in a lurch because none of those services are reimbursable expenses under the State School Fund Transportation Grant.

If Parkrose wanted to continue using those supports, they would have to foot the bill out of their General Operating Budget. Parkrose is a district with limited resources. Unlike some districts, they do have a local operating levy to support additional costs. It felt like the district was between a rock and a hard place. Current policy is essentially "If you run buses, you'll be

reimbursed. If you don't have the staff to run all your buses, you'll be reimbursed less, and it's all on you to figure out how to get kids to school safely."

We met with ODE staff who were very generous with their time in explaining the various policies and helping Parkrose to problem-solve. However, the answer remained unchanged: the services the district wanted to provide to families were not allowed transportation expenses and it would take legislative action to change that.

Parkrose continues to operate with a scaled-back transportation plan, though they have done their best to provide services to students on the *most* unsafe routes.

The problem for another of the districts in our region was similar. Earlier this school year, Reynolds School District was regularly short bus drivers due to staff being out on allotted (and deserved) sick days. This left Reynolds requiring drivers to double up on runs, going out to pick up students, dropping them at school, then going out for another group of students. When these route adjustments happen at the last minute, it can disrupt families' schedules and students' learning time. Rather than put families in this situation of ongoing uncertainty, the district decided it would be better to at least provide consistency for the sake of families' ability to plan.

In the fall of 2022, Reynolds requested a waiver from the State Board of Education with the intention of canceling 11 high school bus routes. Instead, the district planned to provide students on those routes with TriMet passes and to run shuttles from the nearest TriMet stops to reduce the need for students to transfer bus lines. The State Board approved the plan, but there was no ability for Reynolds to use their Transportation Grant funds to cover these alternative costs, even though the district would be saving 11 routes' worth of expenses. Fortunately for Reynolds, the district had access to a local grant from TriMet to offset some of the projected expense, but anything beyond that would come out of the district's General Fund.

As it turned out, Reynolds ultimately determined that with rising violence, it was not appropriate to serve students in their community with public transit at this time. This highlights how seriously districts take student safety and the fact that districts don't consider alternative transportation options lightly.

We know that school buses are the safest means of transporting students. But when busing isn't an option, such as when districts don't have enough drivers, districts should have some flexibility to serve students differently without taking a financial hit. Reducing the district's transportation grant means the district has less money in the General Fund to put toward recruiting and retaining much-needed bus drivers.

That said, we understand the need for standards for student transportation. There should be sideboards to ensure student safety. And any increase in the Transportation Grant is money not being distributed to districts statewide in their General Operating Grant. It is our goal to craft amendments that provide appropriate sideboards for the use of alternative transportation

options when business isn't an option. Our aim is to not to give districts any more money, rather just to give them greater flexibility over the funds to which they would be entitled for busing.

We recognize there are policy elements to be worked out with partners as well as logistical and accounting elements to sort through with ODE.

But it is our hope that you you can agree with the need for this policy and that, when we come back to you with amendments, you will vote yes on HB 3014.

Thank you.