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The New York School Bus Contractors Association (NYSBCA) responded to Gov. Andrew Cuomo's new state budget proposal for the 2013-2014 fiscal year, which would keep current student transportation aid intact through efficiencies that could funnel nearly $100 million back into classrooms.

NYSBCA said the transportation efficiencies, namely contracting with private bus companies, are proven to cut costs. NYSBCA said state schools currently using private pupil transportation operators have reduced transportation costs by a total of $200 million per year. This figure, the association added, represents one of the most successful examples of public-private partnerships in New York State. NYSBCA also estimated that an additional $100 million a year could be saved if more school districts partnered with private school bus contractors.

In a statement, the association said the cost-saving solutions will give cash-strapped school districts not currently using private pupil transportation operators the opportunity to do so. This will allow these schools to "significantly reduce transportation costs while maintaining the highest standards in school bus safety," NYSBCA added.

Association President Phil Vallone formally presented the ideas at a Wednesday legislative hearing on the proposed budget in Albany. The proposal would help school districts explore the option of hiring a private school bus operator, and allow the schools to keep unused transportation aid for up to five years. The plan also calls for the repeal of the state and local sales tax on the purchase of school buses – a tax that NYSBCA said "is ironically paid by the school and the state."

"More than half of the schools in New York State are enjoying the safety and cost-saving benefits of using a private pupil transportation operator," added Vallone. "We believe the solutions we are putting forth this year will help even more schools realize the safety and cost-saving benefits of using a private pupil transportation operator for their school bus services."

Meanwhile, the New York Association for Pupil Transportation thanked Cuomo for retaining the state student transportation budget line item as an expense-based aid and not reducing the state's commitment to it. NYAPT also pointed out the the proposed budget continues the appropriation of $400,000 for the state School Bus Driver Training program, endorses the

extension of school district authority to lease school buses, and recommends that the state appropriate funds to support transportation of pre-kindergarten students so that districts are not left with the entire cost.

Additionally, Cuomo's proposal recommends that the legislature expand the definition of "allowable/aidable equipment" on a school bus to include GPS and telematics, and cautions the legislature to be aware of the transportation costs inherent in some of the proposed education reform initiatives such as "extended day/year," full day pre-kindergarten and regional high schools. NYAPT added that the proposed budged reiterated mandates on school districts for relief recommendations and urged the legislature to enact them.

NYAPT Executive Director Peter Mannella made the statement before the Joint Hearing of the state Senate Finance Committee and the Assembly Ways and Means Committee. He also introduced a new slogan, "School Starts Here," that builds on the idea that the school bus and the school bus driver are the first contact that students have with their schools each day.