

Decentralization Committee Meeting - November 15, 2012

I am David Weissman, Director of Transportation of School District Five of Lexington & Richland Counties and President Elect of the South Carolina Association For Pupil Transportation. I am here to speak regarding the current study of the decentralization of school buses in South Carolina. Currently the school bus fleet is maintained and managed by the Office of Transportation under the Department of Education. Over the last eight years, while serving as the Director of Transportation and five years as a bus supervisor, I have seen a tremendous effort by the Office of Transportation to maintain our aging school bus fleet. The efforts they have given has allowed the school district to meet our transportation needs at minimum cost to the state and district taxpayers. As you know we have some of the oldest school buses nationwide and although not without problems, the Office of Transportation works very hard to maintain this aging fleet. The biggest issue that we face is not the way buses are operated in South Carolina but is that we have to do so with a fleet of old buses and that we do not have a planned, budgeted replacement cycle. It is not a lack of effort of the Office of Transportation that has us as transportation directors concerned but the fact that we have to make do with the vehicles that are getting too old to properly maintain.

Of the two options proposed in the formal House Bill 4610 districts can decide to have a private firm take over some or all of the operations or run their program in-house. Since we've had these options for over two decades it's clear to see why only three districts have chosen to go to a private company. And none of these districts are fully private; they all rely heavily on the DOE to fuel, maintain and provide school buses. The issue of an aging fleet does not go away by simply forcing a move to a private system.

Many districts feel if they must decide which options they choose regarding decentralization, the timeline previously proposed makes it very difficult for the districts to make an informed decision. For many, it will require the need for facilities, equipment and funding to be put in place before a district can effectively make a self-supporting transportation system work. All of this requires capital money that would require many districts to seek the approval of their community through bonds sales or millage increases, which could take several years in itself. Add to that the timeline to find the land and build the necessary facilities and staff them. A rough estimate is \$4 to \$6 million dollars to start a program at the district level and a 4 to 5 year lead time. This does not include the cost of replacing the buses.

As you go about making a recommendation on the school bus system keep in mind there needs to be a commitment made to fix the aging school bus fleet and enough time allowed to put whatever options the districts decided on in place. Please understand that the system currently in place is working at a cost that does not include a profit margin. It just needs the support of this committee to put in place a system that allows for a funded school bus replacement cycle.

Thank You.

-End of Statement-

Additionally I was asked by one of the panel members about what my recommendation would be regarding decentralization and I stated that in my personal opinion that maintaining the system as it currently is under the Department of Education with a funded replacement program would be what I recommended.

David A. Weissman
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"We Drive District Five"