

TO: Senate Transportation Committee
FROM: Gerry Wosewick, Executive Director
DATE: September 14, 2023
RE: Draft Testimony for Senate Transportation Committee



Draft Testimony for Senate Transportation Committee

I would like to start by taking this opportunity to thank Chairman Langerholc, Vice Chair Stefano and the Transportation committee for having me. My name is Gerry Wosewick, and I am the Executive Director at the Pennsylvania School Bus Association. My purpose here is to discuss pressing concerns that confront the School Bus Industry and the continued transportation of students to and from school districts within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Before I begin, I would like to provide an introduction to the Pennsylvania School Bus Association (PSBA). Established in 1980, the PSBA comprises approximately 300 school transportation contractors and industry partners. The majority of our membership consists of multi-generational family-run businesses. These dedicated members of the PSBA provide gainful employment to approximately 13,000 individuals within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and operate a fleet of over 11,000 vehicles each day. It is noteworthy that over 1.7 million students within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania commence their educational journey aboard our iconic yellow school buses. This figure includes over 300,000 special needs students, whom we refer to as "exceptional learners," attending schools and specialized programs throughout the Commonwealth.

Pennsylvania distinguishes itself in several aspects of student transportation. While many states have their school buses owned and operated by either the state or a single entity, our state entrusts small business owners with the vital responsibility of transporting our precious cargo to and from their School District. Within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, over 80% of school districts rely on school bus contractors, such as those that form the PSBA.

The primary mission of the PSBA is to provide comprehensive programs, education, and services aimed at promoting and nurturing the highest degree of safety in the transportation of school children. Furthermore, we are committed to enhancing the quality of student transportation through professional management. The PSBA collaborates closely with various Pennsylvania organizations and government agencies to advance its mission and achieve the objectives set forth by its membership.

Through our collaborative efforts with our membership and in partnership with other key agencies, such as the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT), the Pennsylvania State Police, and the Federal Motor Carriage Safety Administration (FMCSA), and others, we have succeeded in establishing and maintaining the safest mode of transportation for our students as they journey to and from their homes to places of education.

In the realm of student transportation, our contractors and drivers perceive their roles as more than just jobs. They recognize they are entrusted with transporting the future of our Commonwealth, and their responsibilities extend far beyond the simple act of pick-up and drop-off. Often, our contractors and drivers are engaged in transporting students to their athletic events, attending games, or participating in Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings. Many of them are parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles

within the community, thereby establishing a vested interest in the education and safety of the children they serve. Safety is paramount, and ensuring the secure transportation of students to their schools constitutes our most vital responsibility. A student's day commences when they board the bus and concludes when they disembark from it. Our drivers are often the first and last person they see each day.

In a few years, the students we transport on our school buses will hopefully be serving in the legislature, akin to yourselves, and laboring tirelessly to dismantle barriers to education. It is essential to recognize that the yellow school bus remains the safest mode of student transportation. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, students are 70 times more likely to arrive at school safely when they take a school bus, as compared to other modes of transportation, such as cars, bicycles, or walking. Additionally, the American School Bus Council reports that school buses keep over 17 million cars off the road each year, contributing significantly to road safety and congestion

In all 50 states, it is illegal to pass a stopped school bus with its red lights flashing and stop-arm extended. Regrettably, despite these laws, between 2000 and 2020, 51 children lost their lives due to this unlawful activity. Many others suffered injuries. According to the most recent observational driver survey conducted in September 2022, an estimated 41.8 million illegal passing violations occur during a 180-day school year in the United States (source: <https://www.nasdpts.org/stop-arm-violations>). The loss of lives and the injuries sustained by these children represent a wholly preventable tragedy.

School bus drivers shoulder numerous responsibilities while behind the wheel. They are rigorously trained to remain vigilant for vehicles engaged in illegal passing. Their primary objective is to ensure the safety of the students, either by retaining them on the bus or alerting them to potential hazards. Subsequently, they strive to document the incident, including the vehicle's description and license plate details. However, the paramount concern remains the safety of the students, often rendering the identification of the violating vehicle impractical.

The utilization of cameras to capture instances of illegal passing enables school bus drivers to maintain their focus on safeguarding our Commonwealth's most precious cargo as they board and disembark from the bus. Furthermore, it alleviates the concern associated with documenting the necessary information required for prosecuting offenders.

When it comes to school bus safety, automated cameras help protect the future leaders of our Commonwealth, keep drivers focused on safe pickup and drop-off of students, and help cut down on illegal passing that puts precious lives in danger. SB 851 and HB 1284 ensures law enforcement has the ability to continue prosecute drivers that are needlessly and selfishly putting children in danger. It is our hope that with this legislation we are able to crack down on this growing issue and inform drivers of the necessary safety precautions when approaching a school bus and a school zone. We are proud to support SB 851 and HB 1284 and look forward to seeing our results in action while we work to keep students safe.

In conclusion, the Pennsylvania School Bus Association remains unwaveringly committed to its mission of ensuring the highest degree of safety in the transportation of school children and elevating the quality of student transportation through professional management. It is my fervent hope that today's testimony has underscored the pivotal role played by the Pennsylvania School Bus Association and its members in guaranteeing the safe and dependable transportation of over 1.7 million students daily,

including exceptional learners, to and from their educational institutions each day. Our dedicated school bus contractors, many of whom represent local, multi-generational family-run businesses, have served as the cornerstone of student transportation for decades. Their dedication to safety and professionalism remains steadfast.

We eagerly anticipate collaborating with the Senate Transportation Committee to identify solutions that will not only benefit our industry but, most importantly, serve the students who rely on our services for their education. I extend my heartfelt gratitude for your time and consideration, and I stand ready to entertain any questions or engage in further discussions on these crucial matters.

Thank you.