

STUDENT TRANSPORTATION IN CHOICE-RICH DISTRICTS: IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj

Gevirtz School of Education
University of California
Santa Barbara, CA 93106-9490
carolynsattin-bajaj@ucsb.edu

Abstract

Despite a growing recognition of the significance of student transportation for promoting equitable school choice, to date, there has been limited understanding of the implementation of school transportation policies, particularly in choice-heavy settings. Moreover, little is known about the challenges associated with managing student transportation in large school districts or how school and district administrators working in distinct contexts respond to these challenges. This brief draws on interview data collected from district administrators, charter school leaders, charter authorizers, and stakeholders in three choice-rich school districts with distinct transportation policies and public transit infrastructures—Detroit, New Orleans, and New York City—to identify the common challenges associated with implementing student transportation policies and administrators' responses to them. The brief includes a discussion of the implications of high transportation costs, logistical complexity, and student safety challenges as well as non-uniform transportation provision and transportation policies for equitable access to charter schools. It ends with a review of some potential policy alternatives that policy-makers should consider when designing transportation policies or working to improve existing transportation practices.

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INTRODUCTION

Student transportation is an important financial and logistical responsibility of school districts, charter management organizations (CMOs), and schools. Districts spent over \$24 billion on student transportation in the 2014–15 school year, accounting for about 8 percent of all public education expenditures (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] 2019). Student transportation policies also have implications for students' access to the full range of educational opportunities ostensibly available to them, particularly in choice-rich environments (Teske, Fitzpatrick, and O'Brien 2009; Jochim et al. 2014; Denice and Gross 2016; Blagg et al. 2017; Edwards 2021). Yet, policies governing the provision of student transportation vary widely across states and localities, and there is significant heterogeneity within the charter sector in terms of transportation requirements and offerings (Blagg et al. 2017; McShane and Shaw 2020). What is more, given the high costs of providing and managing student transportation, many school districts, charter networks, and stand-alone schools are attempting to reduce expenses by cutting school bus routes or eliminating busing entirely, relying more on public transit options, encouraging biking and walking to school, and even charging families for transportation (Bergal 2015; McDonald et al. 2016; Chen 2021).

Federal, state, and local funds pay for student transportation, and the amount allocated varies by state and locality (Blagg et al. 2017; McShane and Shaw 2020). Along with heterogeneity in per pupil transportation funding across states, there is considerable diversity in state- and local-level student transportation policies and mandates for traditional public school districts, private and charter schools (Vincent et al. 2014; McDonald et al. 2016; McShane and Shaw 2020). In their comprehensive review of student transportation policies, McShane and Shaw examined fifty state education statutes related to pupil transportation, paying particular attention to the transportation requirements for various kinds of school choice, including interdistrict transfer programs, charter, and private schooling. They found a complex set of policies, mandates, and funding practices. For example, in thirty-one states, transportation funding or services are made available for students attending charter schools, but only in seventeen of them is some form of transportation funding mandated at a level on par with traditional public school students (McShane and Shaw 2020). Additionally, while thirty states allow for public funds to be used for interdistrict student transportation, only six states mandate transportation services for students participating in interdistrict choice programs at a level that matches the funding for within-district choice.

In sum, there is a highly uneven landscape of student transportation policies across the 14,000 school districts nationally and the thousands of charter schools operating in forty-five states and Washington, DC. Thus, millions of students and families are making decisions about how to get to school and, where school choice exists, which schools may be feasible to consider, under very different circumstances. Similarly, district administrators and other school personnel managing student transportation are responding to the demands of student transportation in distinct ways. The diversity of student transportation policies and practices in the United States presents a valuable opportunity to understand common challenges related to student transportation, identify effective practices, and examine areas for potential improvement and innovation.

There is growing evidence about the significance of student transportation for families' school choices and for school choice systems to function equitably (Teske, Fitzpatrick, and O'Brien 2009; Jochim et al. 2014; Denice and Gross 2016; Blagg et al. 2017; Hamlin 2018; Sattin-Bajaj 2018; Edwards 2021; Trajkovski, Zabel, and Schwartz 2021). Therefore, policy makers and administrators working in places with expansive school choice offerings would benefit from knowing more about what it means to implement student transportation policy, the obstacles associated with providing efficient and equitable transportation services, and how education officials are responding to the challenges of managing student transportation in choice-rich cities. To that end, in this policy brief, I present new empirical evidence drawn from interviews with district administrators, charter school leaders, charter authorizers, and stakeholders in Detroit, New Orleans, and New York City about the frequent challenges associated with implementing student transportation policies and administrators' actions and decisions in response to transportation-related issues. I find that high transportation costs, along with the logistical complexity associated with managing transportation for large numbers of students, represent significant burdens for district and charter school administrators alike. Student mobility and safety concerns compound issues of cost and complexity, often requiring additional economic and human capital investments. In this brief, I describe the range of costs that districts, CMOs, and schools incur when implementing school transportation policies, identify other difficulties they experience, and highlight some of the ways they attempt to reduce or counteract the logistical and financial demands associated with student transportation. I discuss the implications of these high transportation costs and challenges as well as non-uniform transportation policies and services for equitable access to charter schools, and I review some policy alternatives that may increase access to transportation, including pilot programs and initiatives being tested in different places across the country.

RELATED LITERATURE

School choice policies have been a mainstay of education reform in recent decades, and choice offerings continue to grow nationwide (Wang, Rathburn, and Musu 2019). Research documenting the importance of transportation for families' school choices, and therefore for an effective and equitably functioning choice system, has accompanied the expansion of school choice across the country. Studies show that transportation is an influential factor in parents' school selections (Jochim et al. 2014; Teske, Fitzpatrick, and O'Brien 2009; Hamlin 2018); lack of transportation also limits some families' capacity to choose schools that are farther away or inaccessible via public transit (Teske, Fitzpatrick, and O'Brien 2009; Jochim et al. 2014). Lower income families' choices are disproportionately constrained by the absence of free or highly subsidized student transportation (Jochim et al. 2014), highlighting transportation as a source of inequity in choice-heavy environments.

Beyond ensuring all families' ability to consider the full range of educational options in a school choice system—arguments often central to the rationale provided for school choice policies (Betts and Loveless 2005), there are multiple potential benefits associated with student transportation. To start, research shows that riding the bus to school reduces chronic absenteeism, particularly among some of the most vulnerable students (Gottfried 2017; Burdick-Will, Stein, and Grigg 2019; Cordes et al. 2019;

Gottfried, Ozuna, and Kirksey 2021). Further, school bus eligibility has been found to increase the likelihood of choosing to attend a particular school, fulfilling the promise of many school choice policies to expand options (Trajkovski, Zabel, and Schwartz 2021). Finally, in a study from New York City, researchers found that students who attend a choice school (rather than their zoned public school) are more likely to rely on student transportation services, and they attend higher-performing schools (of choice) (Cordes and Schwartz 2019). In other words, the availability of publicly funded transportation facilitates students' access to higher quality schools.

A related line of inquiry focuses on students' travel time to school. Researchers have analyzed how far students live from different school types (e.g., traditional public versus charter) and schools of different "quality" (as measured by school resources and student outcomes) along with commute times to school, modes of transportation used, and how these vary by student background characteristics (Blagg et al. 2018; Corcoran 2018; Cowen et al. 2018; Denice and Gross 2018; Lincove and Valant 2018; Cordes and Schwartz 2019; Edwards 2021). Taken together, the evidence underscores the importance of school location, distance, and transportation for ensuring school accessibility and equity, specifically in the context of school choice plans. This research has expanded the body of literature on student transportation that had been historically dominated by studies of operational and financial issues (Chambers, Parrish, and Lam 2002; Bittel and Young 2012) as well as work documenting the health and environmental impacts of school buses (Weir 2002; Balmes 2011).

DATA SOURCES AND METHODS

To comparatively examine how student transportation policies are implemented in three school choice-rich settings, I conducted a multiple comparative case study using individual, semi-structured interviews as the primary methodology. The data presented in this brief are mainly drawn from telephone interviews conducted with district officials knowledgeable about the student transportation policies and their district-level implementation; charter school leaders and charter school personnel responsible for coordinating or overseeing student transportation at a school or CMO level; charter school authorizers; and other relevant stakeholders in each city, including representatives from advocacy organizations and local foundations involved in funding student transportation. Interviews focused on participants' roles and involvement in transportation policy or daily oversight of student transportation, the challenges and costs associated with student transportation, and their perspectives on the ways that transportation provision and public transit influence school choice.¹

Three Choice-Rich Cities

The three cities included in this study all have extensive school choice offerings. They differ in size, density, and demographic composition, and, most significantly, have widely divergent student transportation policies. A summary of available transportation for students in each city at the time of data collection is presented in table 1.

1. For a full description of the methodology and the interview sample, please see appendix A, available in a separate online appendix that can be accessed on *Education Finance and Policy's* Web site at https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00377.

Table 1. Student Transportation Policies and Options by City

	Mode	Student Access
Detroit, MI	Yellow bus	• Grades K–8 and students with special needs
	Public transit	• Grades 9–12 who attend a Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) school
New Orleans, LA	Yellow bus	• Grades K–12 enrolled in Orleans Parish School Board (OSPB) or Type 5 (RSD) charter schools
	Public transit	• N/A
New York, NY	Yellow bus	• Grades K–6 and students with special needs
	Public transit	• Grades 7–12

Source: Urban Institute analysis of district transportation policy.

Notes: This is a broad summary of student transportation policy in these cities. The Education Achievement Authority is Michigan's state-run school district. A Type 5 charter school is a school chartered through the Recovery School District, Louisiana's state-run school district.

New York City

The Office of Pupil Transportation (OPT) at the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) oversees transportation for all students in New York, including students attending district, charter, and some nonpublic schools. Yellow bus transportation is allocated by grade for students in kindergarten through sixth grade based on distance (in miles) from home to school. Students in seventh grade and above are given MetroCards for use on public buses and subways depending on distance from school. Students in all grades (K–12) who do not qualify for yellow bus or full-fare MetroCards may be eligible for half-fare MetroCards based on distance. Students with disabilities whose individualized education plans (IEPs) mandate special transportation receive tailored bus service. All standard transportation costs are covered by the NYCDOE.

Detroit

The Office of Student Transportation at the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) coordinates transportation, which is only guaranteed for students attending neighborhood (district public) schools. Students who enroll in a charter school or in a neighboring district through Michigan's Schools of Choice program receive transportation at the discretion of their school or district (paid for by the school, CMO, or district). Transportation eligibility varies by grade level and distance from school. Students in eighth grade and under attending DPSCD schools may qualify for yellow bus service. Students in grades 9–12 who live more than two miles from their neighborhood school and meet low-income criteria receive public transportation passes. Students with disabilities who qualify for special bus service get individualized transportation.

Detroit has a very limited public transportation infrastructure: There are public bus networks and small rail systems primarily in the downtown area, but they cover a small fraction of the city's vast geographic expanse. Transportation challenges in Detroit are exacerbated by low rates of car ownership among low-income families. Within the highest-poverty census tracts in Detroit, more than one in four households do not have a car (Blagg et al. 2018).

New Orleans

Louisiana state law requires public school districts to provide transportation for students living farther than one mile away from school. Charter schools in New Orleans

are each considered a local education agency and are therefore responsible for providing and paying for student transportation. In the large majority of cases, this means that charter schools run yellow buses, although some also give public transit passes for students in upper grades.

EVIDENCE

Costs Associated with Student Transportation

High Costs of Busing

In New Orleans, where charter schools are responsible by law for providing transportation for students, in recent years, charter schools have spent an average of 6 percent of their total budget on transportation, with some schools reportedly spending as much as 13 percent (Babineau et al. 2018). Charter schools in Detroit that opt to offer transportation must cover the costs completely out of pocket, with no public funds available for transportation purposes. Budget estimates provided by interview participants from both cities for any form of bus service ranged from roughly \$400,000 per year per school at one New Orleans network to \$100,000 for the purchase of two buses for a network in Detroit. Irrespective of the actual figure, charter personnel who provide busing in both cities cited transportation costs as among the largest budget items for their schools annually.

Special Education Busing

Special education transportation, and, specifically, personalized busing when required by a student's IEP, is one of the largest transportation-related expenses incurred by districts. In New York City, for example, students with special education classifications constituted 13.3 percent of the total public school population in 2016–17 school year but accounted for 75.4 percent of the transportation budget (NYCDOE 2017). District administrators have considered a number of proposals to try to reduce these expenses ranging from encouraging more “mainstreaming” of students with IEPs on buses serving general education students to renegotiating special education transportation costs in contract negotiations with general bus service providers. In Detroit, officials also expressed interest in moving toward more neighborhood assignments for students with disabilities—a practice they thought would benefit students educationally and reduce transportation costs but that conflicts with the basic idea underlying school choice.

Responses to High Busing Costs

Charter school leaders use a range of tactics to balance quality service, cost, and efficiency in student transportation provision. Some Detroit charter networks that provide busing to students contract with DPSCD for yellow bus service, leveraging the district's existing bus contracts and in-house staff to develop routes and manage operations. Others negotiate their own contracts individually with bus companies allowing them greater flexibility in terms of bell schedules and routes but potentially higher costs because of lost economies of scale. A third approach that some charter networks have adopted in New Orleans and Detroit is to purchase a small fleet of buses, a strategy that offers maximum control and unrestricted use of vehicles but includes additional demands such as bus maintenance.

The high cost of transporting students to charter schools via yellow buses in Detroit and New Orleans means that charter school leaders must make some significant financial trade-offs. A senior administrator at a charter school network in Detroit juxtaposed the circumstances of one school in the network that did not provide busing and could pay teachers higher salaries and recruit “good talent” with another school whose location necessitated spending “hundreds of thousands of dollars on transportation” to ensure sufficient student enrollment. The founder of another set of two charter schools in Detroit who used private donations to cover the cost of purchasing buses summarized the calculus as follows: “When someone writes a \$20,000 check, that could go to the classroom, or that could go to a bus, it becomes a push and pull.” In short, high transportation costs forced school leaders to make difficult decisions about resource allocation: Transportation mandates and/or competitive market pressures to maintain student enrollment meant that expenditures on transportation often displaced instructional or human resource investments.

In light of the high cost of student transportation in New Orleans and Detroit, leaders in the charter sector have experimented with a series of different cost-containment solutions. They also manage their school budgets in a number of ways to pay for buses.

Tiering

Tiering was one strategy that multiple charter schools in New Orleans used to minimize transportation costs. When schools tier, they use the same bus to pick up students on different routes by staging arrivals. The leader of one New Orleans charter school network explained how tiering works in some of her schools to reduce expenses: “A group of kids gets there [at a school] at 7:45 before school starts. Those same buses go back out and pick up more kids and get them back here by 8:10. You’re getting paid per bus, so let’s say there are nine buses, instead you actually only have six.” Though most participants discussed tiering within a single school, some also mentioned attempting to tier across different schools within the same charter network. Provided that start times could be coordinated and the geographic distances were manageable, sharing buses across schools was a way to reduce costs. Yet, school calendars and start times complicate cross-school tiering efforts, and some charter leaders expressed significant reservations about the idea of tiering with schools from a different CMO.

Greater Reliance on Public Transportation and Contract Renegotiation

In New Orleans, where transportation costs were both politicized and high for nearly all of the schools in the city, charter school leaders explored a number of other options to reduce expenses. For example, one charter leader discussed pursuing a cost-savings plan to combine public transportation with yellow bus service for students in a high-demand high school in her network. Others mentioned cutting the number of bus routes, which could reduce costs but likely increase students’ time spent on the bus. Contract renegotiation with existing bus company partners or rebidding contracts to engage lower cost providers was another strategy that charter school leaders identified as a particularly effective way to address expenses.

Reduce Administrative Staff

Charter operators in New Orleans and Detroit looked for ways to reduce other expenditures to find sufficient funds in their annual school budgets to cover transportation

costs or they sought to raise private money. One charter school leader in Detroit explained that she could afford to offer busing without additional state funding for this purpose by maintaining a lean central office and keeping administrators' salaries low:

I don't make \$400,000 a year, or \$300,000 or \$200,000. I don't have a central office staff that makes the type of money that you see in a lot of other CMOs, and that's done intentionally . . . I can afford it [busing] because I'm not taking money out of the schools to pay significantly high central office salary.

Aside from busing costs specifically, the human capital costs associated with managing the logistics of transportation were high, and charter leaders in all three cities relied on their existing staff to oversee transportation in addition to a host of other responsibilities.

Other Transportation Challenges

Complex Logistics and High Student Mobility

Day-to-day management of student transportation requires significant time and personnel resources. District and school personnel described numerous demands associated with student transportation ranging from fielding ongoing requests for routing changes to dealing with unexpected issues like public transit cards not arriving to schools on time. Officials in both New York and Detroit also named continual changes to transportation policies and high levels of student mobility as sources of additional complexity. In Detroit, one charter authorizer pointed to the loose enrollment policies as a driver of the high mobility:

Kids come and go with no transfer policies and really no kind of accountabilities in place around who's moving where—so there's no citywide policies. Kids are just moving constantly . . . to the school, it would be like out of control, the amount of jostling, rustling you would have to do to even try to operate a bus schedule.

The unpredictability of both policies and student movement across schools adds another layer to an already complex endeavor.

Though OPT in New York is responsible for coordinating transportation for thousands of students across hundreds of charter schools citywide, many of the day-to-day tasks of managing student transportation fall to school-based staff. In New Orleans, where each CMO is essentially its own district and, in Detroit, where charter schools provide busing at their own discretion, every aspect of student transportation from vendor contracting to routing is under the school or charter network's purview. Consequently, interviews with charter-based personnel revealed a number of logistical challenges distinct from those discussed by district-level administrators.

Developing efficient bus routes requires time, expertise, and adaptability, particularly at the start of the school year when enrollment may change daily. The director of operations of a ten-school charter network in New Orleans described the chaos of setting up student transportation when enrollment is in flux: "The first couple weeks of school are always challenging about bus routes. You think you want to run these routes,

but then you find out that we have to add two more kids.” Even in New York, where bus routing is managed by OPT, administrators must ensure that all students are riding the assigned bus and field angry phone calls from parents whose children were not eligible for yellow bus service per the NYCDOE policies. This takes time and energy, and school staff reported that they find it stressful and unpleasant.

Student Safety

Charter school personnel in New York, Detroit, and New Orleans named safety concerns on buses and public transit among the most pressing transportation-related challenges they faced. One former director of operations at a charter middle school in a high-poverty area of Brooklyn explained how safety issues played out for their families in terms of walking to and from bus stops and public transportation: “You are late by 7:30. Then school is dismissed at 4:00. What that means is that during those winter months it’s just—it’s dark. People don’t want their kids walking around in the dark at 4:00.” Neighborhood safety was similarly mentioned in Detroit, and this was additive to parents’ fears about public transportation.

In response to families’ anxiety about student travel to and from school, some schools increased the frequency of communication home and experimented with new modes of communication. A charter school network in New York City, for example, used an app that would text parents with updates including if the bus was running late for pick up or drop off. Another New York City charter network had students practice riding public buses and subways to help them prepare for when they would no longer be eligible for yellow bus service after sixth grade.

Student Behavior

Student misbehavior on the bus and bus drivers’ limited capacity to manage behavior problems were additional sources of concern for charter school leaders in all three cities. They emphasized the importance of developing and enforcing strict policies with consequences to try to limit behavioral issues on the bus. The director of operations at a New Orleans–based charter network described the bus as an extension of the school building, underscoring the importance of having consistent expectations for behavior and associated discipline policies on the bus and at school.

Hiring bus attendants is one way that some charter schools have attempted to reduce the likelihood of behavioral incidents on the bus. This is standard practice for yellow buses transporting students attending DPSCD schools. However, for some charter schools whose transportation expenses come directly from their own budgets (like in New Orleans and Detroit), paying an additional staff person to ride the bus is financially untenable. Instead, some provide additional training for the bus drivers so they are better equipped to deal with student issues. They also make efforts to have the drivers recognized by students as a formal part of the school community. The CEO of three charter schools in New Orleans explained her strategy to train bus drivers as follows:

The schools themselves, their relationship to the bus company is super important. . . . We train [the bus drivers] ourselves for a morning about the expectations we have. We . . . give them t-shirts of our schools, and we want them to feel like they are a part of our school. We also make it really clear to kids

that they are a part of our school, even though they don't work directly for us. If you're gonna mouth off to the bus driver, guess what? Tomorrow morning, you're gonna find out that we all know about it, and you're gonna have a consequence.

Similarly, a charter network in New York City that hires bus attendants pays them to cover breakfast duty at school so they can be “embedded in the culture” and “not just the person who rides the bus,” but, rather, seen as someone who works at the school. Ultimately, schools sought to make student time on the bus an extension of their time inside the school building, and they reinforced this through hiring practices and communication to students and families about behavioral expectations on the bus.

DISCUSSION AND POLICY ALTERNATIVES

Evidence from three choice-rich school districts highlights the significant role that student transportation plays in determining administrators' operational and financial decisions. High costs and logistical demands associated with student transportation influence hiring, student recruitment, and even decisions about whether and where to open new schools. Moreover, districts, CMOs, and individual schools are constantly pursuing cost-reduction strategies while trying to maintaining school quality and accessibility.

Ultimately, the costs and challenges of providing widespread transportation complicate efforts to ensure equity in access to schools via school choice. When transportation is not mandated for schools of choice and is not funded by states or districts, families with transportation barriers are essentially cut off from schools that do not provide it. Barriers to access are exacerbated in places with limited public transit. In sum, student transportation provision constitutes a significant source of stratification within school choice systems, and transportation policies can fundamentally shape how schools operate and whether families can reasonably choose them.

The findings from this study suggest some potential policy alternatives that policy makers should consider when designing transportation policies or improving existing transportation practices. To start, policy makers should seek out ways to reduce both costs and the logistical demands associated with student transportation for district administrators and school-level personnel (charter or non-charter). This could include greater centralization of transportation services to increase economies of scale and improved coordination within and across schools and school sectors. More centralization may facilitate better contract negotiation with bus companies, more opportunities for tiering, and even shared bus routes under certain circumstances. In fact, multiple districts have experimented with shared bus options to expand students' access to different schools. For example, Detroit launched a school bus loop modeled after Denver's “Success Express” (Denice and Gross 2018) in Fall 2018 with the goals of reducing transportation barriers and encouraging students living in Detroit to attend schools within city limits. Initially serving 10 charter and DPSCD schools in Northwest Detroit, the GOAL (Get On And Learn) bus picks students up on designated street corners and drops them off at different schools. While GOAL expanded to more schools in subsequent years, there have been some issues with take-up, coordination, and cost, raising

questions about its overall effectiveness as a strategy (Edwards et al. 2019; Pogodzinski et al. 2021).

Policy makers should also consider ways to control special education transportation costs, potentially through shifting away from wholly separate bus services for students with disabilities where appropriate. Finally, significant labor shortages during the COVID-19 pandemic have created new challenges and possibilities for innovation with student transportation. Districts and schools have responded by paying families who do not use school bus services to which their children may be entitled and by paying parents to drive their children to school (Burnett 2020; Bhattarai 2021). In many ways, innovation in transportation is in its early stages, affording policy makers and researchers wide leverage to explore and experiment with new approaches to student transportation that can improve access and equity to schools, particularly in school choice systems.

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