

SPOTLIGHT

—Photo provided by Five Keys



Inside of Five Keys' mobile classroom, known as The Self-Determination Project. This bus-turned-classroom includes a library, seating and desks, Chromebooks with internet access, and power outlets.

SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION

EDITOR'S NOTE

More than just a means of getting to school, transportation has become a focal point for various issues of access. In this Spotlight, learn how buses have transformed into tech hubs and how busing policies are tackling questions of chronic absenteeism and equity.

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Photo provided by Five Keys

The Self-Determination Project parked in front of the urban community college, known as City College of San Francisco, located in California.

students surveyed said they only have one device at home, compared to 11 percent of students in non-rural areas.

Communities in California, Arizona, and Arkansas have backed efforts to install routers on school buses to help students stay connected during their commutes to and from school. In some of those programs, students are even provided with laptops or tablets en route to complete their homework.

Recapturing Learning Time

One effort that is focused on promoting mobile learning is the Rolling Study Halls initiative, backed by Google.

Since it was launched in April 2018, the initiative has offered thousands of students, located in 16 districts in 12 states, access to Wi-Fi and Chromebooks during their bus rides. The efforts are sponsored in partnership with the Consortium for School Networking, an organization representing K-12 technology officials.

On each bus provided by the program, students are given access to Chromebooks and Wi-Fi as well as an onboard educator who offers academic help. The program is free for students and is targeted mainly to rural areas.

The program manager for Google's Rolling Study Halls, Alex Sanchez, said in an interview that students participating in the programs are turning in more homework and showing academic gains in subjects like math and reading.

"The commutes are sometimes 45 minutes, an hour, an hour and a half, and that's additional learning time that would otherwise be lost to travel," Sanchez said. That's time that students "can be using to kind of get ahead in work or do projects, [or] collaborate with their peers or their onboard educator."

Another effort to transform buses into learning spaces is being led by Estella Pyfrom, founder of Estella's Brilliant Bus. Pyfrom's bus-turned-classroom, originally known as Project Aspiration, has been profiled by a variety of media organizations, from NBC to CNN to Oprah Winfrey's magazine.

Before founding the program, Pyfrom worked as a classroom teacher, guidance counselor, and adult education instructor. She says she didn't set out to create a mobile learning environment.

Published June 2, 2019, in *Education Week's Digital Education Blog*

Buses as Tech Hubs: Way More Than Just Wi-Fi

By Michelle Goldchain

When students in a San Francisco neighborhood were afraid to walk to a community learning center because of the threat of gang violence, an effort was made to bring the learning to them—by bus.

A nonprofit called Five Keys arranged to have a vehicle loaded with Wi-Fi, as well as other tech tools that students can use to meet a variety of academic needs, roll into impoverished communities throughout the city.

The idea of delivering internet connectivity to students and communities via buses is not new. But over the past few years, the scale of those efforts has increased as the mobile tech hubs have been transformed—gutted, reconfigured, and reimagined—so that they provide students with a much broader array of tech access and services than just internet connectivity.

The buses delivered by organizations like Five Keys are staffed with educators who provide academic support for students in different subjects. In some cases,

the buses offer full-fledged computer labs where students can prep for the SAT or take part in anti-bullying programs. Some of them come with desks and swivel chairs.

School districts and other organizations see the buses as one of many options for closing the so-called "homework gap": the inability of students, especially those from poor backgrounds, to access reliable internet service away from school. Those barriers to connectivity prevent many students from doing online work away from school, at a time when lessons are increasingly being delivered via technology.

A report released by Common Sense Media in 2015 found that approximately 70 percent of teachers in the U.S. assign homework that requires access to broadband.

The lack of connectivity stymies students in districts of all sizes. A survey published this year by the ACT found that rural students were almost twice as likely as non-rural students to describe the internet access in their home as "unpredictable." Twenty-four percent of rural



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"I didn't build a bus and then try to do a program on it," she said. "I set up the program first and said, 'What do I need to get it out there?'"

Today, her program offers 30- to 45-minute academic sessions, though students can spend more time on the bus as needed in order to complete assignments and do research or prepare for the GED or college.

Many of the families in her community, Pyfrom said, often have to make the decision to either put food on the table or pay for internet and technology.

Estella's Brilliant Bus is equipped with 17 computer stations, all connected to the internet. Use of the bus is free for the public, though Pyfrom does accept donations. She also works with Microsoft, which replaces the computers and provides tech support. Microsoft covered the approximately \$1 million cost to purchase and reconfigure the bus as a learning environment.

The Self-Determination Project, headed by Five Keys in San Francisco, has

similar goals. The program serves four public housing complexes per day, focused on lower-income communities. It launched in June 2017 with the goal to serve the city's at-risk population. Five Keys' bus-turned-classroom includes a library, seating and desks, Chromebooks with internet access, and power outlets. It can fit 15 learners at a time.

Five Keys is an organization that offers a network of brick-and-mortar learning centers and charter schools throughout the Bay Area. Five Keys serves 3,000 students per day with 1,000 of those in county jails and 2,000 in community learning centers.

Safety, Accessibility

"Many of our students come from the most challenging neighborhoods in San Francisco," said Steve Good, executive director at Five Keys. Some of the learning centers are in neighborhoods controlled by gangs, making it difficult for students to get to them on foot.

In addition, many housing projects where students live are often islands removed from major parts of the city, making it difficult for students to use public transportation to get to classes.

With a mobile classroom, Good said, "You take the school to them and thus remove the barrier of safety and accessibility."

The cost of buying and retrofitting the bus was about \$100,000, an amount covered by the Google Impact Challenge.

Students' use of the buses varies according to their need, Good explained. Some of the students using it are trying to complete classes they need for graduation. Others have farther to go, academically.

The flexibility the program provides is giving students an academic opportunity many of them haven't had so far—and which they may not get down the road.

It can meet a "huge, unfilled need," Good said. "Once you're 18 and you drop out of school, there aren't a lot of options available for you." ■

Published April 7, 2019, in Education Week's Inside School Research Blog

'If You Miss the Bus, You're Walking Four Hours': Challenges of Rural Absenteeism

By Sarah D. Sparks

What happens if a 9th grader misses the bus? If she's waiting at the stop near the 4505 mile marker along California Highway 154, she's got a more than 12-mile walk to Santa Ynez Valley Union High School.

That's the kind of situation that led University of California Santa Barbara researchers to explore district transportation policies to find out they can affect chronic absenteeism among rural students.

"If you live in this rural area, you are really dependent on that bus. If miss the bus, you're walking four hours and 19 minutes to get to school," said Christopher Ozuna, a U.C. Santa Barbara researcher who discussed the study this week as part of the American Educational Research Association's annual



— Photo provided by Five Keys

meeting here. "You may not have a car, you may have fewer neighbors who can give you a ride."

U.C. Santa Barbara researchers analyzed attendance data from a nationally representative sample of more than 3,400 rural students. They found rural students who rode the school bus had significantly higher attendance and lower risk of becoming chronically absent, even though those riding the bus had a longer mean commute, in both time and distance, from rural students in the study who didn't ride the bus.

"The bus currently isn't being used as an intervention for chronic absenteeism, and maybe it should be. We could optimize these city bus routes to be as effective as possible," he said. "It seems like an easy place to cut and save money, but perhaps if you could design these routes in ways to get kids to school and reduce student absenteeism, maybe [the transportation costs] would even out."

There are more than 7,000 rural districts in the United States, accounting for more than half of all districts and 18 percent of all students. Federal civil rights data show these districts have lower absenteeism than urban districts, but higher rates than those in suburban and municipal districts.

Robert Mahaffey, the executive director of the Rural School and Community

Trust, said rural transportation, particularly in mountainous or remote areas, is a constant challenge. “It’s not just bus transportation, it’s the reality of trying to get the child to the bus stop,” he said, noting that parents in some areas must drive children before dawn to reach a pickup stop in time. These raise different kinds of attendance challenges than those in ur-

ban districts, which often have more public transportation.

“There are often interventions made in urban districts of Chicago or New York that are said to be generalizable to be models for rural districts—and there are certainly some lessons to be learned there, but they don’t necessarily translate,” Mahaffey told *Education Week*. ■

Published March 14, 2019, in Education Week’s Inside School Research Blog

Less Costly, More Equitable Bus Routes Possible, But Lack Political Will, Study Finds

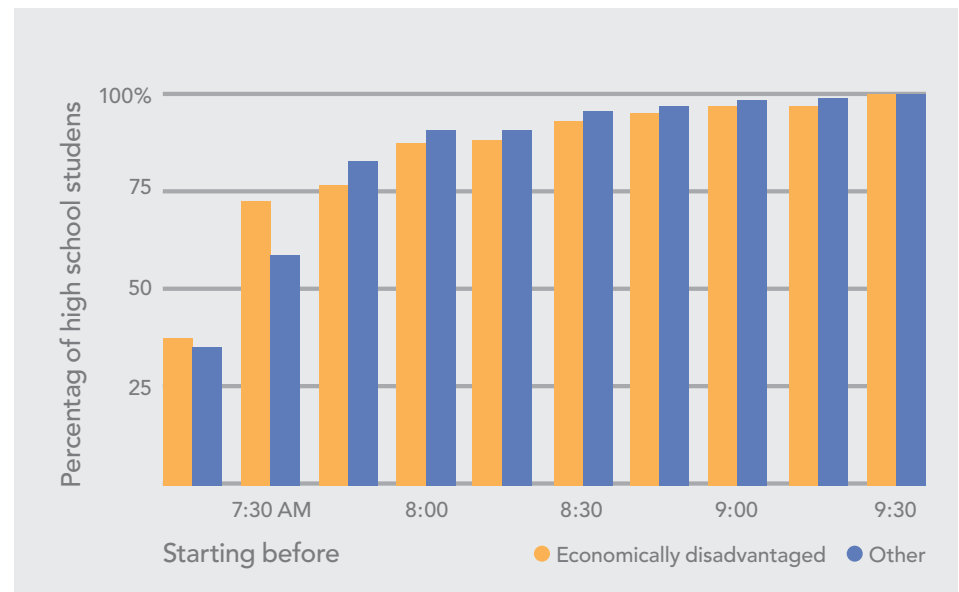
By Sarah D. Sparks

Teenagers learn and remember more when they get more time to sleep in the morning, but making that happen can be tricky, since it requires costly changes in transportation routes to set school earlier. A new study suggests that even transportation changes that save money and ease students’ schedules can be tough to pay for politically.

“School start time is not only about busing,” said Sebastien Martin, a co-author of the study in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences and a researcher with the Operations Research Center at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. “It’s about many things. It’s about the life of parents. It’s about the health of teenagers, and it’s about equity in the system.”

In most districts, transportation and school start times are intricately connected and difficult to change, even as school populations ebb and flow. Over time, that makes bus systems less efficient, more expensive—and often biased in favor of wealthier enclaves, the MIT researchers found. In Boston, for example, the researchers found low-income high school students were more likely to face early start times than their wealthier peers, as the chart to the right shows.

A busing system developed by the center uses two separate algorithms: One to allow district administrators to weigh the most efficient routes and cost of buses to use them; and the other to schedule school start times based on costs but also other factors, such as providing later



start times for teenagers and preventing younger students from arriving home after dark. According to the study and a separate district equity analysis, Boston’s initial transportation plan, adopted last year, would have:

- Raised the number of secondary students who start school after 8 a.m. from 27 percent to 94 percent;
- Halved the percentage of elementary students who end school after 4 p.m.;
- Distributed start times so that more than half of students in every racial group (as opposed to just white students) would start school between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m.; and

- Saved the district \$20 million per year in transportation costs.

More than 40 other districts and the state of Rhode Island have since started exploring the system for transportation changes. While Boston used the algorithms to adopt some changes—saving \$5 million per year in bus costs—backlash from parents at some schools with changed start times have so far stymied Boston’s broader implementation of the plan.

“It’s a very hard policy decision; parents have very strong opinions about this,” Martin said. “The algorithm is not able to make a political decision. It’s only able to show many trade-offs.” ■

Published February 13, 2019, in Education Week's Inside School Research Blog

Want Students to Attend School Every Day? Make Sure They Feel Safe on the Way

By Sarah D. Sparks

Students whose school commutes force them to walk through or wait in violent neighborhoods are more likely to miss school, according to a new study.

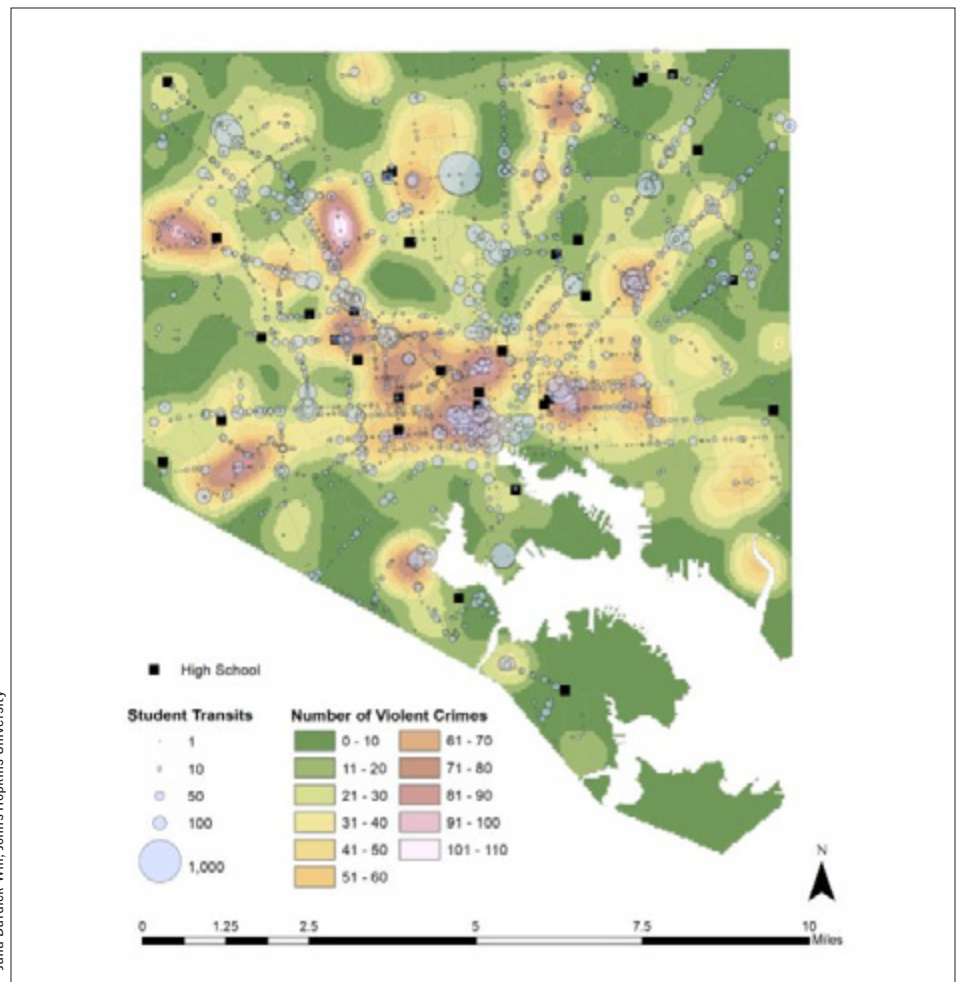
Like many large districts, Baltimore has been struggling with both chronic absenteeism and student transportation problems for years, complicated by its open school enrollment. While elementary students are bussed by the district, middle and high schoolers receive vouchers for public transportation, and prior studies have found longer commutes are associated with higher absenteeism. But a new study in the journal *Sociological Science* suggests commute safety, not just total time, plays a role in whether students get to school.

Researchers at Johns Hopkins University mapped the most efficient routes to and from school for 4,200 first-time 9th graders in Baltimore City public schools in 2014-15. Then they overlaid police data on the numbers of violent crimes—such as assaults, robberies, and murders—as well as non-violent crimes, like drug sales and property damage.

Only 8 percent of students lived within walking distance of their schools. Nearly 70 percent of students used public transportation to get to school, traveling a little more than a half hour on average each way. But a significant portion of students travelled an hour or more, with multiple transfers in which students had to wait or walk to a different stop to catch the new bus. As the chart to the right shows, several major transit hubs for students also had high rates of violent crime:

The researchers found that as violent crime increased in areas where students walked or waited for a bus, their attendance dropped. A doubling of the incidents of violent crime was associated with 6 percent higher student absenteeism—roughly an additional day missed for each student per year. Julia Burdick-Will, lead author of the study, noted that because the number of individual crimes is relatively low at any given bus stop, it's not that hard for students to face a sud-

—Julia Burdick-Will, Johns Hopkins University



den doubling of violent incidents during the school year.

"I've taken the bus a lot in Baltimore—I take it to work every day—and there are particular issues around bus stops," Burdick-Will said. "If an altercation between two people escalates quickly, there's nowhere to go. ... It feels physically scary, because ... there's an unpredictability to it."

Interestingly, students were not more likely to miss school if their commute passed through a violent area but they did not get off the bus, or if they had to wait in an area with high drug or property crime but not violent crime. Moreover, the effect of violent crime on attendance was the same regardless of how safe

the student's own neighborhood was, or whether the student was attending his first choice of school.

"It's hard to know why kids aren't going. They may be just fine and their parents are just protecting them and won't let them go out today because they've heard that something bad happened. Or they might be staying home because they are having the effects of trauma of play out—depression and even physical ailments," Burdick-Will said.

Looking for a Safer Path to School

While Burdick-Will and her colleagues calculated the most efficient route to

school for each student, she cautioned that many students take longer routes to avoid high-crime areas. Doing so may help them avoid stress or danger on the way to school, but could increase their risk of absenteeism in other ways, if an alternate bus proves overcrowded or a neighbor who gives a student rides gets sick.

Back in 2013, a student documentary by the Student Attendance Work Group in Baltimore City found some students regularly faced two- or three-hour commutes, including multiple transfers and waits at bus stops before dawn and after dark.

The Baltimore Education Research Consortium found in a 2017 report that more than a third of the 13,000 students who used public transit often felt unsafe during their school commutes.

Edie House Foster, spokesperson for Baltimore City Public Schools, said the district was still discussing the study findings. “The safety of our young people is always our primary concern. Our

administrators and teaching staff are keenly aware of some of the obstacles our children encounter when traveling to and from school,” House Foster said. “In addition to our district initiatives to address the transportation issues, we work collaboratively with community based organizations and city agencies to find solutions to the issues that make it challenging for our students to attend school regularly and on time.”

Burdick-Will offered a few recommendations for district administrators to help students feel safer on their way to school:

- Work with public transportation officials to include school schedules with work commutes in planning bus or train schedules.
- Train teachers and attendance officers to look for commuting difficulties when students miss school repeatedly, and incorporate transportation support into attendance plans.

- Consider the safety and reliability of public transportation when considering districtwide plans to open school enrollment, site new schools, or cut school buses from budgets.
- Help students get real-time transportation data, such as through an app, which can inform them of wait times at different stops.

“There’s a lot of literature on adult commuting causing stress ... and shouldn’t we expect to see the same thing for kids?” Burdick-Will said. “It can be really stressful to get where you need to go to school and especially if you know the principal and teachers are all going to yell at you for being late when it feels like it’s not your fault the bus was slow or your ride fell through or something. We want kids to be able to get to school engaged and awake and not stressed out when they get to school to be able to learn things, not just be there.” ■

Published March 21, 2018, in Education Week’s Charters & Choice Blog

In Cities With Lots of School Choice, Black Students Have Longer Commutes

By Arianna Prothero

In cities that have embraced school choice policies—be it charter schools, private school vouchers, or even just allowing students to attend any district school they choose—black students travel further to school than their white and Hispanic counterparts.

But low-income students in high choice cities tend to travel lesser distances to get to school overall than their wealthier peers. At the same time however, families without cars have substantially fewer school choice options available to them within a 15-minute drive from their homes.

Those were among myriad findings from an analysis by the Urban Institute of student travel patterns across cities that offer a lot of school choice—the District of Columbia, Denver, Detroit, New Orleans, and New York City—that raise

some important questions about equity and access in school choice.

“Having a car dramatically opens up the number of schools you can get to within a 15-minute drive, and low-income families are less likely to have

a car,” said Kristin Blagg, a research associate at the Urban Institute. “All of these cities have evolved this ecosystem of school choice, and this is a path that other cities appear to be on as well, but nobody has taken a comprehensive look at these issues dealing with the way students get to school. We’re not saying that long travel times to school is inherently bad, but there are trade-offs.”

Every city included in the study has some combination of charter schools, magnet schools, and private schools, which students can attend with state-funded tuition vouchers, as well as the option for students to attend traditional public schools beyond the ones zoned for their neighborhoods.

The Urban Institute study examined travel times between the homes and



schools of nearly 190,000 students. The researchers analyzed only one year of data for elementary, middle, and high school students, so they couldn't glean much about changing trends, and they did not look at the type of transportation that students actually use.

Blagg and her fellow researchers found that black students across all grades, on average, attended schools that are 1-to-5 minutes further by car than the schools that white and Hispanic students were enrolled in.

That may not seem like a lot, but that's assuming that all students drive. Many don't. The researchers just used drive-times as a baseline.

"In D.C., for example, where there's no yellow bus transportation for students ... five minutes driving distance can be substantially longer if you're taking public transit. A 5-minute drive could be a 10, 15-minute transit time difference," said Blagg.

The same goes for yellow bus service, she added, which makes a lot more stops than, say, a personal vehicle.

And there are fewer schools to choose from within a 15-minute drive than a 15-minute transit ride. For example, in D.C., the average kindergartener can reach 31 schools within a 15-minute drive but only 7 schools within a 15-minute transit ride.

Abundance of School Choice Doesn't Guarantee Access

Transportation and commute times are just one issue among a broader set of factors that can affect how accessible school choice policies are for disadvantaged students.

And it's an area of research we've been seeing more activity in lately.

Getting information on school quality and navigating a profusion of different school applications and due dates also create barriers for families when choosing a school—especially for parents with less income, less education, and children with disabilities, according to ongoing research by the Center on Reinventing Public Education.

Some cities are experimenting with ways to address these issues such as mandating that all schools, including charters, provide yellow bus service, creating a single, citywide application system for all schools, and providing comprehensive guidebooks on schools that include how well they perform academically and the services they offer.

There are a lot of other interesting findings in the Urban Institute study that don't really fit into a tidy narrative, but are germane to the debate around school choice access. Here are some of the highlights in no particular order:

- In all five cities, the group of students who traveled the farthest to school were high schoolers.
- Charter school students generally do not travel farther than their peers enrolled in their neighborhood district school.
- Cities that provide buses to students do not necessarily have more students attending schools further out. For example, New Orleans mandates schools provide yellow bus service for all students living beyond 1 mile from their campus while D.C. only provides students with public transportation passes. The commute distances for kindergarteners in both cities is virtually the same.
- Only a small proportion of the study's sample was made up of students who were not low-income—in this case, students who do not receive a free or reduced-priced lunch from the federal government. But of those students, most tended to travel farther than their low-income counterparts.
- On average, 9th graders across all five cities live about a 10-minute drive from a high-quality school, which the researchers defined as schools that offer calculus and have high graduation rates and high proportions of veteran teachers.
- Almost 60 percent of elementary-aged children in Denver have a public school—either district or charter—in their neighborhood. But the same was true for only 21 percent of children in New Orleans. Part of that could be due to people being redistributed around the city after wide swaths of it were flooded following Hurricane Katrina.

Perhaps the last major takeaway one can glean from this research is that each city's experience is unique and that national generalizations about how school choice affects student commute times and access may not be as helpful to local policymakers as localized research.

On that note, Blagg said the Urban Institute plans to release more detailed, city-specific reports later this year. It will be interesting to see what they find at a more micro level. ■

COMMENTARY

Published August 30, 2017, in Education Week's Education Futures: Emerging Trends in K-12 Blog

Why All School Buses Should Have Wi-Fi

By Matthew Lynch

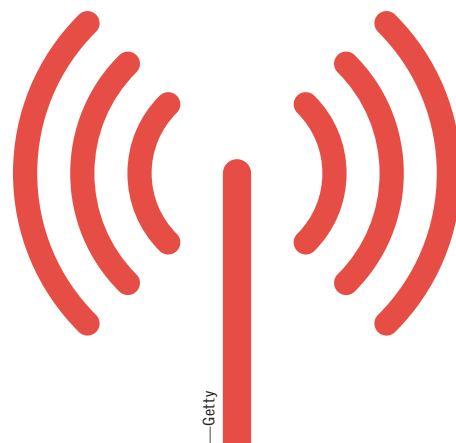
Ask what students do on their bus ride to school every morning and you'll get a variety of answers: texting friends, chatting with neighbors, listening to music and sometimes - completing unfinished homework.

Depending on where a student lives in relation to school, their bus ride may be twenty to forty minutes long. And what's accomplished during the morning or mid-afternoon rush? Chatting and texting and snacking and scribbling to complete worksheets.

What if we treated school buses as an informal first period? What if our students' school days started the minute they stepped on their bus and took a seat? For some students, that equates to over an hour more each day of learning and productivity.

And what's standing in their way of problem-solving and essay-writing on the go? Aside from a short attention span and the desire to chat with friends, there's often no internet access.

Options like SmartBus allow students access to Wi-Fi that automatically filters out inappropriate content, social media





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Everyone at First Student involved in transporting students puts this commitment at the forefront, whether they're creating routes or driving the bus. And it's a commitment the child can feel, even if she doesn't see the things going on behind the scenes. Because she sees what's in front of her: an adult who she can depend on, who's earned her trust.

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so that every child
feels **protected**.*

Safety is more than just following traffic rules and making sure bus maintenance is up to date. It's building a culture of safety, making it an intentional way of thinking for every single person involved in the transportation process. It's integrating the right technologies and keeping every child's emotional well-being at the forefront. It's all part of a deliberate approach that's earned First Student the National Safety Council

(NSC) Green Cross for Safety® medal, the highest award for safety in North America, as well as an invitation to the prestigious Campbell Institute.

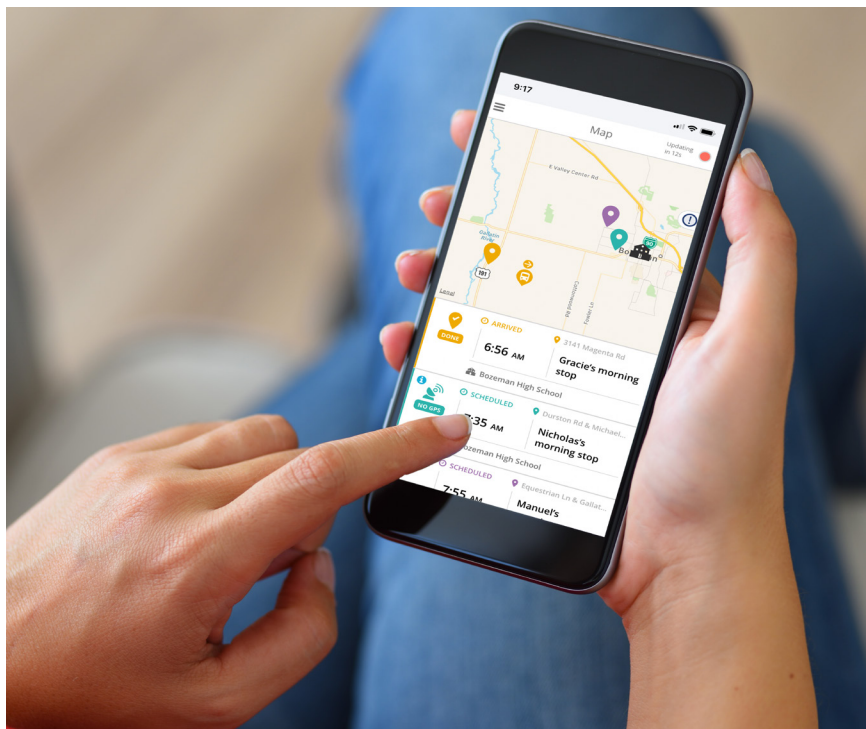
How First Student embodies safety:

- We know our drivers are our most important safety feature, which is why we hire, train, and retain only the best individuals for the job.
- We continuously monitor driver performance for speeding, idling, rapid acceleration, and hard braking, and quickly provide feedback for improvement.

- We ensure that all our equipment exceeds stringent safety laws and standards, which has helped make us 1.8 times safer than the industry average.
- We implement safety-focused technologies such as our Child Check-Mate System®, which requires the driver to walk through the bus to check for sleeping children.



Awarded the National Safety Council (NSC) Green Cross for Safety® medal, the highest award for safety in North America.



*This care continues with putting the **latest technologies** in place, so that every child feels confident.*

While bus technologies may not be something children think about, these tools play a significant role in each student's life. Making sure the right technologies are implemented means letting a child know their bus will arrive on time and that they'll feel safe and protected during every ride.

How First Student shows care through technology:

- We created the bus-tracking tool FirstView®. The FirstView District Dashboard sends real-time data on stops and routes to school personnel, and the FirstView Parent App allows parents to track buses in real time and receive predictive stop times.

- We created FirstACTS® (Active Conduct Training System), a confidential web-based communication tool. It proactively addresses student behavior by easily communicating incidents on the bus through cloud-based reporting. It also taps into our comprehensive driver training by focusing on appropriate levels of action and resolution.
- We consistently utilize crossing control arms that mechanically extend in front of the bus bumper when loading or unloading students. These remind students to move to a safe distance in front of the bus before crossing.
- We offer additional technologies such as Wi-Fi on buses, which allows students who may not have Internet access the ability to study or do homework on the bus. We are also implementing tablets.

*This care entails putting experts in charge of **routing and maintenance** so that every child feels assured.*

Though a child may not know what a routing analyst does or the regulations a technician needs to meet, they know what it feels like if a bus doesn't arrive when it's supposed to, or when it breaks down. It's why we do everything we can to ensure students don't worry about their everyday transportation.



How First Student leverages our routing and maintenance experts:

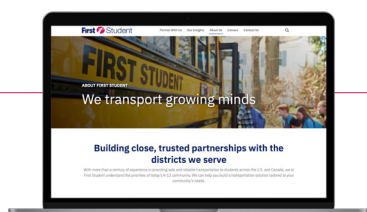
- Our routing analysts work as an extension of each district's transportation team. They analyze bell times, simulate various travel scenarios, and use routing software platforms to design the most efficient routes that get students to school on time.
- We have more than 2,700 maintenance technicians who are certified through The National Institute of Automotive Service Excellence, or ASE. They perform regular diagnostic tests to prevent breakdowns and attend continuous trainings to ensure the safest practices for all passengers.

This care means finding and training the most thoughtful drivers, so that every child feels special.

A bus driver plays a significant role in each child's life. They don't just drive them to and from school — they're a consistent, compassionate presence. Their interactions with each child can shape who that child becomes. It's the reason we put so much thought, time, and effort into our driver vetting, hiring, and training.

How First Student ensures care through our drivers:

- We thoroughly screen prospective drivers from your local community with background checks, drug and alcohol testing, and physical performance and dexterity tests.
- We comprehensively train drivers in everything from behavior management to emergency procedures.
- We enroll our drivers in needs-specific education programs and workshops that focus on recognizing, responding to, and transporting students with a range of physical and emotional needs.



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distractions, and entertainment sites like Netflix and Spotify.

School has taken a technological turn for the better and more assignments and study materials can be found online. If students have access to working Wi-Fi they have access to instant intellectual improvement.

There are so many reasons why school buses should have Wi-Fi. Here are just a few to mention at your next PTA meeting:

1. Schools are Struggling: According to the 2015 Programme for International Student Assessment, a cross-national test that measures global academic development, the United States ranks 38 out of 71 countries in math and 24th in science. In short, students from the U.S. lag behind other students from developing countries around the world. Everyone has a different idea on how to solve our education crisis, but, as previously stated, Wi-Fi access on school buses allows some students over an hour more each day for homework completion and online learning. We need a solution to our academic shortfalls, and there's no harm in increasing a child's access to resources that only improve their potential for intellectual growth.

2. Increased Homework Completion: Homework is only helpful if a child actually completes it and according to schoolbusfleet, districts who've implemented technology on school buses have seen homework completion rates rise. While it sounds farfetched, not all students have internet access or, more likely, computer access at home. When the bus becomes an extension of materials they're provided at school, students have the freedom to complete assignments without the distractions that come from an unpredictable household or spotty Wi-Fi.

3. Kids are Overbooked! Check the school planner of any high school student in 2017 and you'll see lists of activities taking up every minute of their free time: sports practice, tutoring, SAT prep, part-time jobs, and social lives. On top of after-school activities, many students are overloaded with homework, especially if they're enrolled in honors and AP courses. That means students have limited time for sleep and fun - two things essential for every teenager's growth, development, and mental wellbeing. Having Wi-Fi access on the school bus carves out extra time for overworked students to complete assignments and catch up on school projects.

4. Wi-Fi on Wheels Can be Cost-Effective: Limiting Wi-Fi access to education-related content saves bandwidth which cuts costs to begin with. Additionally, on-board Wi-Fi could shift the cost burden away from the transportation department and towards instructional departments. If school buses serve Title 1 schools, there's funding for bus Wi-Fi because limited Wi-Fi serves an instructional service.

5. Reduce Anxiety and Improve Behavior: Many kids with behavior issues need a distraction to keep cool. If students are anxious about bus rides for whatever reason, have ADD, or simply can't sit still, it's a nightmare for bus drivers trying desperately to maintain some sense of order onboard. Providing kids with Wi-Fi helps students look forward to bus rides and have something to toy with other than each other.

If worksheets on wheels are a piece of cake for every student, today's busy kids will have no problem cranking out the beginning of an English essay or solving a few online algebra problems en route to school. Provide your students with more time for homework and productive distractions to improve their intellect and overall wellbeing. ■

COMMENTARY

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When Getting to School Is a Challenge

By Adrinda Kelly

Exploring the Problem of Practice Through Research

Educational progress has been made in New Orleans, but far too many children are still struggling to access high-quality schools. Our current approach to school transportation places an undue burden on students, parents, and schools to absorb the effects of lengthy, circuitous, and expensive commutes.

As a recent post outlined in greater detail, recent research by the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, released in partnership with the Urban Institute, examined student commutes in New Orleans, illuminating just how significant



—Unsplash

the challenges are. The research found that some students await a bus pick-up as early as 5:00 a.m. and some children spend 6 hours on a school bus per week—meaning the tax on student learning is significant. A child who gets on a bus at 5:00 a.m. may not make it back home until 6:30 p.m. depending on the area of the city she lives in. With so many of our highest-rated schools clustered in areas where families who have children enrolled in public schools cannot afford to live, students (especially Black students from lower-income communities living in far-flung neighborhoods) end up bearing the greatest cost of accessing quality. The positive impact of eliminating transportation barriers to schools of choice is undermined by practices that force students to get up in the dark to wait at unmonitored bus stops and spend long parts of their day in a stressful and/or isolated commute. Students may arrive at school feeling disengaged, which can contribute to behavior problems or children giving up on school altogether. This is especially concerning for our most vulnerable students considering the documented effects of lack of sleep on child brain development and the connection between engagement, learning, and persistence in school.

The costs of providing school transportation places an undue burden on standalone schools and small networks which in New Orleans are overrepresented by local, Black school leaders. Schools are spending twice as much on transportation costs than they did pre-Katrina, leaving fewer funds for things like high-quality instructional materials. We all need to be concerned about the operational sustainability of Black-led schools given our current academic challenges and the robust body of research that has established the positive achievement effects of students who are educated by professionals who look like them. If we are going to enhance the pace of educational success in New Orleans, we need these schools to continue to exist and ensure they are not overburdened by high transportation costs that keep them from delivering on their mission.

How Research Findings Should be Used

The Orleans Parish School Board should create a common-sense school transportation policy that responds to these issues. Setting parameters around pickup times, trip lengths, and pickup locations is a start. Implementing this guid-

ance would be easier if the district looked at the way school schedules are set and advanced a sustainable, equity-focused funding solution to help schools pay for transportation. The district should gather insights and ideas from a broad range of school and parent stakeholders and work with local intermediaries on a funding approach that removes the financial burden on standalone schools and small networks and rewards coordination. (For example, could the district return a percentage of its administrative fee to a fund used to help schools offset transportation costs? Could the charter renewal process incentivize schools that share transportation services?)

Focusing on ways to improve school transportation is a step in the right direction—this is a solvable problem! However, there are broader questions that should not be ignored. Setting a transportation policy that advances students' safety and wellness is a great thing, but holding schools to this standard without offering supportive structures to address logistical and financial challenges may end up worsening outcomes for kids. Providing information on a school's transportation logistics may indeed help New Orleans parents make more informed school choices, but how can we also respond to parents' repeated call for more information and transparency in the school matching process overall? Given the positive effects of parental engagement on student achievement, do we need a transportation policy that also improves access and proximity to the school for parents? Finally, we know that schools in wealthier communities function as anchoring institutions generating cultural, economic, and political value for the surrounding neighborhood - how can we think about a policy that better mobilizes this role? ■

In Conclusion

We can take a technocratic approach and solve our school transportation problem at the fringes by focusing only on the logistics of pickup times, routes, etc.; or we can embrace the opportunity to architect a comprehensive policy that fosters more equity, collaboration, and community-responsiveness in our choice environment.

I hope we do the latter.

Adrinna Kelly is the Executive Director of Black Education for New Orleans.

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