
Appropriations Committee

ESSB 6031

Brief Description: Modifying the student transportation allocation to accommodate multiple vehicle types for transporting students.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Ways & Means (originally sponsored by Senators Braun, Dozier, Kuderer, Rivers and Schoesler).

Brief Summary of Engrossed Substitute Bill

- Revises pupil transportation allocation and vehicle reimbursement formulas to include vehicle types other than school buses.
- Applies the qualification requirements for school bus drivers to drivers transporting students in Washington State Patrol-inspected school vehicles other than school buses.

Hearing Date: 2/22/24

Staff: James Mackison (786-7104).

Background:

Pupil Transportation Formulas.

The state's statutory program of basic education includes transportation to and from school for eligible students. To provide transportation allocations to school districts, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) uses the Student Transportation Allocation Reporting System (STARS), which is a regression formula that uses prior year expenditures, student passenger counts, average distance between bus stops and destinations, and other district characteristics to calculate the expected costs of to-and-from transportation. Information used in the STARS formula is reported by school districts. The STARS formula result is then compared to the district's allowable transportation expenditures from the prior year. The school district

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receives the lesser of the two calculated amounts, plus any compensation adjustments provided in the operating budget. The transportation distribution formula is for allocation purposes only and does not mandate specific levels of pupil transportation services by local districts.

The transportation formula also provides an allocation for transporting students in district-owned passenger cars using the private vehicle reimbursement rate, if a school district deems it advisable to use such vehicles after the school district board of directors has considered the safety of the students being transported and the economy of utilizing a car in lieu of a school bus. Students transported in district-owned passenger cars must be included in basic and special passenger counts.

School Bus Purchasing and Reimbursement.

School districts are responsible for selecting, paying for, and maintaining student transportation vehicles purchased by the district. Regarding school bus purchases, the OPSI is responsible for developing categories and competitive specifications for school bus acquisitions as well as a corresponding list of school bus dealers with the lowest purchase price quotes. School districts and educational service districts that purchase buses through this competitive quote process or through a separate lowest-price competitive bid process are eligible for certain state funds that are based on the category of vehicle, the anticipated lifetime of vehicles of this category, and a state reimbursement rate. The accumulated value of the state payments received by the district and the potential investment return is designed to be equal to the replacement cost of the vehicle, less its salvage value, at the end of its anticipated lifetime.

School Bus Driver Training and Qualifications.

The OSPI is required to adopt rules to ensure that school bus drivers possess the physical health and driving skills that are necessary to safely operate school buses. According to these rules, every authorized school bus driver must:

- have at least five years of experience as a licensed driver of a passenger vehicle;
- submit to a criminal record check;
- satisfactorily complete a school bus driver training course administered by an authorized school bus driver instructor and annually complete a school bus driver in-service training course;
- have a valid driver's license or commercial driver's license issued by the Washington State Department of Licensing;
- maintain current and valid first-aid training;
- submit an annual disclosure of certain legal actions and disqualifying crimes;
- meet physical requirements necessary to control school buses, conduct safety inspections, and evacuate students; and
- provide a current and valid medical examiner's certificate to their employer.

Summary of Bill:

Several revisions are made to transportation allocation formulas to further accommodate vehicles other than school buses, which are described below.

The transportation allocation is not to be construed to require a type of vehicle for service to and from school. School districts are encouraged to use what they consider the safest and most cost-effective vehicle type, including school buses and vans. The annual allocation of transportation to and from school must be inclusive of all vehicle types. School district reporting of transportation data used to determine the allocations must include the number of miles driven per vehicle type.

District-owned passenger cars used in lieu of school buses must be included in the overall determination of the district's annual student transportation allocation, including when calculating the average distance to school and the number of locations served, rather than generating reimbursement at the private vehicle reimbursement rate.

The OSPI categories and competitive specifications used for reimbursement formulas that apply to school buses are revised to apply to student transportation vehicles. A student transportation vehicle is defined as a school bus or passenger van used in lieu of a school bus.

The rules adopted by the OSPI governing the training and qualifications of school bus drivers must also apply to drivers transporting students in Washington State Patrol-inspected school vehicles other than school buses. A driver that exclusively transports students in such a vehicle must have the appropriate driver's license for that vehicle and may not be required to hold a commercial driver's license.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available. New fiscal note requested on February 6, 2024.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.