



March 21, 2022

The Honorable Nancy Skinner
California State Senate
1021 O Street, Suite 8630
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Senate Bill 878 (Skinner) School Transportation (as introduced)
Position: Concern

Dear Senator Skinner:

The California Association of School Business Officials (CASBO) represents over 24,000 school business officials in public education leading operational, fiscal, and budget offices in local educational agencies (LEAs) across the state. Our members are charged with ensuring LEAs are fiscally solvent and operating to provide services, materials, equipment, and facilities to support the education of California's 5.9 million students.

CASBO has reviewed SB 878 and has taken a CONCERN position. We have appreciated the opportunity to meet with your staff, share our concerns with the proposed legislation and look forward to continued dialogue. CASBO's concerns are around:

1. Supply, Demand, and Infrastructure
2. Proposed new funding system
3. Staff Shortage

CASBO has been active in prior legislative and budget efforts to ensure that school transportation is funded adequately, working closely with numerous education stakeholders. CASBO agrees that access to quality education begins with the ability of pupils to attend school and, home-to-school transportation (HTST) provides a critical component of equitable access, particularly for high-needs students without alternate modes of transportation. We applaud your efforts to bring attention to the need for additional funding for HTST, however, SB 878 presents implementation challenges, specifically pertaining to whether LEAs will have the capacity, staff, and infrastructure to provide nearly every student with transportation services by the 2023-2024 school year.

Existing Law

California does not require districts to transport students to and from school. Instead, state law gives discretion to the district governing board to provide pupil transportation, "whenever in the judgment of the board the transportation is advisable and good reasons exist" and the ability to contract with local transit providers to bus students to and from school. Federal law requires districts to provide transportation to students with disabilities, if required by their IEP, and to homeless students.

This bill would provide universal HTST for students to and from their neighborhood school, for free, and reforms the state's transportation funding mechanism with a state reimbursement rate, which does not accurately reflect the entire cost of establishing, expanding, and operating these services.

Supply, Demand, and Infrastructure

There are limited companies that manufacture alternatively fueled school buses. The company Lion Electric has been working to become a leader in the all-electric school bus industry. From 2016 to 2021, they have delivered over 300 all-electric school buses in North America, about 60 buses a year for at least all 50 states, most recently delivering 10 buses to the Los Angeles Unified School District. These buses seat 72 passengers and can travel up to 155 miles on a single charge.

According to a suburban school district in Los Angeles County that contracts with their local transit agency, educates nearly 10,000 students and currently transports 750 students, using 25 buses. Should the district need to offer transportation services to 8,000 (80% of their student population), the district would need an additional 50 buses.

According to a rural school district in Humboldt County that educates 1,300 students, use 12 buses to transport 637 students. Should the district need to offer transportation services to 1,040 students (80% of their student population), the district would need an additional 14 buses.

According to an urban district school district in Fresno County that educates nearly 74,000 students, currently transports approximately 15,000 students, using 103 buses. Should the district need to offer transportation to 59,200 students (80% of their student population), the district would need about 400 additional buses.

Another urban school district in Alameda County serves 35,000 students and does not generally provide general education home to school transportation. Education Code section 41856 identifies an apportionment for school transportation and the district decided to use their funding to purchase bus passes from their local transit system and give to students. It is unclear how this proposal to offer students transportation will impact the existing local transit system and how the proposed reimbursement mileage formula play a role in apportionments for this district and others in similar situation.

School districts are currently waiting 12-18 months to receive buses that have already been purchased from the manufacturer and will need to account for facility space to park, service, and maintain additional buses purchased. Districts who contract for transportation services will need to account for expanded services, relying on their contractors to meet the additional demand for service.

Funding System

Districts currently pay for transportation out of their own apportionment funds through the Local Control Funding Formula. Over the years, two important state studies on school transportation funding were published by: the [California State Auditor Home to School Transportation Program: The Funding Formula Should Be More Equitable \(March 2007\)](#) and the [Legislative Analyst's Office Review of School Transportation in California \(February 25, 2014\)](#). These reports identified that school transportation is woefully underfunded and provided recommendations to improve funding for school transportation. The LAO report highlights that school districts spent approximately \$1.4 billion statewide on pupil transportation in the 2011-12 school year. The amount received in state reimbursement by districts and county offices of education varies but the statewide average reimbursement is about 35% of approved costs.

Since the amount received by districts has been flat funded with the enactment of the Local Control Funding Formula, without recognition of inflation costs, the current state allocation has become disassociated with the actual expenditure of operating transportation services. Public transit is more

available in urban districts, but even with the partnership of alternative busing options, the state does not currently have the capacity to meet the conditions in SB 878.

For many districts, the start-up costs to supplement an existing fleet or begin a new one would be considerable. The mileage-based funding system does not address the cost differentials of various types of school districts (urban/suburban/rural), as well as the capital costs required to expand existing services.

Staffing Shortage

California's existing HTST program is experiencing a severe staffing shortage, which is further impacted by challenges in retaining and recruiting bus drivers. For district leaders, staffing difficulties add another layer of turmoil to the already challenging task of keeping schools running, especially during a pandemic. Demand for bus drivers grew with the return of fully open school buildings, creating a massive competition for workers.

Edjoin.org currently shows that there are 925 vacancies for bus drivers throughout the state. The new demands of accommodating services for the Universal Transitional Kindergarten, the Expanded Learning Opportunity Program, and the implementation of SB 328 (Statutes of 2019, Chapter 868) – which requires later school start times for middle schools and high schools, only adds to the existing bus driver shortage.

This position requires training and the attainment of a special driver certification from the California Highway Patrol (CHP), which is a program that will need to be scaled up to accommodate the increased need for new school bus drivers.

Recommendation

CASBO recommends adequate funding for the existing home-to-school transportation program, specifically providing cost of living adjustment and raising the base funding to address rising cost pressures to transport students safely. The aspirational goals set in SB 878 can be met with the current program and distribution methodology if we commit ongoing Proposition 98 funds to adequately fund this program. We urge that you reconsider creating a complicated and inequitable structure and build upon the current structure to ensure that LEAs can support their existing programs, expand capacity, in a realistic and prudent manner.

Thank you for your consideration. Should you have any questions, please contact Elizabeth Esquivel at eesquivel@casbo.org.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Esquivel
Senior Director of Policy and Governance
California Association of School Business Officials