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Many California school districts breathed a sigh of relief after Gov. Jerry Brown signed into law Senate Bill 81, fast-tracked legislation that restores $248 million in transportation cuts made in December. Now, they are equally relieved to learn that the governor will present a modified plan to lawmakers on Thursday that would keep the same amount of transportation funding in the next budget year.

The governor would pay for 2012-2013 school bus service by devoting less money toward reducing the state's massive debt. But, if voters reject his proposal for tax hikes in November, he still plans to cut $4.8 billion from public schools.

When state revenue came up $2.2 billion short prior to Christmas, the governor enacted $1 billion in midyear "trigger" cuts that left school districts scrambling for funds to cover bus service the rest of this school year. But state lawmakers were quick to respond. State Sen. Noreen Evans sponsored an amendment to SB 81 that replaced the $248 million in transportation cuts with an across-the-board reduction for all school districts.

Michael Rea, executive director of the West County Transportation Agency in Santa Rosa, north of San Francisco, said there was wide support statewide for the across-the-board reduction to replace the deep transportation cut.

"Districts all over California were up in arms, vociferously expressing their displeasure to their legislators," said Rea. "By transforming this to an across-the-board trigger cut, every district gets

an equivalent level of cuts, so it's just more equitable. There is great support for that to happen."

Rea explained that districts will get their transportation money back but will receive a cut of $42 per average daily attendance (ADA) for the remainder of the current school year. He also noted that the state's education coalition, which consists of teachers and classified employees unions, were "very supportive" of SB 81 because it levels the playing field for school districts using a greater amount of transportation services to serve the rural and the poor.

"The problem with the transportation trigger cut is that it's very disproportionate," Rea continued. "Why this bill make sense is because transportation is used by school districts at varying levels. In very rural and/or low-income areas, there are districts in this state where cuts equal from $30 to $2,000 per ADA…Some school districts have really high costs, and for those districts, their equivalent ADA cost is extremely high."

Rea said that transportation's current fiscal crisis has served as a "great education tool" for the legislature to learn about the importance of school bus transportation. He applauded a group of concerned citizens
from southern Humboldt County that took a field trip to Sacramentoon Jan. 24 to meet with legislators and rally to shine a light on the important role of the yellow bus.

"It's one of those moments when people are saying, 'We've had enough, and we're not going to take it anymore.' A lot of these districts are on the brink. With extremely rural districts, if they don't have transportation, the kids are not going to come to school. Then they lose money and children don't get educated," said Rea.

Dave Walrath, who represents the Small School Districts Association in Santa Rosa, said he would like to thank the Senate Budget Committee for amending the bill to address the "discriminatory" cut made to urban and rural school districts serving high numbers of children from low-income families and children needing special education transportation.

"Senate bill 81 treats all districts equitably as the state struggles — and school districts struggle — with lower-than-anticipated income," said Walrath. "For most rural school districts, there is not subsidized public transportation…Consequently, the school bus, the parents or walking are the only means for these children to attend school. Many of these rural parents don't have the

income to afford transporting their students to school."

For example, Walrath continued, in Imperial County, which is located by the Mexican border, the unemployment rate is currently 20 percent. He said there are many more school districts where 100 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced meals.

"Many of their roads don't have sidewalks or bike lanes, so it is unsafe for students to try to walk or bike to school on those roads. There is a major student safety issue if transportation cannot be provided," he said.