



GROUP AGAINST SMOG & POLLUTION

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Testimony from Rachel Filippini, Executive Director of the Group Against Smog and Pollution, to the Pittsburgh Public School Board of Education on the need to be proactive to reduce unnecessary school bus idling

Thank you for the opportunity to speak this evening. My name is Rachel Filippini and I'm the Executive Director of the Group Against Smog and Pollution (or GASP). For more than forty-five years we've worked to improve air quality in southwestern Pennsylvania through education, advocacy, and legal work. One of the causes of our region's air pollution is diesel emissions and one of the sources of the diesel emissions are school buses. For many years now we have worked with Pittsburgh Public Schools to reduce emissions from school buses that seriously impact student, driver, and community health. You may recall our work to establish the Healthy School Bus Fund and more recently our support of including a requirement in the contracts you have with the school bus companies that school buses clean-up, which involves using retrofit or new buses, within five years. We are aware and disappointed that there has been limited success in making that requirement stick.

Tonight, however, I'm here to specifically talk about school bus idling. Diesel exhaust from idling contains significant levels of small particles, known as fine particulate matter. Fine particles pose a significant health risk because they can pass through the nose and throat and lodge themselves in the lungs or pass into the bloodstream. These particles are linked to asthma attacks, heart attacks, cancer, stroke, diabetes, and reduced brain function. Children are especially vulnerable, as their bodies, including their respiratory systems and brains, are still developing and because they breathe at a faster rate than adults.

To help prevent unnecessary idling by school buses and other large diesel vehicles, in 2009 the PA legislature passed anti-idling legislation. In general, the law says that drivers of commercial diesel powered vehicles, like school buses, can only idle 5 minutes in an hour. If there are passengers aboard, buses can idle for up to 15 minutes during an hour. The law also mandates that schools post signs reminding drivers about the law.

Unfortunately, not all school bus drivers are complying with the law. In 2014, GASP and several other environmental, community, and health-based organizations conducted school bus idling observations to try to determine just how big of a problem idling is at Pittsburgh Public Schools. In both the spring and fall, we found roughly 1/3 of all school buses idling beyond the allowable 5 minutes. We also found, at the time, that the required diesel idling signage was not posted at any of the schools.

I am pleased to report that we have noticed many more signs posted at this time. We encourage you to get all signs up as soon as possible. If more signs are needed please let us know, as we have more we can provide to you.

In addition, we'd like to make the following recommendations:

1. of the law. During bus contract negotiations we'd encourage you to require bus companies you work with to train their drivers about the law and even include a clause in the contract prohibiting unnecessary idling. Ensure all school staff are aware of the idling law and empower your school bus monitors to inform school bus drivers who are idling that they must turn off their engines because idling is both unhealthy and illegal. We've developed reminder cards that monitors can use.
2. Notify the school bus companies that Pittsburgh Public Schools takes the diesel idling law seriously and will not tolerate violations idling.
3. Last but not least you should report repeat violators to the police.

School bus idling contributes to our region's poor air quality and puts kids' health at risk. The solution to the problem is so easy—simply turn off the engine. A strong commitment from Pittsburgh Public Schools will go a long way in improving compliance with the law and creating a healthier learning environment.

Thank you for your time.