

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Full Committee Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr.

Hearing on “Making the Grade?: Audit of the Environmental Protection Agency’s Clean School Bus Program”

September 13, 2023

I have to start out by saying, the only way we’re going to have more electric vehicles, more electric buses, more clean energy buses, more EV charging stations, is if we build more – if we create more. And if we let China do it, and say “well they’re way ahead of us, so we shouldn’t even bother,” then we’re only going to be in a worse situation. So I really can’t understand the Republican mantra that “there aren’t enough buses, there aren’t enough charging stations” – well, then let’s change that. Let’s not just say we’re going to go back to the past and continue doing what we’re doing. Let’s change it.

And we have to, because we have long known that harmful emissions from school buses that use fossil fuels can exacerbate childhood asthma, increase a child’s lifetime cancer risk, and contribute to the climate crisis.

Fortunately, there are newer buses that can reduce or eliminate school bus emissions, but tight budgets coupled with high operating costs of existing bus fleets make it impossible for many schools to replace outdated buses. It’s particularly difficult for underserved communities to invest in school bus upgrades, even though these upgrades would reduce future fuel costs. These communities are also disproportionately affected by air pollution and these upgrades would better protect both the health of students and the surrounding community.

So we created programs at the EPA that have helped replace the oldest, most-polluting buses with new models that meet EPA’s diesel emissions standards. Then, last Congress, as part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, we invested \$5 billion over five years in EPA’s Clean School Bus Program. This funding will help the EPA build on past success protecting public health, while also combating the climate crisis.

Today, the Clean School Bus Program is taking the oldest and most outdated school buses off the road and replacing them with cleaner, modern buses. These investments are helping schools enjoy immediate cost savings on fuel and maintenance that can be reinvested in the classroom or to pay for future fleet upgrades.

Now, the Clean School Bus Program is still in the early stages, but initial results are promising. In 2022, EPA received thousands of applications from schools and communities to replace more than 12,000 buses. To better meet this tremendous desire for clean school buses,

EPA increased the award pool from \$500 million to \$965 million. EPA then prioritized eligible applications from rural, low-income, tribal, and other underserved communities using criteria set forth in statute by Congress. Many schools that received awards last year have started to use clean school buses this year to provide a healthier environment for their students while realizing immediate cost savings that will continue to grow over time.

I call that an early success, but Committee Republicans are looking to undermine the program and these investments simply because every single one of them opposed the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Republicans are deliberately misleading the public about this program in order to prop up their friends in the fossil fuel industry.

The Clean School Bus Program provides funds for electric buses as well as low-emission propane and compressed-natural gas buses. Congress gave schools the flexibility to choose from a range of technologies so new buses would fit their needs, and schools spoke loudly and clearly. More than 90 percent of the applications that EPA received for the first round of rebates were for zero-emission electric school buses. Schools want clean buses and EPA is delivering.

While I appreciate hearing from Inspectors General (IG) about their work in detecting waste, fraud, and abuse, the Republican Majority is holding this hearing before the Inspector General has even completed an initial audit of the Clean School Bus Program. Reports and audits from IGs are invaluable to Congressional oversight efforts, but IGs need to actually complete their audits to have those results.

Democrats are committed to conducting constructive oversight that can help programs succeed and compliment an IG's important work. We need to make sure that EPA's Clean School Bus Program is successful, and constructive oversight is one of the best ways to protect these investments. But we shouldn't confuse fearmongering on behalf of the fossil fuel industry with real oversight. I look forward to hearing about the risks and challenges that could hinder federal investments so that we can ensure that this program is successful and that there is an expansion of clean school buses in communities all around the nation – including in the communities of my Republican colleagues here today who also are reaping the advantages of these investments, even though they oppose them.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back the balance of my time.