

Student Mobility Scholarships Legislative Testimony (Est. 3 Minutes) House School Aid Appropriations Subcommittee (March 11, 2020)

Chairman Miller and Members of the Committee:

My name is Ben DeGrow, and I serve as director of education policy for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. I come to you today to ask your support of a transportation scholarship pilot program that would enable low-income students to more easily access quality educational options.

Our research has found that some low-income families are held back from quality educational opportunities because of barriers to affordable, reliable school transportation. In response to a 2014 survey conducted by the Washington-based Center for Reinventing Public Education, almost 30% of Detroit parents said that barriers to transportation made finding the right school for their child significantly harder. A 2018 Mackinac Center survey found a small but significant number of Michigan charter school parents – parents who already exercise choice – failed to enroll in a first-choice school because they were limited by transportation. While this limitation is likely not widespread, where it is felt it can have a significant impact of holding back a student from a better, more impactful schooling experience.

Even a well-intended and well-designed educational choice system may make it hard for some of the most disadvantaged families to take advantage of the alternatives available. In crafting the policy we have called Student Mobility Scholarships, we seek to increase equitable access to school and career training options, giving parents another tool to take charge of their children's educational future. Under state oversight, Student Mobility Scholarships would operate like a restricted-use debit card, enabling families to craft their own school transportation solutions.

Want to attend one of the two-thirds of public charter schools that do not provide transportation service? A small number of low-income students could pool resources for a smaller vehicle that could convey them daily to campus, or an individual student could purchase a public transit pass. Want to attend a neighboring district through the

Schools of Choice program but are not able to get to a bus stop that will pick you up? Set up a regular route on a child-friendly ridesharing service. A scholarship program may open the door for a number of companies that provide this kind of service to come to Michigan.

The Mackinac Center proposes the creation of a pilot program operating in two distinct regions – one urban and one rural. A pilot program would be a beneficial approach, allowing a chance to test and study the first-of-its-kind policy in the nation. Full funding would amount to about \$1,400 a student, with prorated funding provided in cases where a family’s ability to transport the child to school is limited just to certain days. We estimate that one million dollars per region would directly benefit nearly 700 students in each area. Low-income families living in the designated regions would apply to the state agency overseeing the program by a stated deadline, with a lottery held in event of the program being oversubscribed. Extra demand could be met in the future through state tax credits for donations to a Student Mobility Scholarship-granting nonprofit organization.

Thank you for your consideration of this innovative approach to level the playing field of educational access by addressing one key need that less-privileged families face: the need for safe, reliable and affordable school transportation. I am available to take any questions.

[NOTE: A copy of the full report “Student Mobility Scholarships: Helping Families Access the Best Schools” is available at <https://www.mackinac.org/S2019-10>.]