

New York School Bus Contractors Association

Testimony
Joint Legislative Hearing on Education
2019-2020 Executive Budget
Legislative Office Building, Hearing Room B, State Street, Albany

Our Priorities...

Safely Transporting School Children
Helping School Districts Manage Transportation Costs
Protecting our Labor Force

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Good Morning.

My name is Bree Allen; I am the President of the New York School Bus Contractors Association and the Regional Manager for The Trans Group. We operate over 1500 school buses from Ulster County down to Suffolk County, NY.

I am here today proudly representing the New York School Bus Contractors Association. We are an organization comprising nearly 100 private pupil transportation companies that provide safe, reliable and cost-effective student transportation for over 300 school districts in New York State – transporting over 2 million children a day.

In addition, school bus contractors employ approximately 50,000 people with good paying jobs with benefits and operate roughly 30,000 school vehicles in New York State.

I want to thank all the members of the joint committee on education for affording the New York School Bus Contractors Association the opportunity to present an overview of our 2019-2020 budget recommendations.

We appreciate the positive working relationship we have with the legislature, Governor, the school districts we serve and the over 50,000 professionals who work to make sure every student is provided a safe ride to and from school. School buses are, and have always been, the safest way for children to travel to and from school. School buses also are the safest form of transportation bar none; a fact we are extremely proud of and work very hard for.

This year, we are recommending the legislature once again include a sales tax exemption for school buses and related items used for pupil transportation in the 2019-2020 executive budget.

On average, more than \$8,000 of sales tax is charged for each new school bus that is on the road. The cost associated with this tax — as well as taxes on school bus parts and fuel — is passed along from transportation providers to school districts. School districts, which are funded by both local taxpayers and the state, are forced to use the resources of residents, and even more ironically, the state itself in the form of school aid, to fund its own tax. There is simply no public benefit to the sales tax structure imposed on school buses. Furthermore, exemption from sales tax would help control school property taxes through the competitive bid process.

Eliminating sales tax on school buses would also serve to offset a variety of unpredictable and uncontrollable financial challenges facing school bus operators today, from clean-fuel regulations to rising insurance premiums. Sales tax relief would allow the school bus industry in New York to address wage increases for school bus drivers, matrons and other transportation personnel, as well as allowing purchases of additional safety equipment and resources. One of our greatest duties is to protect our children by maintaining and continually upgrading our state's fleet of yellow buses so that our children benefit from the latest technologies and are ensured the highest level of safety without straining a school districts budget.

And to add a bit of perspective, if the same contractor decided to instead buy a yacht, racehorse, plane, ferry boat, tractor, semi-trailer, fishing vessel, coach bus or transit bus, any of those could qualify for full or partial sales tax exemptions. The legislature and Governor exempted private coach buses from the sales tax back in the mid-90's because of the public and environmental benefits of riding a bus; it seems logical that school buses which produce direct public and environmental benefits should receive the same treatment.

The New York School Bus Contractors Association also supports Governor Cuomo's proposal in his executive budget to increase the penalties for drivers who illegally pass a school bus, a proposal the association has actively supported for the better part of decade. The single most important thing that we do as school bus contractors is to provide the safest ride possible to and from school. Unfortunately, with estimates showing as many as 50,000 drivers in New York illegally passing a stopped school bus every day school is in session, it is clear that as a state, more needs to be done to ensure maximum student safety. Illegal passing is the biggest threat to school bus riders today.

Therefore, the association is renewing its call for driver education surrounding school bus safety. We are actively supporting Assemblywoman Linda Rosenthal (AB605) and Senator Anna Kaplan's bill (SB 2960) which would educate New York drivers about the dangers of illegally passing a school bus by requiring a school bus safety component to the pre-licensing written test given by the Department of Motor Vehicles and mandate that there be at least one question pertaining to school bus safety. Ensuring that drivers are educated about the rules of the road before being licensed by NYS is the critical first step.

The Governor's budget proposal would also authorize school districts to install stop-arm cameras on school buses and require students to wear seatbelts while on school buses. The Association is in favor of all decisions regarding stop arm cameras and use of seat belt to be made at the local

school district level where they have the most familiarity with the challenges in regard to funding, timing, enforcement, safety, and liability issues.

As transportation providers for more than half of the school-age children in this state, we have a record of safety, quality, and cost effectiveness that is unparalleled. We are proud of the work we do, and the services we provide. We're always striving to do better for the school districts who entrust us with those services too.

We are here today, not asking for an increase in spending for school transportation, instead we are here to provide the Legislature with our professional insights, opinion and to provides smart budget options that will help control spending, and most of all, ensure we are able to provide the safest school transportation services possible. Thank you very much for your time today. We are here to help, so please do not hesitate to call upon us. We look forward to working with you and the Governor to improve our transportation system, reduce unnecessary costs and most importantly—keep our children safe.

