



TO: House Revenue Committee
FROM: Stacy Michaelson
DATE: April 26, 2023
RE: HB 3014 A

Chair Nathanson, Vice Chairs Walters and Reschke, Members of the Committee:

For the record, I'm Stacy Michaelson, and I represent the six school districts in East Multnomah County, as well as Multnomah Education Service District. I'm here today in support of HB 3014. I'm proud to have worked with our legislative sponsors and our partners OregonWalks to bring this bill forward, as many of the districts I represent are struggling with the busdriver workforce shortage.

A quick primer for those who may not be familiar with school transportation:

- School districts are required to provide transportation to elementary students living more than a mile from school and to secondary students living more than a mile and half from school.
- Students living closer than this are colloquially considered to be in the “walk zone.”
- There is a process by which districts can get approval from the State Board to transport students who live in the walk zone, if there are extenuating safety circumstances.
- There is also a process for districts to get an exemption from the requirement to provide transportation through a waiver from the State Board, though the district must prove that students have other viable means of getting to school.
- While reimbursement rates vary slightly based on a formula, all districts are reimbursed a minimum of 70% of their costs to provide required/approved transportation, with the funding coming through the State School Fund Transportation Grant.

When Oregon passed the student transportation requirements in the early '90s, Eugene 4J and Portland Public Schools were already using their local transit districts to get students to school. These arrangements were legacied in and PPS and Eugene 4J were allowed to use their transportation grant funds to purchase transit passes for students. No other district is currently allowed to be reimbursed for public transit fares. Other than the inequity of who has access to public transit and who doesn't, this hasn't posed much of an issue for student transportation until recently.

With the current bus driver shortage, many of the districts I represent are concerned about their ability to get students to school. The example that precipitated my work on this bill is Parkrose School District. In 2020-21, as they returned from the pandemic, Parkrose did not have enough bus drivers to fill their routes. For years, the district had had a supplemental plan to provide transportation to students living in the walk zone, including high schoolers, due to the unsafe traffic patterns near the school. Faced with not having enough bus drivers to go around, the district was looking for alternative ways to ensure students could get to school safely.

There are TriMet stops adjacent to the high school, and Parkrose inquired to ODE about the possibility of providing TriMet passes for students who were at risk of losing bus service. The district was told that they could purchase passes for students, but the expense would not be eligible for reimbursement. Or, the district could provide families with a stipend—for which the district *could* be reimbursed—and if families purchased transit passes, that was fine. The challenge with the latter option is that there is no guarantee that a stipend paid to families actually goes toward getting students to school.

The situation from Parkrose's perspective was essentially: "We can be reimbursed for providing yellow busing, but we're currently unable to provide yellow busing to all students who need transportation. Any of the other viable local solutions require us to cover the cost out of our general fund, which leaves less money for other classroom services."

HB 3014 aims to give districts in a similar position greater flexibility in navigating how to get students to school safely. The bill would allow a few defined alternative methods of transportation to be reimbursed out of the state school fund when certain criteria are met. Those are crossing guards, walking and biking groups, and public transit. In order to receive reimbursement for any of these, districts would need to have a plan approved by their local board and then by the State Board of Education. This would go through either the existing supplemental plan or waiver process, depending on the location of students being served.

Because the State School Fund is a finite pot of money, we want to be clear that this is about giving districts flexibility over how they spend their funds, not increasing the amount of transportation spending. Critical to the bill, in order to have their plan approved by the State Board, a district would either have to show that their costs to utilize alternative transportation are no greater than their basic transportation costs, or if there is any increase, the district must have a plan for covering the difference outside of their transportation grant funds.

HB 3014 is about giving districts who are struggling with the workforce crisis additional tools for getting students to school. In the case of public transit, that means giving other districts access to a tool that two of the biggest districts have been using for decades. We believe this is much needed and ask for your support.

Thank you.