



Testimony to the Assembly Budget Committee

March 23, 2022

FY 23 State Budget

Submitted by:

Sandy Myers Grawert

Associate Director, Community Relations Committee

Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest NJ

sgrawert@jfedgmw.org

Thank you to Assemblywoman Pintor Marin and members of the Assembly Budget Committee for the opportunity to testify on this year's State budget on behalf of the Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest (Federation). Our Federation represents the Jewish communities, institutions and day schools in Essex, Morris, Sussex, Union, and parts of Somerset counties. We have four vibrant Jewish day schools in our catchment area - Golda Och Academy in West Orange (Essex), Jewish Education Center (JEC) in Elizabeth (Union), Joseph Kushner Hebrew Academy/Rae Kushner Yeshiva High School in Livingston (Essex), and Gottesman RTW Academy in Randolph (Morris). The four schools pride themselves on their role as anchors in the community that provide safe, accessible, and high-quality education to 2,100 students from 1,250 families.

Our budget ask for this year is to increase the per pupil transportation funding from \$1,000 to \$1,500 per student. This investment would meaningfully address the actual cost of providing the service, and ensure competitive wages for the workforce.

Transportation is one of the core parts of the success of our nonpublic school community. Without reliable and affordable transportation, our nonpublic schools will be faced with decreasing enrollment and potential closure. Parents have also shared that reliable busing is the only way that both parents can hold employment outside of the home, and this service is key for working families of all backgrounds.

Like in many sectors, the pandemic shined a light on the challenges of providing reliable and cost-effective transportation and now, after more than a decade of State funding that hasn't kept up with the rate of inflation and actually covering the real costs of providing services, we are asking our State government for assistance. Given the increasing costs, we are concerned that the current rate isn't competitive enough to get the bus companies to bid for service. Despite increasing costs, public school students have consistently received transportation, yet in recent years, we've seen nonpublic school families be without transportation for days or weeks at a time, often with little or no notice.

Alongside increasing costs, we are also dealing with a school bus driver shortage. This problem existed before the pandemic, but as many schools went remote, bus drivers took other employment with companies that allowed for more flexibility and immediate employment. We appreciate the steps that the State and MVC have taken to address this problem with expediting CDL licensures and renewals, but unfortunately the shortage still exists. While there are different reasons causing the school transportation crisis, offering competitive salaries for bus drivers is a major component.

Currently, the State allocates \$1,000 per pupil for the school districts or county transportation commissions to get bids from bus companies, or in the form of aide in lieu of services, which becomes a payment to families to help offset the cost of providing their own transportation. Buses, at full capacity can seat 54 students, which comes to a total budget per bus of \$54,000. It's important to note that many buses have not been operating at capacity due to both COVID restrictions and route needs.

It currently costs about \$75,000 or more to operate a bus for the year, so \$1,000 per student still leaves a gap of at least \$20,000. This expense is either subsidized by the school, or passed along to the parents, who are already paying out of pocket for their children's schooling. This increasing gap is becoming untenable for our community to continue to carry.

According to my colleagues at the Catholic Conference, who are also advocating for an increase, the per-pupil amount for nonpublic school transportation was frozen for 17 years and our request represents our attempt to adjust the investment. Increasing the investment from \$1,000 to \$1,500 would meaningfully address the problems we are seeing with the high cost of service and addressing the driver shortage with more competitive salaries for bus drivers.

Summary of Ask: On behalf of the four Jewish day schools located within the Greater MetroWest community, the Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest requests that the State increase per pupil funding to \$1,500.