

Here, we've compiled news about four places that have been grappling with school transportation challenges and describe implications for integration, equity, and student success.

Transportation is vitally important to K-12 public education. As the Civil Rights Project noted, “[s]afe, reliable transportation to and from school is a basic need for students and families throughout the country. School districts provide transportation to students every day for a variety of reasons, most commonly related to geographic distance from school.” School transportation has, too, been recognized as essential to the design of equitable and meaningful school choice programs. Despite this, the issue of school transportation can often get politicized, and in some instances, critics use incomplete or inaccurate information to support their case against expanding school transportation services. The many costs and benefits of school transportation—both real and perceived—warrant careful examination and consideration.

ROCHESTER, NY: Urban-Suburban Program

In 2021, Rochester City School District was close to discontinuing transportation for students who live in the district but attend school in another district, including participants of the Urban-Suburban Interdistrict Transfer Program, one of the few remaining voluntary interdistrict desegregation programs in the U.S.

RCSD Floats Preliminary Proposal to End Busing for Urban-Suburban, Other Suburban Schools (Oct. 2021) “Approximately 3,500 students could be affected...The district has long been responsible for transportation for Urban-Suburban students. The law does not mandate it bear that expense, but many suburban districts have made it clear their participation depends on the program not costing them any money.” See also RCSD Looking at Ending Transportation for Some Students (Oct. 2021).

RCSD to Continue Busing Students in District Who Don't Go to RCSD Schools (July 2022) “The Rochester City School District Tuesday said it will continue its current bus routes, which facilitate transportation for students who live within the RCSD, but who don't go to RCSD schools...Cherie Wright-Banda has two teenage sons in the urban-suburban program who rely on busing and she's celebrating the decision.”

SOUTH ORANGE-MAPLEWOOD, NJ: “Courtesy Busing”

A New Jersey school district eliminated “courtesy busing” for students who live less than two miles from their school in order to conserve limited transportation resources for its Intentional Integration Initiative.

South Orange & Maplewood Town Leaders Want to ‘Collaborate Closely’ with BOE on Restoring & Expanding School Busing (Aug. 2022) “The Mayor of Maplewood and the South Orange Village President are asking that the South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education present town leaders with information related to restoring ‘courtesy busing’ routes, and expressed an interest to ‘collaborate closely on this issue’ to potentially raise funds through tax levies to cover the costs.”

How a School District's Decision to Halt Bus Service Got Swept Up in Integration Debate (Sept. 2022) The “decision to end courtesy busing, and how it was handled, upset many who relied on the bus service—and has become swept up into an ongoing debate that has embroiled parents and administrators over the district’s ambitious effort to integrate its schools... Superintendent Ronald Taylor said sunsetting the busing program helped plan for integration, because it ‘allows for us the space to redesign and bid our transportation needs.’” See also Plan to Integrate Schools, Cut ‘Courtesy’ Busing Roils N.J. School District (Sept. 2022).



SAN FRANCISCO, CA: “Zone-Based” Student Assignment Policy

San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) recently adopted a “zone-based” student assignment policy that was designed to reduce racial and economic isolation, but the uncertainty of transportation may interfere with the district's ability to integrate. A [2019 report](#) urged SFUSD to “[c]reate concrete equity metrics and goals to assess the impact transportation has on educational opportunity.”

[San Francisco is Changing its School Assignment System. This Data Shows Why](#) (Jan. 2022) “At the crux of this change is that unconstrained choice—allowing families to apply to all SFUSD schools—resulted in unintended consequences, according to the district: Schools are segregated and some are underenrolled and disconnected from surrounding communities...[F]amilies with more resources—time, transportation and access to information—are often better equipped to navigate the [school choice] process.”

[How Lack Of Access To Transportation Segregates Schools](#) (May 2018) While SFUSD “offers citywide school choice—allowing all students to apply to any of its 100-plus public elementary programs—many schools are in reality accessible only to those who live within walking distance or whose parents have the time and money to drive. The link between limited school transportation and decreased school choice is neither conjecture nor specific to San Francisco. A [2009 report](#)...demonstrated...that ‘transportation is indeed a barrier to choice.’ Lots of parents told researchers they would have chosen a different school if better transportation options had been available.”

BOSTON, MA: Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity

Many districts nationwide continue to face transportation challenges brought on by the pandemic, including a shortage of school bus drivers. Interdistrict integration programs like Boston's Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) faced unique challenges. As schools reopened in 2021, state school bus capacity guidelines designed to achieve adequate social distancing substantially increased transportation costs. This forced some receiving districts to reallocate funds typically used for support services and/or facilitating access to after-school programming to cover basic transportation costs. Responding to insufficient staffing and funding for bus monitors, some METCO districts created student bus monitor positions to help mitigate bus supervision gaps. METCO headquarters secured a workforce development grant from the City of Boston to fund youth jobs during the school year (including bus monitors), and encouraged receiving districts to take advantage of city-funded youth jobs to help cover these costs. While staffing shortages and rising gas prices continue to pose budgetary challenges, METCO aspires to strengthen its transportation services in the coming years. Transportation planning and investments, particularly targeted towards some of Boston's geographically isolated neighborhoods with limited transit infrastructure, would allow more families to access the program.

[School Bus Companies, Schools, Districts Work to Address School Bus Driver Shortage](#) (Sept. 2021) “When schools went virtual at the start of the pandemic...there were efforts to keep bus drivers paid and on staff. But some drivers were nevertheless laid off, and others chose to take different jobs. Later, when schools implemented hybrid models, some drivers weren't getting paid full time, which made it hard for them to make ends meet...When schools started going back to full-time, in-person learning this past spring, many former drivers had already found new jobs. Others didn't want to return out of fear of catching the virus.” See also [School Bus Driver Shortage Raises Questions as Boston Students Return to Class](#) (Sept. 2021).

[On School Buses this Fall: Masks, Open Windows, and Distanced Seat Assignments](#) (July 2020) “Students will have to don face coverings to board school buses this fall, but they will each get an entire seat to themselves to maintain social distancing, under new state guidelines that will dramatically reduce ridership and complicate reopening plans for many districts across Massachusetts. The seating restriction—instead of the usual two or three students per seat—means ridership capacity will shrink by more than 50 percent and could dramatically increase the cost of busing students. That, in turn, could cause districts to implore parents to drive or walk their children to school, or lead school districts to operate buses in multiple waves, stagger school start times, or alternate students between days of in-person instruction and remote learning, according to the guidelines created in response to the pandemic.”

Related: As Pew Charitable Trusts [recently noted](#), the bus driver shortage is especially dire in rural districts where little to no public transportation options are available.