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**FINAL REPORT OF THE
SENATE STUDY COMMITTEE ON SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION,
NUTRITION, AND SUPPORT PERSONNEL**

2000

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Charge of the Committee

The Senate Study Committee on School Transportation, Nutrition, and Support Personnel was created by Senate Resolution 374 during the 2000 Session of the Georgia General Assembly. The Committee was charged with undertaking a “study of the conditions, needs, issues, and problems” of school support personnel, including the mission and scope of their responsibilities, whether there is a need for additional qualifications, training, and review among these groups, and their compensation and benefits structure.

The resolution provided that the Lieutenant Governor appoint the Committee’s chairperson and members. Senator Jack Hill was appointed as Chair. The Senators serving on the Committee were Senator Richard Marable, Senator Robert Lamutt, Senator Vincent Fort, and Senator George Hooks. The legislative staff members assigned to the Committee were Bradford Borum and Jill Turman of the Senate Research Office.

The Committee held several meetings in the months of November and December and took testimony from a variety of interested groups, including the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), local school systems, the Georgia School Board Association (GSBA), and the Georgia School Food Service Association (GSFSA).

B. Background

Georgia’s student transportation and nutrition systems reflect the needs of an ever growing state population. Georgia has over 17,500 qualified school bus drivers, transporting over 1,000,000 students per year. Approximately 12,000 route buses travel almost 140,000,000 annual route miles.¹ Over 176,000,000 lunches and 61,000,000 breakfasts are served annually, with approximately 74 percent of eligible students participating.²

Unfortunately, state funding has not kept pace with the costs of these programs. Although \$10 million has been placed in the FY 2001 Supplemental Budget and another \$20 million earmarked for FY 2002, the last ten years have seen a dramatic decrease in the percentage of state funding to local school systems for student transportation, from 54 percent of total local expenditures in FY 1991 to only 42 percent in FY 1999. This continuing downward trend will result in local systems receiving only about 37 percent in state funds in FY 2001.³

¹1998-99 Data from the GaDOE, www.doe.k12.ga.us/transportation.

²1998-99 Data from the GaDOE, www.doe.k12.ga.us/nutrition.

³Testimony by Sam McCullough, Director, Student Transportation Services, GaDOE, on November 28, 2000, Senate Study Committee on School Transportation, Nutrition, and Support Personnel.

Funding difficulties in these programs are exacerbated by personnel issues. The state minimum salary range for bus drivers is no longer applicable in all areas of the state since most local job markets have moved well beyond the minimum point and are forced to pay much higher compensation in order to fill driver vacancies. Not only are support personnel salaries low, but employees who participate in the Public School Employees Retirement System (PSERS) cannot retire until age 65, regardless of their number of years of service. Furthermore, unused sick leave cannot be counted toward retirement for those employees in the PSERS (members of the Teacher Retirement System can do so), leading to high absentee rates among support personnel. These, and related issues, became the focus of the Committee in its efforts to illuminate some of the concerns in these areas and to lay the groundwork for their resolution.

II. TRANSPORTATION ISSUES

A. Program Basics

Transportation is provided for students who reside more than one and one-half miles from the school located within their attendance areas.⁴ Many local school systems provide transportation for students within walking distance and across attendance areas, at local expense, due to student safety concerns.

Local school systems have the responsibility of operating student transportation programs within their systems or contracting for the service. The Georgia State Board of Education promulgates rules and regulations for student transportation which are not set forth in state law.

Local school systems must instruct students on safe school bus riding procedures to ensure their safety while riding buses.⁵ Safe riding instruction may be provided by the classroom teacher using the curriculum set forth by GaDOE or the local system's transportation department, or a combination of the two.

Local school systems are required to have all school buses inspected annually by the Georgia Department of Public Safety.⁶ School buses must also be inspected monthly by system personnel to ensure that students are riding in safe vehicles.

Pupil transportation allocations are based on information contained in the most recent transportation surveys. Surveys are conducted in each of three transportation programs, regular, special education, and vocational. A local school system is allocated funds for buses up to the number determined by the survey; however, if a school system operates fewer buses, funds are reduced to match the number of buses actually in operation. Pupil transportation funds are in the

⁴O.C.G.A. §20-2-188.

⁵Rule 160-5-3-.13, Administrative Rules and Regulations of the State of Georgia.

⁶Rule 160-5-3-.03, Administrative Rules and Regulations of the State of Georgia.

categorical grants program.

Local school systems have the responsibility of providing initial training for all school bus drivers. The system is also required to maintain a file on each driver to ensure that he or she is qualified to drive a bus, and to include such things as physical exams, drivers' licenses, training records, fingerprints, and drug test results. Not only are these files checked under GaDOE standards, but also by the Department of Public Safety under the requirements for the testing of commercial drivers.

Recent media attention; however, has revealed some disturbing aspects to the way background checks for school bus drivers are currently conducted. According to an Atlanta Journal-Constitution/WSB Channel 2 Action News analysis of the driving and criminal histories of approximately 7,500 Georgia school bus drivers, hundreds have questionable records, ranging from excessive speeding, DUI, driving with suspended licenses, and prison time. Although more than half of the state's bus drivers have exemplary driving records, one in six has a serious violation on his or her personal or professional driving record according to the study.

One concern is that Georgia does not require school districts to review veteran bus drivers' driving histories. Most metro Atlanta districts do at least annual checks of personal and professional driving backgrounds, but normally see only seven years' worth of driving history. The Georgia Department of Public Safety can pull lifetime histories, but its system is set up to provide only three- and seven-year print-outs. School districts can ask for a lifetime report, but most are not aware that they have that option. Even with complete information, the state does not offer guidelines to evaluate driving histories, and many local districts have no written policies either.

While state law requires that all Georgia school employees submit to a criminal background check stretching back as far as state and federal records go, there are some records that the school district will not have access to. Anyone sentenced under the state's First Offender Act, for example, will not be shown as having a criminal record since the statute is designed to give first offenders a fresh start. Georgia law does not specify which types of infractions or criminal records should preclude an individual from driving a school bus.

School districts have up to 200 days to complete the background checks. That means that bus drivers can drive their routes for up to seven months before an investigation is complete. Due to a backlog of paper tickets from various jurisdictions, some driving infractions do not make it onto the state's computers for months or even a year so recent offenses can go undetected by local school districts.⁷

B. Funding Concerns

⁷Pickel, Mary Lou, "Traffic Violations, Suspensions, Criminal Pasts—And They're Driving School Buses in Georgia," The Atlanta Journal and Constitution, February 26, 2001, 1(A).

Currently, there are 8,765 buses appropriated for the transportation of school students. Local school systems operate approximately 3,500 buses above the number of state supported buses. Of the 1,444,937 students in Georgia, 923,848 live beyond the one and one-half mile point, and are thus transported by survey for state reimbursement. Local systems provide transportation for well over 100,000 students who are not eligible for state reimbursement.⁸ Additionally, federal law requires that students with disabilities be provided a free and appropriate education, which may require transportation if it is determined that the student needs it because of his or her disabling condition. In some systems, special needs students comprise twelve to eighteen percent of the overall student population, but the state may fund as little as five percent of these systems' transport costs.

The amount requested by GaDOE for student transportation in FY 2001 was \$178,804,488 for 8,765 allotted buses. The state appropriated \$154,606,489. During FY 1999 (the latest year for which figures are available) local systems operated 12,343 route buses and expended \$358,488,948 for student transportation.[%] Factor in insurance, capital outlay for buses, and salaries and benefits for drivers and it becomes obvious that local systems are providing extensive services beyond the state base program. Local expenditures are expected to continue to rise just as they have for the past ten years.⁹

There are only two sources of funds available to local school systems for student transportation: state funds and local funds. In order for local school systems to provide the necessary transportation services to students, local taxpayers have seen increases in their property taxes. From FY 1994 to FY 1999, local school systems have increased local property taxes to fund an additional \$95.5 million in additional student transportation costs. The state has increased its funding during this period by only \$21.5 million.¹⁰

Local systems have not earned any additional school bus allotments since 1998, although the number of students in Georgia has increased dramatically. Currently, the buses funded by the state are receiving operational funds at 77 percent of calculated earnings and receiving replacement funds at 83 percent of calculated earnings.¹¹

Systems are currently on a ten year replacement cycle for conventional diesel powered buses, a rule which is mandated by the State Board of Education. Systems can keep such vehicles past the

⁸McCullough.

[%]These figures do not include fuel costs.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Testimony by Dr. Allene McGill, Superintendent of Forsyth County Schools, November 28, 2000, Senate Study Committee on Student Transportation, Nutrition, and Support Personnel.

¹¹McCullough.

ten year mark, but the state stops replacement funds after that time. Some systems believe that a fourteen year replacement cycle may be more realistic. Systems sometime average three replacement buses a year, but some years may be as high as ten depending on the age of the fleet.

Maintaining buses becomes doubly difficult since diesel mechanics are much harder to find in a good economy. Several systems have found the cost of competent diesel mechanics has doubled in recent years, and due to the fact that only head mechanics are allowed to become members of the Teachers Retirement System (TRS) they have some of the same concerns as other support personnel as far as the retirement age limitation mentioned previously and unused sick leave not counting toward retirement.

In FY 2001, \$44,780,847 will be earned in operations costs by local systems. Only 19.7 percent of that money is for mechanics' salaries, which means the state's contribution to the salaries of these personnel will be \$8.8 million. Local systems spent over \$27 million in operations salaries last year. Adding to the strain is the fact that trainers and other associated costs, not just mechanics' salaries, must be covered by these monies.

Local school systems also find it very difficult to recruit, train, and retain adequate numbers of school bus drivers. Salaries range anywhere from \$10,800 to about \$16,000 per year, depending on experience. Some systems report an average driver salary of approximately \$12,000 per year. The state pays local systems only \$7,238 toward driver salaries. In FY 1999, local systems spent \$141,641,376 while the state allotted \$63,441,070, or approximately 42 percent of total salary expenditures. For the same year, the state allotted \$1,096,375 for sick leave, while local systems expended over \$2.5 million. The amount of sick leave with which the state assists local systems averages \$125 per driver annually.¹² For teachers the amount is \$150. Some systems pay over \$4,000 in benefits per driver, including health insurance, dental insurance, life insurance, disability insurance, FICA, Medicare, and supplemental retirement.¹³

One metro-Atlanta county reports 38 percent turnover among drivers within their first year. The number skyrockets to 70 percent by the third year. Other systems report that for every three drivers they train they lose two, usually to trucking companies with better salaries and benefits. A representative from the GaDOE stated that "a good economy equals no bus drivers."

Aside from being in desperate need of drivers, systems report that they also need school bus monitors. Student conduct on buses is sometimes a safety concern. Local systems say they need monitors to help maintain order and discipline on the buses. Systems may pay anywhere from \$9,000 to \$13,000 per year for monitors. Since there is no state allocation, local systems currently absorb all of those costs.

¹²Ibid.

¹³McGill.

Technology costs pose another problem for local systems. Better equipment for zoning and bus routing is needed. Likewise, safety equipment such as cameras are becoming increasingly necessary in order to help maintain discipline on the buses. Cameras may cost \$1,000 to \$1,200 per unit.¹⁴

If the percentage of state participation in this required program decreases further, local taxpayers will be required to pick up the additional costs. The extra buses required by the increase in students will also increase local participation. Even with the state's extra help in the FY '01 and FY '02 budgets, local systems are covering more miles and paying more money than ever before for student transportation costs, and those costs are only expected to increase in coming years.¹⁵ The Committee thinks it extremely important that ways be found to lessen the tremendous burden that local systems are now carrying in trying to provide adequate transportation for their students.

III. FOOD SERVICE ISSUES

A. Program Basics

The School and Community Nutrition Program housed in the GaDOE has three major areas of responsibility:

- 1) school lunch, breakfast, milk, and after-school snacks;
- 2) commodity food distribution, The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP); and
- 3) Nutrition education and food service management training.¹⁶

Like student transportation, the nutrition program is governed by state law. Rules and regulations promulgated by both the State Board of Education as well as the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GPSC) also apply. Certification for supervisors, classification for managers, personnel training, and sick leave are some of the areas that are covered.

On the whole, lunches are a good value and Georgia ranks third among the states in both total student participation and paid student participation. Seventy-seven percent of students in attendance participate compared with the national average of fifty-six percent. Fifty-three percent of participating students are served free or reduced-price lunches compared with fifty-seven percent nationally. The after-school snack program, although new and currently in only 564 schools, appears to be very popular. Similarly, the breakfast program is offered in about 90 percent of schools and

¹⁴Testimony by Dr. Jesse E. Bradley, Superintendent of Griffin-Spalding County Schools, November 28, 2000, Senate Study Committee on Student Transportation, Nutrition, and Support Personnel.

¹⁵McCullough.

¹⁶Testimony by Annette Bomar-Hopgood, Director of School and Community Nutrition, Georgia Department of Education, December 28, 2000, Senate Study Committee on School Transportation, Nutrition, and Support Personnel.

85 percent of districts offer breakfast in all of their schools.¹⁷

The second component of the program, food distribution to needy families, is done through the GaDOE since no other state agency was prepared to take it when the program was first instituted. Approximately 95 percent of the food from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) goes to schools, the rest to needy families. Distribution to the needy families is a \$3-5 million initiative and requires working with community action agencies and food banks, which are very competitive.¹⁸

The third component of the program, nutrition education and food service management training, is handled for the most part at the local level. Classification of personnel is based on the amount of training completed. Basic certification is 150 hours, then 30 hours annually after that. Local boards can establish their own training requirements, or use GaDOE's. Initial orientation is based on GaDOE's training courses that cover cleanliness and safety.¹⁹

B. Budget Constraints

Despite its tremendous success, the nutrition program as a whole has its share of problems. Within the school lunch component of the program, competitiveness with snack machines is of concern, not only due to nutritional considerations for the students, but due to the fact that such machines supply many schools with non-budgeted items and the schools do not want to remove them. Parents voice complaints about local school board policies that do not address the charging of meals; however, some school systems face lost potential revenue due to unpaid charge accounts and thus they may not want to begin the practice.

There is also a problem with logistics in that it is difficult to get students off the buses and into the dining halls for breakfast. Providing adequate supervision for the students once they are there is also difficult. To compound the problem, buses are sometimes barely getting to school on time, so students have little or no time for breakfast. This problem stems from the scarcity of bus drivers who sometimes have to run double routes or run for more than one school.

The programs are compensated by: deficit financing, requiring board help; cash reserves in some school districts; and raising prices to students, which is not an option in every county. From the FY 2001 funding estimate of \$336,213,406, approximately \$35 million comes from the state and \$300 million comes from the federal government. Another \$32 million in federal contributions comes in the form of food, the rest is cash (students paying for meals.) The purpose of these appropriations is to keep sale prices low for paying students and to maximize participation and quality meals. Program revenues break down approximately as follows:

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

- 28 percent cash from paying students;
- 8 percent cash from the state;
- 7 percent federal food contribution;
- 57 percent from federal funds.²⁰

Even with this amount of government assistance, local programs run into major budget hurdles. During the 1999 school year local districts reported spending \$11 million on capital equipment. In school year 2000 the expense was almost \$9 million. When one considers that a single dishwashing machine costs approximately \$50,000 it is no wonder that these figures are so high. While it can be assumed that some of these expenditures are for replacement equipment, much of the expenditures are reported to be for the kitchen equipment required in new facilities.

Purchasing is another primary concern in most districts. Some states purchase for school districts through state contracts (food, kitchen equipment, etc.) That is not the case in Georgia, but GaDOE encourages local boards to form cooperatives for purchasing. It is believed that the only place to make up for a local program's budget shortfalls is in the purchase of food.

Compounding the budget concerns is the fact that some students' nutritional requirements are not being met. School administrators have found that many students come to school without breakfast. Even children who can afford breakfast come to school hungry because they either do not have time to eat, they are not hungry when they wake up, their parents have already left for work or are too busy to prepare a meal, or they have a long bus ride to school.²¹

Over the last twenty years, evidence has been growing to confirm that school breakfast contributes to children's learning, development, and health. A Massachusetts study completed in 1987 found that school breakfast students scored 20 percent higher on tests than non-school breakfast students. The study provided the first clear link between academic performance and participation in a school breakfast program. The study also showed school breakfast students:

- receive nourishment for growth;
- have higher school attendance;
- have fewer discipline problems; and
- have greater attention span in class.

For these reasons advocacy groups are proposing a universal breakfast program for students in Pre-K through third grade. The feeling is that offering a universal free breakfast will obviously

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Testimony by Lana Jackson, Past President Georgia School Food Service Association, December 28, 2000, Senate Study Committee on Student Transportation, Nutrition, and Support Personnel.

increase the number of students participating in the current breakfast program.²² Cost estimates from GaDOE range from \$22,000,000 for non-severe need cases to \$33,000,000 for severe need cases.²³

Just as with student transportation, personnel issues figure prominently in the nutrition program. As previously mentioned, there are currently two different retirement systems for education personnel in our state, the Teachers Retirement System (TRS) and Public School Employees Retirement System (PSERS). Directors and assistant directors are enrolled in TRS. Managers and assistant managers have a choice between the two systems. Cooks and kitchen staff are in PSERS.

Last year the funding for PSERS increased from \$10.50 per month per year of service to \$12.00 per month per year of service. That translates to \$360 per month in benefits for an employee who retires with 30 years of service. The association representing these employees points out retirees' difficulty in functioning with this amount of money and is, therefore, advocating raising the funding to \$15.00 per month. Previous cost estimates project that the amount of money needed for this increase would amount to approximately \$6,864,000.²⁴

A related concern is the retirement age. Currently, support personnel on PSERS must wait until they are 65 years of age before they can retire, regardless of their years of service. Local systems and advocacy groups point out that it would be easier to recruit and retain employees if they were allowed to retire after 30 years of service, regardless of age, without penalty.²⁵

Finally, support personnel on PSERS are not permitted to count unused sick leave days toward retirement, unlike employees on TRS who are permitted to convert all unused sick leave days, which are accumulated at a rate of 15 days per year, toward retirement.²⁶ Local systems assert that due to the unavailability of this benefit, there is an alarmingly high absentee rate among support personnel. To date, there has been no study on the budgetary impact of allowing PSERS employees this benefit.

III. CONCLUSION

A. Summary

²²Ibid.

²³Annette Bomar-Hopgood, "Universal Breakfast in Georgia's Pre-K Through Third Grades, Facts and Assumptions," Georgia Department of Education, January, 2001.

²⁴Jackson.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Teacher Retirement System, www.trsga.com/sickleavecredit.

Aside from the sheer enormity of their tasks, Georgia's school transportation and nutrition programs face many challenges throughout the state. From personnel issues and aging bus fleets to budget concerns and underfed children, there seems to be an almost endless list of problems that can negatively affect the quality of service that local systems provide their students.

Local school systems are desperately trying to shoulder the financial burdens concomitant with transporting and feeding their youth, and are unfortunately met with steadily slipping state funding support. Our local systems are to be commended for providing the quality of services that they do, even while sometimes buckling under the financial strain. They are especially to be commended in considering the safety of those students who do not meet the one and one-half mile radius rule and transporting them anyway, even though they receive no state funding for the practice.

The Committee believes that all of the concerns it heard from the individuals and groups that testified are important issues that deserve attention. The following is a list of recommendations that the Committee feels should be considered by members of the General Assembly in order to help resolve some of the programs' present difficulties.

B. Committee Recommendations

Policy

- **The State should change the one and one-half mile radius rule.** Most systems agree that this requirement is outdated, mostly due to safety concerns. Many students live within the prescribed distance from their assigned school, but may have to cross a busy four-lane highway or walk through an unsafe neighborhood to get to school. The state should assist local systems in transporting these students by including them in transportation surveys and thus giving local systems needed financial support.
- **The State should review the screening process for school bus drivers.** More thorough driving and criminal record histories should be made accessible to school districts and the state should issue guidelines to assist school systems on record review and evaluation.
- **Assist drivers in responding to parental concerns.** Currently, there are language barriers between some drivers and parents. Allowing the use of student monitors as interpreters may be one solution.
- **Expand the student code of conduct to include the time that students are on buses.** Allow drivers to remove disruptive students from buses.
- **Pass a "School Bus Driver's Bill of Rights" incorporating an expanded code of student conduct.** This would promote respect for bus drivers as part of the school

system.

- **The State should address helping local systems with their special needs students.** Students with disabilities comprise twelve to eighteen percent of some systems' student populations, but the State funds as little as five percent of the cost to transport them.
- **The State should address helping local systems with transporting summer school and Pre-K students.** Systems receive scant funding for transporting these students and the costs are extremely high. Addressing other transportation funding concerns without assisting in these areas will do little to adequately resolve the present situation.

Benefits

- **A career ladder with at least three steps should be instituted for food service and school bus driver personnel.** State minimum salary schedules, if accompanied by decreased state funding, is not realistic. Career ladders will reward longevity among employees and be a good recruiting tool.
- **The State should examine the possibility of changing current sick leave and retirement policies for school support personnel.** This is another way to reward long-serving employees and assist local systems in recruiting quality personnel.
- **Change the current law so that the maximum per month/per year of service allowance in the PSERS automatically continues to rise.**
- **Allow employees to put more money into their retirement plans.**
- **Allow 12-month employees (full-timers) to choose between PSERS or TRS.** In this way they can contribute more to their retirement plans and the locals have more decision making authority.
- **Strike the retirement age penalty (age 65).** Allow employees to retire after 30 years of service, regardless of their age.

Safety

- **The State should examine whether to require locals to provide bus drivers with student management skills training.** Some local systems provide bus driver management skills training, but there is no state standard or requirement for the

practice. School bus safety is still of utmost concern in most areas and giving drivers the tools they need to manage their passengers is one way to ensure students' safe arrival at their destinations.

- **The State should examine the possibility of adding a school bus safety grant to the state categorical grant program.**
- **The State should review safety standards for buses that cross railroad tracks during their routes.** There should perhaps be a different standard for such buses since the potential for accidents is greatly increased for these vehicles. Requiring monitors to be on board could be an option.
- **Amend the emergency communication equipment law to clarify who provides the equipment (the State or locals).**
- **Have GaDOE study the rights of drivers to search students under safety guidelines or the student code of conduct.**
- **Require the State to fund CPR classes as a part of bus drivers' training .**
- **Require first aid equipment to be on board all school buses.**
- **Require GaDoe to survey local school systems on whether their buses have a problem with vehicle mirrors fogging up and assist them in addressing this important safety concern.**
- **Require local school boards to formulate plans addressing disruptive behavior onboard buses.**

Nutrition

- **The State should examine the possibility of fully funding a universal breakfast program for Pre-K through grade three.** Future scholastic success requires that students be properly grounded in the basics early in their academic careers. Since studies have shown a definite link between student nutrition and student learning, it makes sense to ensure that students in this age range are properly nourished.
- **Review how the State's purchasing power would help local school systems buy food, equipment, etc.**
- **Have GaDOE conduct a study on the use of snack machines in order to gauge**

their effects on nutrition and meal participation.

- **Evaluate the practice of charging the cost of new kitchen facilities to the school nutrition program.** With local growth in the number of schools funded from state capital outlay, SPLOST, and other local funds designated for capital expenditures, such an evaluation is warranted. Federal and state reimbursement for the program is limited in the ability to effectively fund costs other than direct meal costs such as food, labor, supplies, and operating reserves, not the costs that are required for replacement equipment.
- **Adopt a state policy on standard meal times.** There are currently no state guidelines on the minimum amount of time students have to eat. Any policy, however, should not count travel time to and from the lunchroom.

Respectfully submitted:

Honorable Jack Hill, Chairman
Senator, 4th District

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Honorable George Hooks
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