
Public Hearing

before

COMMISSION ON BUSINESS EFFICIENCY OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

“Coordination of pupil transportation services”

LOCATION: Committee Room 10
State House Annex
Trenton, New Jersey

DATE: October 9, 2002
11:00 a.m.

MEMBERS OF COMMISSION PRESENT:

Assemblywoman Arline M. Friscia, Chairman
Laurie Fitchett, Vice-Chairman
Assemblyman Samuel D. Thompson
Thomas Niland

ALSO PRESENT:

Chris Bluett
George Corwell
Regina Swierc
Linda Wells

Dennis R. Smeltzer
Executive Director
Commission on Business Efficiency
of the Public Schools



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ASSEMBLYWOMAN ARLINE M. FRISCIA (Chairwoman):

Good morning, everyone. I am Arline Friscia. I am the Assemblywoman in the 19th District, which is primarily Woodbridge. I sit on the Education Committee, so I'm very interested in the Commission and its workings. I am very pleased to be here this morning and to see so many people who are here to testify on this very timely subject.

Before we begin, I would like to introduce Laurie Fitchett, who has been chairing the Subcommittee on Transportation. I would also like the members of the Committee to introduce themselves. Can we start over here on the left, if you would state your name and where you're from.

MR. CORWELL: I'm George Corwell. I'm the Associate Director for Education for the New Jersey Catholic Conference.

MR. BLUETT: Chris Bluett, Transportation Supervisor, for Hanover Park Regional High School.

MS. SWIERC: I'm Regina Swierc. I'm the Superintendent of Warren County Special Services School District.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: Assemblyman Sam Thompson, 13th District, which is Middlesex and portions of Monmouth. I see several of my constituents are on the list today.

MS. WELLS: I'm Linda Wells. I'm the Director of Student Transportation in the Department of Education.

MR. SMELTZER (Commission Executive Director): I'm Dennis Smeltzer. I'm the Director of the Commission.

MS. FITCHETT: A very brief background. School Transportation is one of the very expensive projects for education and also a very important part of getting our kids to school. We, on the Commission, realized how many

bills are introduced each year for school transportation. Some of them move, and some of them don't. We finally decided, as a Commission, that we'd establish a task force to study school transportation -- all aspects of it. We've pretty well covered issues -- everything from bus drivers to school bus safety to transportation routes to hazardous routes, and then realized there are still problems out there that, maybe, we weren't aware, maybe we were aware of and didn't know how to resolve them. So we thought the best thing to do would be to have a hearing, have public input, and you tell us what's good, and what's bad, and what needs to be corrected in school transportation. So that's how we got here.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Thank you, Laurie.

So without delay, because we have quite a list of people to testify, I'd like to call our first person, Joseph Deroba, who is the principal of St. John Vianney High School in Holmdel.

Come up to the table, Joseph, and welcome to the hearing this morning. If you will push your microphone until the red light comes on, thank you. That means you're in business.

JOSEPH F. DEROBA: I'm the Principal of St. John Vianney High School for the last 18 years, so I have a history with transportation. So I'd just like to -- a little brief history -- before I talk about some of the problems I think need to be addressed.

When I first started, every bus that came into the school was a district bus, a school district bus with the name on the outside. As time went by, it started gradually changing over to private contractors. Bus transportation problems were still minimal. I think that happened because, as the population of Monmouth County grew, the public schools weren't able to

keep up with the transportation needs within their own districts. So, hence, they couldn't provide any of their own buses for the nonpublic parochial school kids, and it got farmed down to the private contractors.

As the population continued to grow, the public schools themselves, and they fell further behind in their transportation situation, they started routinely farming out transportation to the private contractors. And since there's a cap on private education, kids getting their rides to school at \$710 -- even though legislation has been passed to increase that, it was removed from the budget. There isn't a cap on the public school transportation. It's more lucrative for those private contractors to take the public school route. So our routes are not very well paid. I guess the profit margin on it is very small, so there's a hesitancy to bid on them.

I also think that there's, probably, a lack of the number of providers out there for the bidding process to be fairly done. I also think you can't legislate to school district transportation coordinators a conscience or a commitment to getting kids to school. We have some transportation coordinators, one of them is here, who is very committed to his job. We never have a problem -- and goes out of their way to figure out ways, imaginative ways, to get kids to school. We have others that simply would rather write out the aid-in-lieu-of check.

The Monmouth-Ocean Educational Services Commission, I think, doesn't always get the information they need in a timely fashion, from school districts, in order to do the bidding. Notification of parents is often last minute. I think you'll hear about that later. I personally didn't have that problem this year, but I have had that problem, where three days before school

you're finding out that 300 kids don't have a ride to school. There's not much you can do with three days left before the school day starts.

So those are the issues. I think that the public schools haven't kept up with their own transportation needs. I think there's not enough bus contractors to make the bidding process fair. I think the cap on our kids being transported to school hurts a great deal. It also hurts a great deal when these private school parents see public school kids, within a mile of their of school, getting courtesy busing, and their child is being told, "No, you can't go to school." There's also after-school busing for the public school kids. There's no after-school busing for the private school kids. I'm not suggesting that at all, quite frankly, but I think it's a strain on the resources and limits buses being available to get kids to and from school.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Thank you, Joseph.

Any questions from the Committee?

Assemblyman.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: Well, of course, in the past two or three years, in the area that you're speaking of there, we have several towns who've encountered major problems in getting transportation -- getting anyone to bid on the contracts for the nonpublic schools. As you say, one of the major problems has been the amount of reimbursement that was available for each kid. So we've tried to deal with this each time, but, obviously, we haven't come up with a permanent solution.

MR. DERObA: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Anyone else -- comments, questions? (no response)

Thank you. I appreciate your coming today.

MR. DEROBA: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Janet Dolan, Principal of St. James School in Red Bank. Is Janet here? (no response)

Elena Torregrossa, the Principal of St. Leo the Great School in Lincroft. (no response)

Mary Ellen Lilly, Principal of St. Benedict School in Holmdel.

Thank you for coming, Mary Ellen, and welcome.

M A R Y E L L E N L I L L Y: Thank you for having me, and good morning.

I am the Principal of St. Benedict School in Holmdel. Our property is adjacent to St. John Vianney High School, so everything that Mr. Deroba just reflected I would certainly reiterate. We're a Catholic elementary school with 482 students in kindergarten through eighth grade. Our students are drawn from six different public school districts, including what we call "the Freehold area" that actually encompasses a number of different districts in Freehold Township. Buses for students in this area are provided through the Monmouth-Ocean Educational Services Commission. Since our school, as I said, is approximately a quarter of a mile from St. John Vianney, a system is now in place whereby the high school and elementary students share these buses. I certainly appreciate the opportunity to make some points about that.

In past years, we've been faced with the prospect of receiving bus lists from the Commission up to the day before school is scheduled to open. Often parents have not received their bus passes until the eleventh hour, and I think this probably will be repeated several times. So I don't mean to go on and on about that, but, needless to say, it creates a great deal of confusion and

places a great deal of unnecessary stress on parents, students, and the school alike. The safety issues involved in making sure that young children are on the right bus certainly speak for themselves.

My second point is that, since we share buses with St. John Vianney, we have also had to deal with a shuttle system in which students from St. Benedict were shuttled to the high school where they had to make connections with their regular buses. This created a scenario in which, for example, primary grade children would be leaving one bus and trying to find their regular bus among all the buses that service the high school. We have resolved this situation to a degree, because all the buses now pick up their students at St. Benedict's. We have a long line of buses coming in. Perhaps, each bus is only picking up one to five students, and then they move on to the high school. This system, however, necessitated moving up our dismissal time so that the buses could pick up their several students at our school and then move on to St. John Vianney. So that creates somewhat of a disruption in our daily routine.

The third point is that, to secure busing for our students, we have had to combine the elementary and high school students, and although that's not an impossible situation, from my point of view, it's certainly not optimal. Combining the students means that five-year-olds may be riding on a bus with fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds. It also means that St. John Vianney and St. John Benedict must adhere to an identical school calendar. Often, this is problematic, because we find ourselves with half days or full days off at times when it makes no sense for our individual needs. For example, St. Benedict is scheduled for a half day next Tuesday to accommodate the high school's need to administer their PSATs. And conversely, St. John Vianney will take half

days in November to accommodate our need for parent-teacher conferences. So the school calendars are certainly not what they would be if we were operating independently.

My fourth point is that, technically, our school is not open until 7:45 a.m. I have made arrangements to have staff on duty at 7:30 a.m. to accommodate early buses. Now a number of the “Freehold” buses are arriving at school by 7:10 a.m. Usually the reason given is that they have other runs to make and they can’t spare the time. Despite the fact that we’ve been clear about our school hours, it seems that the buses keep backing up and backing up their arrival times. We have a maintenance worker and a few teachers who arrive at school consistently at 7:00 a.m., so that the students are not alone in the school building. But I do wonder whether students in the public school districts would be required to comply with this type of scenario. Of course, the parents of students who attend St. Benedict are certainly paying their fair share of taxes, and we’re saving the public sector 482 times the cost per pupil in that public sector.

In conclusion, I would like to commend Jennifer Cooper at the Commission for her cooperative attitude and her attempts to assist us with situations that develop with the bus companies. I think we have a good relationship there, and I certainly appreciate that.

In this particular year, we did receive our bus lists in a very timely fashion, and those efforts are certainly appreciated as well. I also want to make clear, as I believe my comments have indicated, that we are more than willing to make reasonable accommodations to maintain effective bus service.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Mary Ellen, are you dealing with private bus companies or school board of education buses?

MS. LILLY: We deal with both, because we draw from different districts, but I believe the-- We do not have this difficulty with the local districts that we deal with, who send their own buses to us. But, as Mr. Deroba was indicating, in this Freehold area, the buses are not -- they're contracted out. It's those buses that become the most problematic.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Does anyone have any questions?

MR. CORWELL: Assemblywoman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Yes.

MR. CORWELL: Mary Ellen, are you finding that the districts are aware of the obligation that, if the first bid comes back and there are no takers for the routes, that they would then, immediately, turn the students over to the third party provider for transportation; or is that still something that is unclear in the minds of some districts, even though the law has been around for five years now?

MS. LILLY: I would have to base it on what happened this year, since all of our students did receive busing. We did get the bus lists in order. It seemed to me that everybody was in compliance this year. I don't know what might happen next year.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Anyone else? (no response)

Thank you very much for coming.

MS. LILLY: Thank you very much, too.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Before we continue, I'd like to introduce another member of our Commission, Tom Niland.

Tom, would you let everyone know that you're back there (Mr. Niland sitting in audience), and thank you for coming.

If anyone has written testimony, you can also submit it to Dennis, and we'll be very happy to take that.

Our next witness is Kathy D'Andrea and Carol Gaspartich, from Monsignor Donovan High School in Toms River.

Welcome, ladies.

KATHLEEN D'ANDREA: Thank you.

Monsignor Donovan High School is the only Catholic high school in Ocean County. We also have St. Joseph Grade School on our campus. So we have a situation similar, I think, to St. Benedict and St. John Vianney. The high school students and the grade school students have been riding buses together for years, and it never even crosses our mind that it could be any different. We've just assumed that's the way it is, and I guess that part works.

It would be wonderful, as she stated from St. Benedict's, that the calendars could be different if they had separate busing. Because we're the only Catholic school, we receive students from all over Ocean County and even parts of Monmouth County. We know that many families who would prefer a Catholic education do not choose it, because they do hear horror stories about busing from the outlying districts.

Two of our biggest problems, I think, are in Howell and Jackson. Howell -- the public high school in Howell is very large. They invite us-- They're the only public school that actually invites us to come to their school to talk about Catholic education. They want to get students out of the district, but there's just not-- It's true. We have one bus route that goes through Howell, down Route 9, and parents have to drive their students to the bus

pickups. Sometimes it's two and three miles. They have to drive them there to get on the bus. In the morning, it works, but sometimes in the afternoon, I don't know how they work out for their students to get home if they're not home, the parents work. So the students get off the bus and somehow have to get back to their homes.

There's another route that is shared between Brick and Howell. That bus is packed full. It's about an hour and fifteen minutes by the time they get to school, so that that's a problem area. Jackson always keeps us on edge. They, kind of, treat us like second-class citizens. Whenever we call the Jackson transportation, they tell us that we're not a priority. They threaten. We get threats each year that there may not be busing from Jackson. St. Aloysius, which is a new Catholic school in Jackson, they want to come to our high school. That's why they went there. Then they find out the routes are too long, that there's not going to be busing. They're afraid, so they would go to the public school. We do know about specific families who have made decisions on that level.

They always put the substitute bus drivers in Jackson on our buses. They get lost. They don't know which way they're going. So they really do treat us as second-class citizens. Along the beach, all right -- we have many families on the beach, through Lavallette and Normandy Beach, who would want to come to our high school. Sections of the beach are also Dover Township. So Dover Township provides the busing. Depending upon how many students are enrolled, the Toms River system, Dover Township, will pick up the students. But if they have too many, they just call us at the last minute and say, "There's no room for your Lavallette students or Normandy Beach students." We've had to deal with this, over the years, and try to--

We go through our bus lists. We see who's a senior, who may be driving. We say, "Well, they're not going to ride the bus." I mean, we do it one-on-one, trying to get spots on the buses for our children.

One specific incident, which I think demonstrates the problem with getting lists to the bus companies: This past year we registered a family in Howell, and their B6Ts, the bus forms, were sent to Monmouth-Ocean Educational Services Commission in March. We always get our bus forms in on time, which I think is March 15.

CAROL GASPARTICH: Yes, March 15 or March 1.

MS. D'ANDREA: Okay. But we found out, by law, the Monmouth-Ocean Commission has until July 1 to notify the school district if busing is available. They notified Freehold Township school district that this family would not have busing, but Freehold never notified the family. By this time, the family had already started paying tuition. Okay. They had paid two months tuition. Again, we worked something out. We went through lists. We tried to get kids, who were not going to ride the bus, to get off the bus and make room for these students.

So I think our problem is, we need more local bus routes, especially in Howell and Jackson. We need Dover Township to provide more busing along the beach, just to put another bus out there. Again, that route is over an hour long that the students ride.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: The Jackson bus service that you refer to, is that a private company?

MS. D'ANDREA: I don't think so. I think it's Jackson.

MS. GASPARTICH: The Jackson school district provides their own, yes.

MS. D'ANDREA: It's not a private.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Okay, thank you.

Any questions from any of the panel?

Sam.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: I probably should have asked Mary Ellen, as well as you. Both of you are related to the fact, of course, you have high school and elementary school kids riding together. Have you had any significant problems with regards to this -- that is, the kids on the buses with older and younger kids?

MS. D'ANDREA: I would say some isolated incidents, where sometimes we'd get a complaint from the grade school that, maybe, a high school student was harassing one of the younger students. There are isolated incidents, but it isn't the best scenario. I mean, it is best to have the same age group together. But again, we've never even considered that it could be different.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: You wouldn't categorize it as a significant problem then?

MS. D'ANDREA: No.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Anyone else?

MS. FITCHETT: Yes, I've got a question.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Laurie.

MS. FITCHETT: Now those are Jackson Township board buses?

MS. D'ANDREA: Yes.

MS. FITCHETT: Are they overloaded, when you say they're full? You don't have standees, do you?

MS. D'ANDREA: We have a parent here, too, from Jackson, who would know if that bus is--

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER FROM AUDIENCE: I don't believe there's any standees on the bus.

MS. FITCHETT: Okay.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Thank you, ladies, for coming.

MS. D'ANDREA: Okay. Thank you for listening.

MS. GASPARTICH: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: John Prachar and Paul Lacy, St. Catharine School in Spring Lake. Before you begin, you are John or Paul?

FRANCIS GROFF: I'm neither.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: You're neither. Okay.
(laughter)

MR. GROFF: I'm batting for Paul.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Okay. What is your name?

MR. GROFF: My name is Fran Groff.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Before you begin, could you please tell me what the alliance is.

JOHN PRACHAR: The Alliance of Catholic School Families is an organization started in 1996, and it's the parents of all children who attend Catholic elementary and high schools in the state of New Jersey -- are members of the Alliance.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Okay. The floor is yours.

MR. GROFF: Okay. Thank you very much. My name is Fran Groff, like I said. I'm from Brielle. I have two high school students; one at Red Bank Catholic, one at Christian Brothers Academy. I also have two

children at the St. Catherine School in Spring Lake. So I have been dealing with the bus problems for quite some time. I say *problems* because there are just so many times -- and I think that if you ask yourself, as you go through your legislation in trying to come up with your solution, if you just continue to say to yourself, "Would a public school parent put up with the service that they're receiving," I think you'll be able to answer a lot of questions as to whether we're being provided the service that we really deserve, as we go through this.

I have some prepared remarks. I will read them, and I will try to be as brief as I can with it. For the past six years, we've had tremendous difficulty regarding the arrangement of transportation for our school. The board of education consistently has sent the transportation information to us on the Friday before or the Tuesday after Labor Day, for the past few years, to notify us that there will be no bus service, that we would be receiving aid in lieu of. Prior to that, we were able to get transportation only with last-minute rebids and arrangements.

Three years ago, the board of ed in Brielle, very willingly, turned the responsibility for private school busing over to the Monmouth-Ocean Educational Services Commission. Because we have only 12 to 15 children going to the St. Catharine School in Brielle, in the past our children shared a bus with Manasquan and Spring Lake Heights. In September of 2000, Manasquan Board of Ed worked out an arrangement with Wall to send their students on the Wall Township Board of Ed owned buses. This left Brielle and Spring Lake Heights by themselves. Because there were only 35 students, it was not considered to be a profitable enough route, because it was not going to fill an entire bus.

With the start of the September 2000 school year, we were notified on the Tuesday after Labor Day that we'd have no bus transportation, and we'd receive the aid-in-lieu. When the parents expressed concern about the late notification, which precluded our ability to arrange alternatives, the Brielle Board of Ed did step in, and they made arrangements with a local bus company to offer service for a short period of time until we exhausted our options in trying to find alternate bus service. Some of the problems that occur, though, at that point, are a lot of the restrictions that are made when this bus company offers to pick up this alternate service -- for example, a limited number of stops in the town, or only picking up off a main road type of restrictions that are built into it.

A last minute contract was made with a company whose name will go -- I'm not going to release right now -- but we soon realized that the bus company was not really interested in conscientious, safe, and reliable service. They had problems with the drivers not speaking English, kids getting dropped off at wrong stops. We have a lot of half days where the buses just did not show up at all for the half-day service. They were always there for the full-day service. But the half-day service, they didn't seem to know that they were supposed to pick up the kids and bring them home at the end of the half day.

Last year, we called both the Brielle Board of Ed and the Monmouth-Ocean Educational Services Commission early, to leave some time to deal with the expected difficulties. However, we were advised to call back after the 24th of August, and eventually told that the bids had been sent out to 42 companies, of which all were turned down. The reason: too few children and not enough money per student. They had attempted, again, to combine Brielle with Spring Lake Heights, which would have given the bus 35 students,

as I mentioned before. At \$710 a student, the bus company would have been getting \$24,850, but apparently that was not enough for 42 companies to take the bid.

At this late point, the Spring Lake Heights Board of Education decided to just give up and do aid-in-lieu, which left Brielle to go on its own. Brielle did try a closed bid with several companies, in hopes of a last minute change, but no one wanted to pick up our marginal route. Unfortunately, they all declined to pick up the route, citing the small number of children, and according to the Brielle Board of Ed business administrator, there were just too many restrictions.

Shortly after our closed bids were turned down, we received a letter from the Board of Ed telling us we were now going to receive the aid-in-lieu-of transportation. None of the parents wanted the aid in lieu of transportation. Many of the children are from people with working parents, single parents, or parents that are just trying to juggle three schools, like I myself am.

Our parents took it upon themselves to locate a transportation service. We eventually obtained the services of a Manasquan-based transportation company that was willing to accept us at the rate of the 710 per student. However, this year our number of students dropped from 15, of last year, down to 12. So this year, the parents in Brielle are going to be asked to dig into their pocket, \$280 per student, to make up for the three students that are now not on that van. In addition to this, we must advance \$71 per month, per student, to the bus company, only to be reimbursed later in January and June. I wish I could pay my taxes that way.

This year it does not appear to offer a better scenario. If we lose three more children off the bus, then next year we're going to be asked to dig even deeper. It just is an on-going scenario.

You know the history of when the \$675 was determined back in 1990, and now it's up to a whole 710, 12 years later. So you can see that it hasn't kept pace. So I can really feel for the bus companies, also, when they're trying to pay for their labor, their fuel, their maintenance, their insurance, and try to keep up with inflation to make a dollar on this. However, I also know that the public school does not really have a cap on how much they have to come up with, in order to provide the transportation for their students.

To show you how a local school district can, if they want to, make something work -- I've forwarded to you a form that was sent out by the Brielle school district, which I've had distributed, and what it was is: The Brielle School was having construction done at its school, so its parking lot was in a little bit of disarray -- plus they've always had problems with so many people dropping off their children and not many taking the bus -- that they decided to come up with an alternate plan where they organized and negotiated a bus that the parents could voluntarily pay to have their students put on. You can see the price is 285 for one student or 895 for four students. This was done by the local board of education. This was not done -- a parent was not asked to do this. The school board did this, and that's one of the big differences: We keep getting it thrown into our laps, as parents, to be asked to know what the State laws are and to try to deal with a cap of \$710, dealing with bus companies that are trying to make money on-- (noise interruption) I wasn't ready for the crescendo yet. (laughter)

But, getting back to what I was saying, and I don't mean to reiterate, I know you people have all been over this, and you're being conscientious in your jobs, and trying to take care of it for us, but there's no doubt about it that right now, if I'm a businessman, I'm going to try to cherry pick. I'm going to go and try to take the most lucrative routes, and I'm going to leave the other ones to the other groups. The fact of the matter is, unless these bus companies are asked to pick up an entire group, have the public and the nonpublic school bus bidding all put together on one package, and that's the package that you have to accept, then it's not going to change. Nothing is going to change. We're in a capitalist society, that's the way it is.

I can't believe that with the intelligence and the people that are in the board of ed, the people that are at the Monmouth-Ocean Educational Services Commission, and the business savvy of our bus companies, that these people can't work together to come up with some kind of win-win solution, so that our children can go to the schools that we want them to go to and not have a drain on our public schools for attendance into their schools. And, yet, all we need is the transportation to get our students to where we're trying to get them to go.

I guess that's all I have, and I really do appreciate your time and consideration.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Thank you.

MR. PRACHAR: Again, my name is John Prachar. My children attend St. Catharine School in Spring Lake. There's another woman here, Susan Twidle, that will speak to you later about the situation we have with our bus. Her children and my children ride the same bus. What I have here, which you all have a copy of, is a woman whose children attend St. Catharine

School, had e-mailed me this and asked if I could read this into the record. So, the woman's name is Joy Edly. This kind of gives you an idea of what we're dealing with in Monmouth and Ocean County.

"We are in our 10th year of attending St. Catharine's and living in Point Pleasant. I have two children currently attending St. Catharine's, Shannon and Erin Edly. I have two children attending St. Rose High School, Siobhan and Joy Foley. We have never been able to get bus transportation to St. Catharine's. During the 10 years we have been attending, there have been between three and nine children from Point Pleasant attending St. Catharine's.

Currently, there are six Point Pleasant Borough buses to St. Peter's in Point Pleasant Beach, St. Dominic's in Brick, St. Denis in Manasquan, St. Paul's in Brick, and St. Thomas in Brick, and also to St. Rose Grammar School in Belmar. There are only two children that are transported to St. Rose Grammar School, but they ride the same bus that transports the kids to St. Rose High School. I don't know exactly how many children are transported to St. Denis, but they go by a Point Pleasant Borough school bus, and I follow it on many days that there are only about eight or nine children on that great big bus.

I have asked numerous times why my children cannot be transported on that bus to St. Catharine's. I have never received an answer. I am still waiting for a return call from the transportation department in Point Pleasant Borough regarding this. My last phone call was made in early September. St. Denis starts school after St. Catharine's, 8:20, and ends later, 2:40, or so. So, logistically, this could work. St. Catharine's is less than two miles away from St. Denis. They're already bringing a bus back and forth to

Manasquan every day. I don't understand how it is more feasible or economical to pay me the aid-in-lieu-of transportation.

My biggest frustration with this situation is, what are the criteria and the law when it comes to nonpublic school transportation? Why is it that St. Denis children get transportation via a huge bus, when obviously something smaller would work, and who and what determines when a district transports via their own buses and/or when they put other schools and families out for bid? The criteria are, obviously, not location or distance or how many children attend the school, so what is it exactly?

On a different note, but still within the framework of transportation, my older daughters attend St. Rose High School, and for three years, my daughter's bus picked her up at our corner along with other children. This year, the bus stop was changed to three-quarters of a mile away from our house, on a major road. We live on a major county road already, Beaver Dam Road. The speed limit on our street is 40 mph. My daughters now have to walk, on this major road, to their bus stop at 6:45 a.m., in the dark, on a road with mostly no sidewalks. This is a very unsafe situation. When I asked the transportation office about this, I was told that they moved all the bus stops for St. Rose and Monsignor Donovan High School to major roads. When I told her that we already lived on and had a bus stop on a major road, I was told that there was nothing that could be done about it. I plan on pursuing this further with the local board of ed transportation department, although I know in my heart that it is probably useless to do so.

Sorry for the rambling. I could probably go on for pages, but, alas, I have to go pick up my kids at SCS. Joy Edly, Point Pleasant."

Thank you.

And just to add to what Fran was mentioning, I know we're in a capitalistic society and the people that are in the bus business are in there to make money, but things, as far as bundling, may work out. Another problem that I seem to have had, and Joy mentions it in her letter, we've dealt with the transportation coordinators in different school districts and quite a few of them are ignorant of the laws. Whether that is active or passive ignorance, we don't know. We are not sure what the law is, and we would hope that someone that's in charge of the transportation issues for the different school districts would, at least, try to know what the law is, and they can explain it to us when we have questions. A lot of times we either get the run-around, we don't get the answer, or we're just given a story that, we find out later, is just nonsense.

It's all I have to add. Thank you very much for giving us the time.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Any questions for our two gentlemen from Spring Lake?

MR. CORWELL: Just a comment, if I may, Madam Chairman.

I think this illustrates what we've heard at the Catholic Conference for many years, and that is the fact that there really is no payback to the district for doing the job well of transporting nonpublic school children. Many of these coordinators are just overworked. They have so many issues to deal with. There are so many good ones that will go the extra mile in attempting to try to work through the forest of problems that have been articulated here -- and some of them are in this room right now -- but there are others for whom it is much easier to simply cut a check for \$710 and be finished with it. That's the difficulty. What we're faced with here is the challenge of legislating a change of heart, which is not possible, so I tend to use the phrase, many times, that in the nonpublic school community we're dependent on the kindness of

strangers when it comes to the actual amount of effort that's being put into it. If we could, somehow, provide some incentive for the coordinators or take that responsibility away from them, and into a third party entity completely, that's one step in terms of making it more palatable to find efficient, nonpublic school transportation in the state.

So that would be my little pet speech, and I thank you for letting me say it.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: You're quite welcome.

Anyone else? (no response)

Thank you, gentlemen. We appreciate your coming.

MR. PRACHAR: Thank you very much.

MR. GROFF: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Susan Twidle and Debbie Osepchuk, parents from St. Catharine's School in Spring Lake. St. Catharine's is well-represented today.

S U S A N T W I D L E: Please excuse my naivety. I'm just a parent. My name is Susan Twidle, and I have two children who attend St. Catharine School in Spring Lake. I love their school, and I send them there primarily because we are Christians, and I want to have them get a good education that begins and ends in prayer and honors God in all that it does.

During the last week of July, I received notification that our bus transportation was not going to be provided by Neptune Township or the Monmouth-Ocean County Educational Services Commission. I made several calls to inquire about this decision and to find out what could be done. The companies explained that, because of a reduction in the number of students, that this route was no longer profitable. I alerted as many of the affected

parents as I could, as well as the school, and began the demanding task of trying to find alternate arrangements or lobbying them to run the route.

Both of our parents -- my husband and I, we both work. So the transportation is really a comforting necessity. The companies really dragged it out and kept us waiting. Without a bus, I would have to change schools. I would have to send both of my kids to the Neptune Township public schools. I tried to find arrangements with other Catholic schools in the area -- St. Rose and Holy Innocents -- but both of those schools could only take one or the other. They did not have room for both kids. Although this was a possibility, it would require two kids, two different buses, two different schedules. It was a possibility. But I had to make my decision very quickly, because this is August now -- time is running out -- and I had to start paying them and transferring over.

The local public school that we would go to is in Neptune, and they added another wrinkle to the situation. My daughter would have to attend Neptune Middle School. They cut off their registration for the middle school on August 16. So, in order to get her into the local public school, I would have to register by that date or wait until September -- the second week of school, September 9 or 10, to make an appointment to register her. They say that there's a high level of transience and fraud between Neptune and Asbury Park, so they require a lot of checking of addresses and the validity of the family situations. So they would not even accept registration from August 16 until September 9.

In the mean time, I'm calling the transportation services to get an answer and being met with polite indecision. I had to register my daughter at Neptune Middle School, so as not to miss the cut-off date. So this jeopardized

her enrollment at St. Catharine's because I, in essence, had to withdraw from school, send all her records there, and get a CO. The same situation didn't apply in the elementary school for some reason. They accept registrations throughout the summer. Of course, the principals were not in for the first two weeks of August in the elementary schools, but that's unrelated.

One of the questions my daughter had to answer on the registration form for the Neptune Middle School was, are you currently on parole, and if so, who is your parole officer? As you can imagine, this would be a big change for my daughter, going from St. Catherine School to the Neptune Middle School. After I had registered her, the week after, I received notification that our bus transportation had been reinstated. I'm not sure why, what led to that decision. So then I had to withdraw her from Neptune Middle School and re-enroll her in St. Catharine's School.

We were to be sharing a driver in a small bus with the students from Bradley Beach. We were also warned not to count on this service being provided in the future. So, at that point, I vowed to become more educated and involved about this issue. Now, I know in Monmouth County, there are many wonderful opportunities for high school students to study at a variety of specialized learning centers. We have a few students from each town that get transported to Sandy Hook to the MAST Program; to Red Bank Regional, for the performing arts; to Brookdale, for the high technology high school; and to Wall, for the new communications high school.

I know students go to vocational schools for cosmetology, automotive, all over the county, culinary. Now I know these routes require a lot of cooperation, and planning, and creativity with many sending districts. I believe the same cooperation can be achieved in planning nonpublic school

routes. In my area, one school, St. Mary's School in Ocean Township, has already lost its bus transportation from both Neptune Township and Long Branch. In every instance, the parents tell me they find the transportation offices to be polite, but not very concerned with the transportation issue.

Debbie and I also tried to negotiate our own transportation with private companies, and they wanted to charge us at the rate of a taxi -- \$20 per day, per student. Now, when I added that up, that was higher than my tuition cost per month, that was \$800 a month. I pay about \$730 a month for tuition, so it would be more than my tuition a month.

I feel bus transportation, maybe, shouldn't be judged as profitable or not. I know it's a private industry in some cases, but I believe it should provide safe transportation to the school of one's choice. Our tax money pays for this. If all nonpublic school students entered the public school system, the cost impact would be much greater. So I feel that, perhaps, the amount of the transportation allotment should be looked at -- \$710 a year, \$3.94 a day, doesn't seem to be cutting it.

Another issue that I feel needs looking at is the lack of transportation available to high school students that live within two miles of their school. I know of students who have to cross state highways, drawbridges, drawbridges that are under construction in our area, and other construction areas. These are dangerous trips on foot at 6:45 in the morning.

So I do -- I want to thank you so much for your time and the opportunity to speak to you on this issue. I hope you'll find some validity in what we have to say and will be encouraged to provide busing for all students, wherever they go.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Thank you.

Debbie.

DEBORAH OSEPCCHUK: It's on. (referring to PA microphone)

Thank you.

My name is Deborah Osepchuk, and my story is very similar to Susan's, in that we both live in Ocean Grove, and we were both faced with this dilemma, part way through our summer. I am, like many women, a full-time working mother. I juggle home, work, and family on a daily basis. I'm also a practicing Catholic. I was raised in a Catholic home, and I attended Catholic elementary school, as well as Catholic high school. A Catholic school education was as important to my parents as it is to me. My husband and I both want our religion to be an integral part of our daughter's education.

My daughter, Katelyn (phonetic spelling), has attended St. Catharine's School, in Spring Lake, since kindergarten. She's now in seventh grade. She's a straight A student. She's played on the JV basketball team, the varsity tennis team, and the girls soccer team. She's made good and, possibly, lasting friendships. She attends mass with her classmates and has received her first Holy Communion with them, and she'll soon begin studying for her confirmation. And yet, approximately four weeks before school was to begin this year, I was told that all of this was about to change, because approximately four weeks before school was about to begin, I was notified that there would be no bus to take my daughter to school.

My daughter's entire world was about to change, and I had no control over it and nothing to say about it. I have no way to get my daughter to school. I have no alternatives to busing for my child. And so, for a frantic two weeks, I spent making phone calls to other parents, as Susan did. I called

transportation offices. I called the Monmouth-Ocean Educational Services Commission. I learned new words such as *jointure* and became very familiar with what this whole transportation issue was about. Everyone I spoke to kept telling me that it had to do with money. And yet, to me, it had to do with my child.

I called bus companies trying to arrange for private transportation. We even went so far as to consider taxi service just to get our children to the school that they had attended since kindergarten, that we were now going to rip them out of and have to place them in public education in our township. The thing that is so amazing to me, and I guess this is the question that I would like to pose to this Committee, is that for two weeks of frantic phone calling -- and anguish, and not knowing where to turn and what to do, and making numerous phone calls, and talking to the same people, over and over again, asking them to please revisit this issue, to please see if there was some solution -- all of a sudden, miraculously, a solution was found. I don't really know how. The numbers hadn't changed. The cap or the ceiling on moneys hadn't changed. The bus route hadn't changed, and yet all of a sudden we had a bus. If someone was able to find a solution to our dilemma because of constant badgering by parents or intervention by some other source, then there are solutions out there. There are solutions that can be found for our children. If it depends on people just going that extra mile, then we are certainly at the mercy of these people in trying to provide the kind of education for our children that we want.

I'm a homeowner. I'm a taxpayer. I support Neptune Public Schools with my tax dollars. I believe in strong public schools. I believe that a strong public school system contributes to a healthy community. And even

though my daughter doesn't attend the local public school, I'm a strong supporter of it. The only thing that I ask for my tax dollars is safe, dependable transportation.

Thank you very much.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Thank you, Deborah.

Any questions from the Commission, or comments? (no response)

Thank you for coming.

Yes.

MS. TWIDLE: I also have a letter from a Bradley Beach parent who couldn't be here. If it's possible, I have copies to submit for the record.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: To submit, thank you.

Tim Nogueira and Leslie SHEMELEY and Bruce Rodman, are you here? And you're from the Educational Services Commission, Monmouth-Ocean?

BRUCE RODMAN: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Welcome to Trenton.

MR. RODMAN: Thank you.

Good morning, Madam Chairman. I'm Bruce Rodman, the School Business Administrator with the Monmouth-Ocean Educational Services Commission. My apologies for being late. I had a board meeting this morning. My superintendent, Mr. Nogueira, was not able to attend. I have with me Ms. Leslie SHEMELEY, who is our Transportation Coordinator.

The Monmouth-Ocean Educational Services Commission became involved in coordinating transportation in Monmouth County approximately 20 years ago. We coordinate approximately 100 nonpublic routes and approximately 700 other routes for special education and vocational students.

We coordinate transportation for approximately 90 public school districts. We serve 90 public school districts in one way or another with coordinated transportation. Last year, the budget for that program was in excess of \$20 million. We believe we are one of the larger coordinating agencies. We are the only one we know of that extends over more than one county, providing those services. Leslie and her staff are primarily responsible for that, and Leslie reports to me.

Efficiency on the transportation of nonpublic and vocational special education students -- I really feel more-- Do any of you have any questions? I'm going to open it up. I'd rather start with that. Are there any questions that any of you have for us and how we operate or what we do? Or does anybody have any questions about-- I missed the first half hour here. My ears were not burning, although maybe they should have been.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: Probably would.

MS. SWIERC: I'm just curious. The topic keeps coming up about not having enough contractors, really, to provide a competitive market out there for the bidding process. That's what you're doing all day. Do you see that as being a major issue, that there are not enough private contractors out there? We've talked a little bit at the Task Force about the possibility of creating some things that are not private, going with public transporters. Do you see that as being a major issue?

MR. RODMAN: Well, we work with 45 contractors -- 35, 45 contractors. They're certainly a large number of them. Some of them are very small, some of them are very large. As an economic matter, I think if the price is right, the contractors will come. If there's enough money in a route, they're going to bid it. What you've heard here today is true. There are no caps on

what people may bid per pupil on either vocational or special education routes. However, there is a cap on the public students. It takes a very quick session with a calculator to figure that a route has a certain number of pupils times this 710 or 735 rate that you hear about. That equals X , and can I run a bus for X ? If I can't run a bus for X -- We've also heard people say, "Gee, all of a sudden, at the very end, at this last minute I got this transportation." I couldn't tell why that is, although, I can tell you, I can guess. My only guess is that at the end of the bidding cycle, we run through September, and a contractor might have a vehicle or two empty that he can either let sit on his lot or he can either run at a small loss or a small profit or break even, he might at the last minute jump into the void and take that.

People frequently ask us, we hear this question all the time, "Why do they bid that? Why were there no bidders? Why did this guy bid this and why did that contractor bid that?" And I do not have an answer for you. You can call them and ask them, and I suspect that they're going to tell you that it's just simply-- It's largely a function of where their yards are, how tight the labor market is, whether they can get a driver, what the situation is with paying benefits, whether they can lease a new vehicle or need to lease a new vehicle. My understanding is that we have occasionally encountered problems.

Mr. Corwell, I think, would second this. A few years ago, we found what we believed to be -- is kind of a dearth of contractors in the western part of Monmouth County. It caused us all kinds of problems. It was terrible. I would never want to go through that again. Fortunately, people have, now, economically stepped into that void, and we don't have nearly the problems that we had with nonpublic transportation in western Monmouth County. It's a function of the marketplace.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Assemblyman.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: Virtually, everyone who has testified this morning has spoken of the problems they encounter with late notification as to whether transportation is or is not available. I think it was mentioned that the school districts have to notify you around March 31, or something like that, as to what their registration is and their transportation needs. From that point in time, obviously, you have to prepare and go out for bids on routes, try to assemble routes, then submit them out for bids, time for the bids to come back, etc. I gather this is what carries it into August or so before you're in a position to be able to tell people if transportation is or is not available on a given route. Is that basically the case?

MR. RODMAN: That's basically true.

Leslie, would you go over, a little bit about, the various deadlines, including the submission of documentation from the nonpublic schools, what that is?

LESLIE SHEMELEY: Well, it's just like you said. I believe the deadline for the submission of the B6T forms is March 15. We asked the districts to turn around and give them to us by March 31, so we can get a good jump on what routes we can renew, then we have to figure out what we have to go out to bid with. We try to go to bid as early as possible -- late May, early June. We have several bid openings. This year, all districts were notified the week-- I believe it was the week of July 14, whether they had transportation or not, so they would have ample time to either make other arrangements or notify the parents before the August 1 deadline.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: So this year you were able to get notification out, you say, by mid-July?

MS. SHEMELEY: Yes.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: I believe when Joe Deroba testified earlier, he said it was a bit better this year.

Is that right, Joe?

MR. DEROBA: (speaking from audience) Yes, absolutely.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: The same thing over at St. Leo's.

MR. RODMAN: We did tighten up a bit. We had found that we had tried to be nice guys -- and, okay, you're a little bit late -- and we're trying to accommodate people. We found out that was being a little counterproductive. This last year, we, kind of, said we're not going to do that any more.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: Would it all be feasible to move all dates, say a month earlier or something or other to, i.e., instead of the March 15 and March 31, make that sometime in February that that information has to come, and so on down the line? Would that be feasible or not?

MR. RODMAN: I guess it would be feasible. I'd also see what Linda Wells thought about that. But the other thing, Assemblyman, is also that we need a count of students and names of students from the nonpublic schools as well. So that, then, pushes back for them their planning another month. I don't know how would that--

MR. DEROBA: (speaking from audience) The problem would be for incoming kids into the school, new students coming into the school.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: You can't be heard on the Internet.

MR. RODMAN: Okay, all right. Maybe when Mr. Deroba, if you wanted to call him back, you could answer that question on the record, but I do believe my understanding is there is some problem with the nonpublic schools not having all the students registered at that point. As it is now, it's kind of difficult at times, I believe, for the nonpublic.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: Right. Well, that's what I meant about feasibility. I realize we're talking about more than simply transportation when we get into this thing--

MR. RODMAN: Right.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: --so, was there any way to move-- In fact, say you were able to get out your information by mid-July, and there's any way we can work it up so other districts could get that information out to parents. I suspect that, if you had six weeks notification, you'd be in a lot better shape trying to find alternatives. And, obviously, this year you were able to supply them with that.

MR. RODMAN: If it was feasible, we would adjust to it, and we would do it.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: Yes. You accomplished it this year, that's what I'm saying.

MR. RODMAN: A little better, yes.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: If there was some way we could work up so districts, basically, were able to come up with this kind of time table mid-July, as opposed to mid-August, obviously, it would make it a much better case for parents that get notification that they're aren't going to have transportation.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Laurie.

MS. FITCHETT: Two questions. One is, do your buses have a mix of kindergarten and high school kids, or are they kept separate?

MR. RODMAN: Just for the record, we don't have buses. All that we do are all with contracting.

Can you answer that question?

MS. SHEMELEY: Yes. We mix them.

MS. FITCHETT: You do mix them.

MS. SHEMELEY: We do mingle them.

MS. FITCHETT: Okay. And what is the longest time the kids are on the bus?

MS. SHEMELEY: We have runs that are, probably, a maximum of two hours one way.

MS. FITCHETT: One way?

MS. SHEMELEY: Yes. Some of them -- most of them are, more, about an hour to an hour and fifteen minutes.

MS. FITCHETT: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Yes.

MR. CORWELL: Through the Chair, I have a series of questions, some of which we've talked about, anecdotally, over the years.

First of all, did you see, this year, a better response on the part of the districts, without mentioning any names positively or negatively, in getting the names to you in cases where, clearly, there was not going to be any possibility of that student getting a ride from the district? So they, in effect, were following the 1997 law, which required them, immediately, to turn those

names over to you as quickly as possible. Did that look better this year, Leslie, or--

MS. SHEMELEY: I believe it did.

MR. CORWELL: But we're still not there.

MS. SHEMELEY: We're not 100 percent.

MR. CORWELL: Which is something that rankles me a lot, that we don't get to that particular point.

The second question I have is, in terms of any bids coming in, were there any bids that were, what we might say, just over the ceiling, as there were in some other districts around the state, which would then speak to the need for the law, that is working its way through the Legislature right now, that would permit the district to accept bids over the statutory amount and then charge the parents the difference? So, I guess what I'm saying, in simplified terms, were there bids that came in at 720, 730, or was this simply an absence of bids, completely, in Monmouth County?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Excuse me, Leslie. Would you put your microphone on? The red light.

MS. SHEMELEY: I'm sorry.

I think there was a mix. We had a lot of routes that simply weren't bid on, or they were right at the right amount.

MR. CORWELL: So that leads me to the question, if that law were to be enacted, would you think that those bids at 720 would dissipate, or would they actually -- were they real bids? And I guess that's what I'm trying to get at, because there's some question whether it's worth expending the energy in getting that particular piece of legislation passed. There are a lot of very cooperative public school superintendents who are behind it, who would

be willing to charge the parents the additional money. But if, in point of fact -- because that's a minimal amount of money -- but if, in point of fact, those bids are false bids in reality-- In other words, if somebody were to say, "Okay. We accept that bid at 720," but if the company knows full-well that the district cannot accept that bid because the law prohibits it from doing so, they just submit it as a kind of a courtesy effort, do you really think that those bids would continue? Because, if your opinion would be that that law would be valuable, I think that it's something that we all ought to get behind and move through, because it doesn't cost the State any money at all.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: George, I think that, maybe, I know what bill you're speaking of, but I'm not sure. So, you said, if that were passed, would you clarify that.

MR. CORWELL: Certainly. I think Assemblyman Smith is the first sponsor of the bill, but I believe, if I'm not mistaken, you're on it also, Assemblyman. The bill would simply say that the district -- and Linda can qualify this in terms of the specifics -- the district could accept the bid that was over the statutory ceiling. So, if a bid came in at 720, the district could accept the bid at 720, charge the parents \$10 per person, get that payment up front, and the route would run, instead of giving the parents the check for \$710.

MS. SHEMELEY: Go ahead.

MR. RODMAN: I couldn't tell you what effect that might have with the contractors. I suspect it might have the desired intent. One of the problems, however, with that would be the logistics of getting the payment from the parent, what happens when the parent moves to Dubuque, what happens when three new parents move into the neighborhood, what happens if 85 percent of the parents pay and 15 percent don't.

MR. CORWELL: Well, I recognize all of that. But also, the payment on the other end is when the percentage of that route that's been canceled transfers to public school--

MR. RODMAN: Right.

MR. CORWELL: --and the taxpayers pay that extra amount, and they're the ones that are getting hit in the pocketbook. So, I think this is workable; all of this sort of thing is workable with deadlines, and I recognize all those implications. But I've had superintendents tell me that they would be more than willing to find a way to do this for those parents, because they perceive the nonpublic school parents as being their parents as well.

My third question, with the permission of the Chair--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Go right ahead.

MR. CORWELL: --would be that, are you satisfied with the computerized mechanisms that you have, as state-of-the-art, for routing, or do you need help from the State in terms of getting equipment that would provide you with a better opportunity to create more efficient routes?

MS. SHEMELEY: We could certainly use help in that area. I wouldn't call our routing system state-of-the-art, although it is a pretty good one. We still rely on maps and our own coordination, not solely on the computer.

MR. CORWELL: Okay. And, again, with the Chair's permission, my last question would be, given the fact that there is still a lack of contractors out there -- at least ones that are willing to take these routes, these nonpublic routes, which are less desirable -- are you contemplating getting into the business of transportation yourself, as other commissions have done in other

parts of the state, so that they, in fact, are providing the buses rather than contracting them out to private entities?

MR. RODMAN: That's something we always keep in mind. It is a large undertaking, in that it involves capital expense for purchasing vehicles, housing the vehicles, maintaining them, gassing them, and staffing them. It is a big undertaking. It's something that we look at and evaluate.

MR. CORWELL: But, if the State were willing to provide some loan money on some basis, you would at least be interested in exploring that possibility, is that what I'm hearing?

MR. RODMAN: Grant money would be even better, but--
(laughter)

MR. CORWELL: Right. I understand.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: You're welcome.

Any other questions or comments?

Dennis.

MR. SMELTZER: Yes. I was just wondering if you could comment, briefly, on any other limitations we may not have touched on yet with regards to successfully busing these children, whether it's in our bidding laws, or cooperation in calendar, or starting or closing times, or cooperation from school districts, or if there are any other limitations that you might think of that has gotten in the way of providing better transportation that we haven't touched on.

MR. RODMAN: My impression is that the present set of laws and regulations are pretty good, if they are observed and adhered to.

MR. SMELTZER: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Yes, go right ahead.

MS. SWIERC: I just was curious, what routing software are you using?

MS. SHEMELEY: Route-Point (phonetic spelling) by Visual Software.

MS. SWIERC: And you're saying it's fair?

MS. SHEMELEY: It's fair.

MR. RODMAN: It's fair. We have spent well in excess of \$100,000 in the last, probably, three years on programing and hardware upgrades in this department. We're constantly looking at ways that we can generate faster, more accurate data. We are, right now, working with the Route-Point people to see if we can make some of this data available on-line. It poses some dramatic problems, particularly for student confidentiality. But we're looking at various ways that we might be able to let people, in the districts in particular, and potentially in the nonpublics, access this information faster.

MS. SWIERC: Are you aware of other software programs that are better, and it's a function of, "Well, we've already put out this money, and now we're kind of stuck with it?"

MR. RODMAN: I'm not aware of any better software.

MS. SWIERC: Okay.

MR. RODMAN: We keep our eyes open, but I'm not aware of anything that's better. I'm satisfied that what we have is good.

MS. SWIERC: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: You make a very good witness, by the way.

MR. RODMAN: Well, thank you, Madam Chairman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Yes.

MR. BLUETT: I did have a question for you. A number of times a person has spoken about the length of the bus ride, even getting up to almost two hours. What would you say if a child were to go directly from their home to the school all by himself, what is the worst case scenario, as far as the time is concerned?

MR. RODMAN: I believe that we have students as far away as Brick attending school as far away as Christian Brothers. If we put them in a helicopter, I can't make that trip in under half an hour.

MR. BLUETT: Okay.

MR. RODMAN: People hear two hours one way, and it sounds terrible. It really is. But, on the other hand, if you live in Brick, and you choose to send your child to school in Middletown, that student is going to be on a bus for a long time. We have kids that we transport from Toms River to Sandy Hook. Those kids get on a vehicle about 5:20 in the morning. And I've talked to them. They sleep. They sleep for a good hour and a half. They get a nice hour-and-a-half rest, arrive when the sun is rising on Sandy Hook. That's a huge ride, and the parents think that's the program they want for their student and their child. I guess that's what you're going to have to pay--

MR. BLUETT: Yes. I was trying to get some perspective.

MR. RODMAN: --I mean, in terms of time. There is no limitation placed upon us to say, "If it's over two hours, you don't go. We won't do it," or, "If it's an hour and a half, that's excessive." There are no rules like that. The only rule, as I recall -- maybe I'm getting a little off the reservation, maybe Linda or Leslie will catch me -- if the local district has board

policy that says that no local district student shall be on a vehicle for longer than X , and the local district comes to us and says, “We want that policy applied to the nonpublic students as well,” we will observe that policy. However, that’s pretty unusual.

MR. BLUETT: I did have one other question, if that’s okay?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Go right ahead.

MR. BLUETT: Another question, or a point that’s been brought up, do you feel that the task at hand is too much? Is that a factor in the routes, or does it seem to, basically, go back to economics and availability of people to do the routes?

MR. RODMAN: I don’t feel the task is too much. I definitely feel that economics, obviously, in my mind, plays a very important part in the equation.

MR. BLUETT: All right. So, if we were looking for a bottom line, it seems to come back to that.

MR. RODMAN: Economics.

MR. BLUETT: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: That seems to be the bottom line with everything these days. (laughter)

MR. RODMAN: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Thank you very much.

MR. RODMAN: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Margaret Boland, Associate Superintendent of Schools, Diocese of Trenton.

Margaret.

MARGARET BOLAND: Good morning.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Welcome.

MS. BOLAND: I don't have a prepared statement for you, really. But just to say, as the Associate Superintendent working with the government programs working with Dr. Caldwell (phonetic spelling) and Mary Ellen, work at the Alliance, which was mentioned before, I usually get the phone calls in August -- desperate parents and desperate principals. I think one of the issues we have is that our principals really have no knowledge of what's happening out there, because our schools, by law, really don't have to be notified when there are issues with transportation. So, therefore, the parent is being notified, but the principal has no knowledge of that.

So they're left with a situation as how do we deal with the children not coming to the school; Margaret, how do I handle this, and what can I tell my parents? So we try to work with them to help them, and guide them, and direct them in the direction that they can go. This is disruptive to the school, certainly, to get ready for the day and for the new year, particularly with the young children, that is hard.

The other issue that was brought up was the time. Most of my phone calls come from parents with young children who are saying, "Margaret, our children are going to be on this bus for an hour and a half." For a first or second grader, that is very difficult. There is really nothing we can do about that either, because there is no limit on the amount of time that a child can be on a school bus. Of course, I sometimes will meet with the conference. I certainly meet with the Alliance. I meet with the parents. I meet with the principal and try to help them understand that, that we need their help, to come to you and to ask for some help with that time. A first grader or a second grader is exhausted, very often, getting off a school bus.

The other issue that's always presented to me is -- and Mary Ellen Lilly adhered to that -- was that the buses are coming earlier and earlier. We have found that all over the diocese. As a principal myself, in the past, it was scurrying around to get some help at the school, in order to make sure that there -- that's a safety issue. And where children are being left off--

I found that, by principals developing relationships with the bus coordinators and talking to them, that helps a little bit. But it is a major safety issue in our schools, and I'm finding over the years that that is happening. I also have noticed over the years that -- and this is about seven years that I've been doing this -- is that the number of children that have been losing busing, regular busing, has increased over the years, except this is probably our best year -- the least amount of phone calls that came this year in August. So I know that everybody is working very hard to try to solve some of these issues.

And I certainly have to thank Linda and George and all of you for really focusing on this issue for the nonpublic schools. I don't know if anyone has any questions for me.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Thank you, Margaret.

Any questions?

Assemblyman.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: You said the schools are not notified relative to which children have transportation--

MS. BOLAND: No. The principals are never notified. They do not get any notification as to what's happening, unless there is a relationship between the principal and a bus coordinator, and the bus coordinator will pick the phone up and say, "Look, this is what's going to happen." But otherwise, the principals have no knowledge of that. And all of a sudden--

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: I think that's inappropriate.

MS. BOLAND: Excuse me.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: I think they should know.

MS. BOLAND: Yes, I believe they should. Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: I would say so.

MS. BOLAND: I believe it really helps them. First of all, it really helps with -- particularly with brand-new parents. Parents that have been there for a long time, and with their older children, perhaps, can deal with it a little bit better. We do have parents that have just registered their children -- kindergartners, first graders -- I get very nervous. What do I do? They have no-- They don't even know where to begin.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: Well, it also has a potential impact on the registration they have for the school--

MS. BOLAND: That's correct.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: --as some were indicating, they may have to pull the children out--

MS. BOLAND: And that has happened, because the--

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: --and it's going to have significant impacts on the school.

MS. BOLAND: That's right. That's absolutely right, so--

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: I think we ought to look at that a little closer.

MS. BOLAND: That would be a real issue, as that communication piece would be a tremendous help. Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Yes.

Anyone else? (no response)

Thank you very much, Margaret.

MS. BOLAND: Oh, thank you very much for listening.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Jim Keelen (phonetic spelling).

Is Jim here? Contractor? (no response)

Teresa Dondrea, from Marlboro Public Schools.

Welcome to Trenton, Teresa.

TERESA C. DONDREA: Thank you very much. Glad to be here.

I see I'm the first school district director to be here today. A lot of the things that are in that handout have been touched on already. Marlboro Township is a K-through-8 district. We're part of the Freehold Regional High School system, which is probably one of the largest regional districts in the area. It covers five townships: Marlboro, Howell, Freehold Township, Freehold Borough, parts of Farmingdale, and Englishtown-Manalapan.

My knowledge about the private and parochial school transportation is in one area only, and that is what it costs and how we pay the bill, because Freehold Regional High School district is responsible for providing the transportation, and that is provided through, I believe, Monmouth-Ocean Educational Services Commission.

Some of the problems that we have -- and we don't hear a lot, because the parents do know that we don't have the responsibility for providing it -- but, again, the kindergarten children riding on the buses with high school students, the long rides. One of our Board of Education members approached me because a parent had a young child, a kindergartner, who was being dropped off at one of the Catholic schools with no supervision, so the bus could continue on its route.

Her problem was not only that. It was also the fact that she couldn't get an answer or a reason. First she called the contractor, then the services commission, then Freehold Regional High School, and then back to the services commission. She eventually contacted us, and I called Freehold Regional and was told that there was supervision there. The problem, apparently, had been solved. But in the mean time, this parent had to make a lot of calls.

As far as the services go, the \$710 maximum has been in effect for quite a few years. And what we have seen is that we are now paying more aid-in-lieu-of students and have less of our kindergarten-through-eighth-grade children transported on routes, which is a problem. One of the problems we have, and to me it's-- We hear a lot. We happen to have a large Jewish school right in the township, and there are well over 100 students who live in Marlboro attending that school, and they have never been able to get a bus route. We pay them aid-in-lieu-of transportation. Most of them are kindergarten children who are going and taking advantage of a full-day kindergarten program.

So, again, I can -- just reiterating the other problems that I saw-- As far as coordinated transportation services, I have more knowledge about the special service portion of it. And that is very effective, in that we do get hooked up with surrounding districts if we only have one child going to a school, and another district might have one going to the same school. Again, anytime you're trying to coordinate special service transportation or private and parochial school transportation, economics are the issue.

As a school district, I can put a bus into a development, pick up 54 children, take the child to school-- The bus will now go into another

development and service another school. Some of our bus drivers do four routes in one day, with one bus and one driver, over 200 children. It is impossible for a contractor or a school district to get that kind of economics going if you're picking up 30 children spread over a 30-mile area going to a school 20 miles away. And that's why contractors don't bid on private and parochial routes. Because, as a school district, if we went out to bid for a route, it would be a two- or three- or four-run package, where they could-- Even if they bid \$20,000 or \$25,000 or \$30,000 per route, they would certainly be making a lot more money than they would transporting 35 children on that bus at \$710 for the year. So economics is and will be a very important issue as far as private, parochial, and special service transportation.

I also have to say, as an aside, I have found the Educational Services Commission very cooperative and responsive. They, of course, have some of the same problems that we have in dealing with a contractor. The only difference is that there's an extra party involved. It's now a three-step procedure, rather than a two, if we contract out directly. Or, if it's my own driver, it can happen instantly.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Thank you, Teresa.

Anyone have any questions or comments? (no response)

MS. DONDREA: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Thank you for coming.

Cynthia Kowalski from St. Aloysius School in Jackson.

Red means on. (referring to PA microphone)

CYNTHIA KOWALSKI: Thank you.

I'm the parent of a fourth grade student at St. Aloysius Grammar School in Jackson and a tenth grade student at Monsignor Donovan High

School in Toms River. I'm a resident of Jackson and, until the spring of 2001, I was an RN working full-time as a director of an emergency department. I've experienced transportation challenges since my oldest was in sixth grade, which was about five years ago. At that time, she attended St. Veronica's in Howell. During that time, my transportation was changed from a private company to my local school district. Our school day, which then started at approximately 8:10 a.m., had to be changed to 9:00 a.m., because some towns could not get buses until after the public school runs. This was the beginning of every working parents' nightmare.

Although a 9:00 a.m. start impacted my ability to get to work on time, other parents attending St. Veronica lost busing altogether, specifically the Lakewood residents. They, then, had to drive their children both ways to school for their child's seventh and eighth grade years.

I spend every summer with lots of other nonpublic school parents waiting and wondering when and if the rug will be pulled out from under us. Our bus passes arrive Labor Day weekend, or later, and until then, no one knows if we will have transportation.

I have made a choice to send my children to a nonpublic school. I believe I should have the opportunity to have them bused and not forced to transport them. For the last several years, we have heard, "We'll give you back your \$710." Honestly, I don't want my \$710 back. I want my children bused.

During the last school year, 2001-2002, my freshman, high school daughter was late to school 27 times, all busing related. She is bused from Jackson to Toms River. Three of those times, she wasn't picked up at all. Please note, she was absent from school last year one time.

I'm sure some of you have daughters, and maybe even high school daughters. Now, picture your high school daughter is late for school 27 times. This was not pretty. She was late for tests and had to take them in the hall. Understand the domino effect that happens in my house, and many others, when our children are not picked up, or they're late. My oldest gets picked up at 7:20 a.m. It takes approximately 25 to 30 minutes to get to Monsignor Donovan. School starts at 8:00 a.m. I give the bus 10 to 15 minutes if it's late. If I make the decision to wait, she will be ultimately picked up. However, she will be late. That's when it starts to get complicated.

In order to get my oldest to Toms River by 8:00, I have to awaken every day and be dressed and ready for work just in case. I then must wake up my youngest, dress him, and be in the car on the way to Toms River within 15 minutes. He normally doesn't wake up until after 7:45. I then must feed him in the car. Because, in order to get my daughter to Toms River, I have to then turn around in Toms River, come straight back to St. Aloysius in Jackson, because I've now missed his bus. I then must get him to St. Aloysius for 8:50. It's at that time that I turn around, at St. Aloysius, and I drive back to Toms River, because that's where I work.

Just as my daughter was late 27 times last year, I was late 37 times for work because of the two children. In some ways, I'm fortunate, because I'm not necessarily docked for my lateness. However, I do end up working later and, thereby, don't have the time to spend with my family.

My neighbors are not as lucky. For those that make approximately \$30 an hour, times 37 hours of being late, is over \$1000, and we all pay tuition. My son, this week, was picked up at 9:08 a.m. School starts at St. Aloysius at 9:00 a.m. He had another substitute who wasn't sure of his route.

He was picked up late two days last week, causing him to be late for class. He's nine, and he had a test. We have only been in school one month.

I was on a first-name basis with the staff at my town's transportation department. Although very empathetic, the problem was never solved. I even insisted on speaking to the Director of Transportation this past spring -- a delightful man, empathetic, but-- He told me there's not enough staff. Moneys were cut. Salaries were horrible. For a minute, I thought he was talking about nursing. (laughter)

One reason, and certainly not the single-most reason, I left my position was because I could not work the hours that were required and deal with my transportation challenges, especially since my children are no longer together, but at different schools. I considered myself fortunate that my oldest got home before the youngest, until the day her bus came 45 minutes to Monsignor Donovan to pick her up, because the bus driver's priority was getting the public high school sports team to where they needed to go, and they were running late.

My children have been told we are not a priority, period. There are too many more public school children that need transportation. Nobody likes that high school run, it's too long. No one wants the Catholic kid route. Our town is growing too quickly.

Lastly, my husband and I, like many nonpublic school families, made a careful and informed decision about where to send our children. We are on the PTA. Our children play sports and participate in clubs, just like public school children. Although my children do not attend the Jackson Public School system, we do participate in the community. My children's needs to

be transported to school is no different than my neighbor's. I'm just not sure why we're treated differently.

This past spring, several parents that I met through our transportation challenges in Jackson actually considered removing their children from nonpublic school because of the uncertainty of transportation. Without them, I don't know that I could keep my children in nonpublic school. I would lose the emergency car pooling, the multiple-mommy backups that I have instituted, just because of these transportation challenges. There are several members of my community who have actually looked into St. Aloysius, and especially Monsignor Donovan, as potential schools and chose not to pursue them, based solely on the transportation nightmare stories they have heard.

The \$710 cost of transporting the children versus the cost of putting them through an already overcrowded public school, I've done that math. We need to improve the system.

Thank you very much for the opportunity.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: Thank you.

Any questions? (no response)

Thank you for coming.

MS. KOWALSKI: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FRISCIA: We had two people who were missing before, Janet Dolan, from St. James School in Redbank. Is she here yet? (no response)

Or Elena Torregrossa? No? (no response)

Well, that concludes our hearing today.

Would anyone on the Panel like to add something? (no response)

I thank you all for coming and giving the input that our Committee is looking for. I'm sure it has been very helpful to the Subcommittee, and they appreciate your effort in coming to Trenton today.

Thank you.

(HEARING CONCLUDED)