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Superintendent Spearman Calls for School Bus System Revamp

Columbia, S.C. – Today, at a press conference at the State House, Superintendent of Education Molly Spearman addressed ongoing concerns with South Carolina’s state owned school bus fleet and outlined her plan to overhaul its current makeup to improve both safety and efficiency.

“As State Superintendent my top priority has and will always be the safety of our students. That starts each morning when the bus arrives and ends when the bus drops students off,” said Spearman.

“We can no longer wait to address the needs of our state’s student transportation system. I am committed to working tirelessly with our state’s leaders to ensure students have safe and reliable transportation for years to come,” concluded Spearman.

Since the 1950s, South Carolina has owned, fueled, and maintained the fleet of school buses that transport students to and from its public schools. Currently, the state utilizes 5,582 school buses that travelled over 82.2 million miles last year.

For many years our bus fleet has been noted as being one of the oldest in the nation. Currently 50 percent of the fleet, or 2805 buses, are over 15 years old. The manufacture dates of the buses range almost thirty years, from 1988 to 2016.

Despite the General Assembly’s good intentions by passing Act 79, that mandating a 15 year replacement cycle, funding has been episodic and heavily impacted by the Recession. The replacement cycle also does not account for the high level of student growth that is occurring in many areas of the state.

Older buses, particularly those manufactured from 1995-1996 which account for 45 percent of the total bus fleet, are in dire need of replacement. The ongoing maintenance needs of these buses in addition to their higher fuel consumption means that they are more than twice as costly to operate per mile compared to newer models.

To address these ongoing concerns, Superintendent Spearman has asked the General Assembly to fund the replacement of over 1,000 of the problematic 20 plus year old buses. She has also worked alongside State Treasurer Curtis Loftis and the General Assembly to put into place the first ever lease to purchase program for school buses which she is advocating to continue to utilize moving forward.

“As a taxpayer, I thank Superintendent Spearman for being tenacious in her search for the lowest cost financial solution in providing newer, safer school buses for our children. The State Treasurer’s Master Lease Program allows her to have 175 buses immediately instead of being phased in over five years. The reduced financial and operating costs will save the State millions, and our school children and bus drivers will be safer,” said Treasurer Loftis.

In addition to funding for the replacement of the aging fleet, Spearman is also asking the General Assembly to fund baseline salary increases for bus drivers and bus shop technicians who are difficult to recruit and retain and are often paid lower salaries than their counterparts at other agencies.

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