

## Guest Column: The school bus — some interesting tidbits

**By Mike Reinders**

- What mode of transportation moves more people than airplane, mass transit and trains? The school bus — approximately 26 million students twice a day, nationwide. That is a little more than 9 billion passengers per year.
- How many school buses are there in the USA? About 480,000.
- How many miles do school buses travel nationwide? — Approximately 4.4 billion miles each school year.
- How much federal money supports aviation? “In the first full accounting of the 28-year-old Airport Improvement Program, *USA Today* found that Congress has directed \$15 billion to general aviation airports, which typically are tucked on country roads and industrial byways.” Just the tip of the iceberg. — from the Cato Institute: “\$16.7 billion.”
- How much federal money supports rail? From the CATO Institute: “\$1.5 billion.”
- Federal transit spending is \$12.6 billion.
- To support public school transportation — \$0 federal dollars, yet we safely transport 26 million students.
- From *School Transportation News* — “A 20-mile, round-trip school bus commute saves about \$420 annually for each student who rides the bus. That equals about \$10.9 billion nationwide — just a few facts contained on the redesigned website launched today by the American School Bus Council and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.” April 24, 2012 — [www.schoolbusfacts.com](http://www.schoolbusfacts.com)
- Students are about 50 times more likely to arrive at school alive if they take the bus than if they drive themselves or ride with friends. Students are much safer riding the bus than being driven by a parent, and are about 20 times more likely to arrive to school alive if they take the bus than if a parent drives them. — From American School Bus Council.

In the school district I live and work in, the costs continue to climb. Fuel, parts and vehicles have steadily risen, yet revenues from the state have not kept pace. Unlike some nearby districts, the majority of the drivers do not get any benefits. We have cut costs and continue to look for the most efficient ways to transport students safely. With this small amount of research, I have a number of questions, but I will start with just a few:

1. Why does the federal government not fund public school transportation?
2. In what reality does the State of Illinois think cutting transportation funding for schools is a wise decision?

Illinois does have major revenue issues, but why would you (OK, you and I wouldn't) create more programs to fund when you can't cover the cost for the programs in place now? In my humble opinion, impeding a child's access to education pulls on the emotions, and then they can push another tax increase because the public demands it. Only when the Lottery was first presented and even in recent advertising, money from the Lottery helps support education, yet what they do not tell you is they then reduce funding from the general fund, and the gain from the Lottery is wiped out. Now, the proposals coming out of the Illinois State Board of Education to change funding for transportation will have a very negative impact on rural schools. The funding levels may work in the collar counties around Chicago, but in districts in the farming communities where there are fewer students per square mile, would cause districts to fund transportation from the Education Fund or other funds to cover the cost of transportation. Here are some of the proposals as I understand them:

- Elimination of the Transportation Mandate
- Allowing all cost of Pre-K cost and students to be claimable
- Authorization for districts that transport students in Pre-K to charge for transportation. Fees, though, must be waived for students eligible for free breakfast and lunch eligibility guidelines.
- Elimination of reimbursement for the depreciation of all vehicles other than yellow school buses.
- Elimination of flat grant funding for districts.
- Establish a flat rate of reimbursement based on a state average.

Extension of the permissive transportation tax levy for a Unit District to 0.24 percent (it is unclear in the current proposal if a district in a county with tax caps would be able to have this outside of the caps). (In our district, we have tax caps, and the potential would be that the 0.24 percent would reduce our overall levy, which would effectively lower the total available for other funds.)

In the proposal to charge for transportation, free and reduced students could not be charged, so the rest of the students would pay more? The flat rate would work in densely populated areas, but rural districts, which naturally cover more square miles per student, will be hard hit, as the cost per student mile would be much greater.

Statistics show that if a school bus does not pick up students, the attendance drops off. When attendance drops off, reimbursement from the state drops off, and then more programs are cut.

Yes, I am very involved with school buses, but my concern is the direction our school district is going and how it will impact not only students in my school district, but all school districts.

By the time you read this, the proposals may have changed.

*Mike Reinders is the transportation director for Winnebago School District.*

*From the May 30-June 5, 2012, issue*