



GOING THE EXTRA MILE FOR SCHOOL CHOICE

How five cities tackle the challenges of student transportation

FOR FAMILIES LIVING IN NEIGHBORHOODS

with low-performing schools, choice-friendly policies open up an array of options. Students can seek out district or charter schools with stronger academic programs, or look for schools that match their unique interests or needs. The concept is simple, but families who want to take the school-choice route may find that getting students to and from school presents a significant roadblock.

Considering a school some distance from home means weighing the costs and benefits to student and family. Traveling outside the neighborhood can entail earlier wake-ups, lost time en route, unruly fellow travelers, and missed transit connections. For choice to be worthwhile, the payoff has to outweigh the drawbacks. Transportation must be affordable and safe so that all students, regardless of their location or resources, can attend their school of choice. And on the municipality's end, the cost of providing transportation must be sustainable. All of these factors play

by **BETHENY GROSS**

Lack of transportation can be a barrier for parents considering sending a child to a school that is far from home.

PHOTOGRAPH / MARK MCELROY, SHUTTERSTOCK

into the discussion on the benefits of choice.

In 2017, Matthew Chingos and Kristin Blagg of the Urban Institute convened a group of researchers to analyze students' school choices and travel to school in five cities—Denver, Detroit, New Orleans, New York, and Washington, D.C.—where families are able to select from among many charter and district schools (see Table 1). Our team found that a large number of students in these cities take advantage of school choice, and that it often provides them with important academic benefits. Traveling for these benefits, however, does come with some costs to students and their cities' education systems and at times reveals conditions of unequal access. Cities are hungry for innovative solutions to the transportation challenge.

Transportation Policies

State legislatures throughout the country anticipated that student transportation would play a role in the success or failure of school choice. Of the 44 states and D.C. that have enacted charter laws, 14 included provisions specifying whether

the charter school, school district, or some other entity would be responsible for providing transportation. Another 13 states require prospective charter schools to submit a plan describing how they would furnish transportation to their students. Laws in three additional states require local districts to provide the same service to local charter-school students that they provide to students enrolled in district schools. These laws, however, rarely spell out the details of the mandated support and, as a result, approaches vary across cities.

The five cities we examined have adopted a number of different policies for providing transportation for students who opt out of their neighborhood school. In New Orleans, New York, and D.C., students who choose another school can still receive district-provided transportation. In D.C., all students, regardless of their distance from the school, receive free transportation to school on public-school buses or via free access to public transit. In New Orleans and New York, transportation support depends on how far away students live. In Denver, students who exercise choice and live and enroll in any school in specific transportation zones served by Success Express, a dedicated shuttle-bus service, receive free transportation. In addition, most charter schools offer public school-bus transportation to students. In Detroit, students who select a different district school or a charter school are not guaranteed transportation, but some charter schools do offer it.

CHOICE POLICIES IN FIVE CITIES

(Table 1)

CITY	AVAILABLE SCHOOL CHOICES
DENVER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Interdistrict choice » Zoned schools plus open enrollment » 60 charter schools
DETROIT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Interdistrict choice » Zoned schools plus open enrollment » Charter schools
NEW ORLEANS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » 100 percent charter schools
NEW YORK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Zoned schools plus open enrollment for elementary and middle schools » Mandatory choice for high schools » Charter schools
WASHINGTON, D.C.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Zoned schools plus open enrollment for elementary and middle schools » Charter schools

The Road to School

In all five cities, many children are opting for schools other than the one assigned to them, but these choices have not, for the most part, entailed long commutes.

In D.C., nearly 75 percent of the city's students opt out of their assigned school, and in Detroit, more than 75 percent decline to attend their closest school. In Denver, among students applying to high school, less than half select the school closest to home as their first choice. The median first choice for Denver students is actually the fourth-closest school to home. In New York, only 12 percent of high-school students enroll in the closest school. Despite the high number of students who are exercising choice, the median drive time to school for 9th graders across all five cities ranges from 10 minutes in Denver and Detroit to 15 minutes in New York. (Times were estimated via Google driving directions for the typical morning

feature

SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION GROSS

PHOTOGRAPH / SEAN PAVONE, SHUTTERSTOCK



In Washington, D.C., which provides free bus or public transportation to all students, 43 percent of parents drive their children to school, a 2017 survey found.

commuting hours.) Actual commute times for students are likely longer if they are traveling by public transit or school bus. For example, in New York, the median commute time rises to 29 minutes when students use public transit, the more common method of getting to school in that city. That said, a 2017 survey of parents in Denver, Detroit, New Orleans, and D.C. found that driving was the most common mode of transport to school in each of these cities. As many as 67 percent of Denver parents drive their kids to school. Even in

distributed across neighborhoods, but it may also suggest that parents of younger children place a particularly high premium on having a school close to home—or perhaps that they view the school options available to them as more interchangeable, and therefore see less reason to sacrifice convenience.

It should not be surprising that students who exercise school choice still enroll in schools that are a relatively short drive from home. Research clearly indicates that parents and students weigh the trade-offs between distance and quality when selecting a school, favoring a closer one when all else is equal.

Analysis from the five cities, however, suggests that balancing the trade-off between quality and distance may not be exceedingly difficult for many families. We examined how long it would take 9th graders in these cities to drive to the closest high-quality school (defined as one having high graduation rates, employing a high percentage of veteran teachers, and offering calculus). We found that student time en route varies across cities, but the average drive time to a high-quality

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D.C., which has a strong public-transit system, 43 percent of parents drive their children to school.

African American students face somewhat longer commutes to school than white students and more-affluent students. In each of the cities except New Orleans, the drive to school for African American 9th-grade students is between two and five minutes longer than the drive for their white counterparts. Even so, the longest average drive—that of African American students in New York—is only 20 minutes. Interestingly, our analysis also finds that students from less-affluent households do not, on average, travel farther to school than their peers from more-affluent households.

For elementary and middle-school grades, our research team only calculated drive times in New Orleans, New York, and D.C., but in these cities, drive times are even shorter for families of younger students. These shorter drive times may simply reflect the fact that there are more elementary schools than high schools and that they are more widely

school does not exceed 15 minutes for any quality measure. More typically, the drive time to the closest high-quality school falls below 10 minutes.

The drive time to the closest high-quality school varies somewhat among white, African American, and Hispanic students, but the gaps do not always disadvantage students of color. In fact, only Hispanic students in Denver and Detroit have to travel farther than white students to reach a school with a high



Detroit: More than 75 percent of students in the Motor City decline to attend their closest school. Median estimated morning drive time for 9th graders is 10 minutes.

PHOTOGRAPH / JOSEPH SOHM, SHUTTERSTOCK

graduation rate. In all other cities and for all other quality measures, Hispanic students are closer to high-quality schools than their white counterparts. Only in New Orleans and D.C. do African American students have to go farther than their white counterparts to reach a high-quality school.

In sum, our analyses suggest that, for most school choosers in these cities, the drive to school is not exceptionally long, although there are some students who enroll in schools that are farther from home. Ten percent of 9th-grade students in Denver, Detroit, New York, and D.C., are willing to travel more than twice the median distance to school.

Students Reap Benefits

Even a small travel burden would be pointless if students did not gain any benefits for it. Examining three of the five cities—Denver, Detroit, and New York—we explored the extent to which students who exercise choice tend to select schools with higher performance or attractive academic offerings. In each of these cities, we found that students who choose to travel for school do get something for their effort.

In Detroit, students who opt for schools of choice select those with somewhat higher accountability ratings, lower absentee rates, and, for students who started at the school in 9th grade, higher graduation rates. For example, 9th-grade students in Detroit who opt out of the closest school end up selecting one that has an accountability rating that is, on average, 5 points (out of 100) higher, a graduation rate that is 9 percentage points higher, and an absenteeism rate that is 3 percentage points lower, relative to the other schools in the city. In Denver, incoming 9th-grade students who demonstrate the greatest willingness to travel for school, a group we call “super-travelers,” choose schools that have graduation rates that are, on average, 23 percentage points higher and that have seven fewer incidents of discipline per 100 students. They are also more likely to opt for



PHOTOGRAPH / TIM GRAHAM; ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

New Orleans: Rather than relying on a centralized school-transportation system, this city has assigned the responsibility to individual schools, leading to long rides.

schools that offer advanced curricula (Advanced Placement courses, International Baccalaureate programs, and calculus) as well as dual-language or immersion programs. We found that these super-travelers typically could find closer-to-home schools that had one, but not all of these traits, suggesting that the schools that necessitated long commutes offer a “package” of benefits that the neighborhood schools lack.

In New York, our analysis of choice enrollment in elementary grades found that students opting out of their assigned schools choose schools with proficiency rates that are, on average, 6 percentage points higher on the state English language arts and math exams than the schools that “non-choosing” students in their neighborhood attend. Students in grades K–2 enroll in schools with higher student-achievement growth. We found that these benefits increase when students attending choice schools have access to free transportation, suggesting that providing for this service can enhance the potential benefits of choice to students.

Costs to Students and Cities

Students may not necessarily have to endure overly long commutes to their chosen schools, but they still face real costs—as do their cities and school systems.

The prospect of a long ride to school has long led to worries about students’ ability to access before- and afterschool activities, as well as the unsupervised and unproductive time spent en route. Our analysis from New York and D.C. also notes potentially important academic and social costs for students.

Longer commutes can be difficult for students and families to sustain. In D.C. we found that the longer students had to travel to school the more likely they were to miss school and transfer out—two circumstances that can disrupt student learning. Specifically, kindergarten and 6th-grade students with



New York: The farther students traveled, the less likely they were to attend school with another child from their own neighborhood, potentially fraying social networks.

PHOTOGRAPH / S.BORISOV; SHUTTERSTOCK

long commutes (that is, whose commutes were longer than 75 percent of all students) missed about one more day a year and were 2 percentage points more likely to transfer schools than students with relatively short commutes (shorter than 75 percent of all students). Ninth-grade students with long commutes missed about two more days and were 1 percentage point more likely to transfer schools than their counterparts with short commutes. We did not find, however, that longer commutes alone led to lower academic outcomes for students.

Going to school in another neighborhood can also involve social costs. Our analysis from New York found that the farther students traveled to school, the less likely there were to attend a school with another child from their own neighborhood, potentially fraying important social networks.

For public-school systems, providing transportation to students can consume considerable resources. Transportation is a costly and volatile business, subject to fluctuating fuel costs, road construction, and labor shortages. Transporting students introduces a host of additional issues that amplify the costs dramatically.

There are immense logistical demands involved in safely

full-choice system. According to charter-school leaders in that city, where individual schools carry the costs of transportation, school leaders are forced to make difficult trade-offs between classroom and transportation spending. In Denver, the public school system provides transportation services for most district and charter schools. Federal data for the 2015–16 school year show that the district spent \$25 million on delivering these services—almost 2 percent of total district spending. (Charter schools contribute funds from their own budgets for the use of this district service.) Denver’s spending is well in line with that of comparably sized districts nationwide, which devoted, on average, 3.6 percent of their budget to transportation.

Innovation Needed

No single solution will address the costs and challenges of providing transportation in choice-rich cities. So far, school officials in the five cities cited here have turned to public transportation, decentralizing transportation, creating transportation zones and enrollment zones, and using small rideshare enterprises.

Public transportation. Cities often rely heavily on public

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moving students from their homes to a vast number of different school locations. These logistics are further complicated by the fact that many students will change schools (and thus their route to school) some months into the school year, as spots open up on waitlists. When a city lacks a centralized policy managing the student-transfer process, an official at a charter authorizer in Detroit explained, the churn of students can be overwhelming. She noted, “Kids come and go with no transfer policies and no kind of accountabilities in place around who’s moving where. Kids are just constantly moving. [For schools] it would be out of control, the amount of jostling you would have to do to even try to operate a bus schedule.” In addition, schools in choice-rich cities often operate with different start and end times that must be accommodated in the bus schedules.

Two other factors that escalate costs are the requirement to provide transportation accommodations, such as door-to-door service or smaller vehicles for students with disabilities, and the need to hire bus monitors to protect students and maintain order.

Choice may involve higher spending on transportation, but not necessarily. In New Orleans, Tulane University researchers learned that transportation costs increased by almost \$200 per pupil, an increase of 34 percent, after the city shifted to a

transit to get students to and from school. But, with notable exceptions such as in New York and D.C., public-transit networks tend to fall short in this capacity. On top of causing worries about safety and unsupervised travel, the public-transit option increases students’ travel time, especially in cities without extensive transit networks. In Denver, Detroit, and New Orleans, for example, the typical 10-minute drive turns into more than 30 minutes by public transit, and a 30-minute drive morphs into a 70–80 minute transit ride. Predictably, public-transit options are least efficient for students in lower-rent neighborhoods.

Decentralization. Rather than relying on a centralized school-transportation system, New Orleans has assigned responsibility to the individual schools, with the goals of distributing the burden of cost and giving all students access to any of the city’s schools. This policy has guaranteed such access for most students but it has also created considerable inefficiencies in getting them to school. Bus routes serving individual schools are often long and circuitous. The median school-bus commute for students is 35 minutes (more than twice the drive time), with some students on the bus for upward of 90 minutes one way. Schools and networks have

tried to improve efficiency by staggering start times and sharing bus routes with other schools, but costs in funding and student time remain high.

Enrollment zones. Some cities, such as Denver, have tried to balance choice and the costs of transportation by establishing enrollment zones, geographic areas whose residents are eligible to receive free transit to in-zone schools, regardless of whether the school is closest to their home. Students may still be free to enroll in schools outside the zone but would forgo free transportation.

Transportation zones. Among the most innovative efforts to expand service and manage cost are transportation zones where shuttle buses travel a set circuit of stops at neighborhood locations and schools in the zone. Buses operate for a certain number of hours in the morning and afternoon, and students hop on and off as needed. This approach accommodates different start and end times, facilitates student participation in before- and afterschool activities, and captures



PHOTOGRAPH / EGNESVISUALS; SHUTTERSTOCK

Denver: “Super-travelers” journey to schools that offer a package of benefits their neighborhood schools lack. A shuttle bus program here is the “Success Express.”

remains a vexing concern. Analyses from the five high-choice cities in our study show that most students select schools that are within a short drive from home and, despite challenges, many families are sorting out how to get their children there.

In Denver, incoming 9th-grade students who demonstrate the greatest willingness to travel choose schools that have graduation rates that are, on average, 23 percentage points higher, have fewer incidents of discipline, and offer advanced curricula.

some economies of scale. Denver’s Success Express, for example, overlays these transportation zones upon two of the city’s enrollment zones and in so doing provides free transportation to students living and enrolling in two of Denver’s most difficult-to-access and underserved communities. Detroit is poised to adopt Denver’s approach and expand on it by including childcare and afterschool activity centers in the bus circuit.

Ridesharing. More recently, small rideshare companies dedicated to transporting children have emerged. These services, which feature highly vetted drivers and extensive safety examinations for vehicles, allow parents to request rides for their children through a phone app and furnish them with point-to-point transportation. While cities are unlikely to use these relatively high-cost providers at scale, their flexible, custom service has worked for highly vulnerable students living in homelessness or in the foster-care system.

The Start of a Journey

For many students, choice without transportation is not much of a choice, and transportation in high-choice cities

Still, the leaders we spoke with in high-choice cities want to serve families better, especially families with limited resources and those living in less-accessible neighborhoods. The challenge lies in the execution.

So far, cities have tried to shoehorn their transportation services for schools of choice into traditional systems. But to move forward, cities will likely have to shift their perspective on providing transportation to match the one they have been taking with schools—that is, being open to a greater diversity of providers and approaches to meet student needs. As the director of transportation for Denver’s public schools put it, “We are trying to figure out how to migrate to a system that can support the complexity of offerings that the district has created for families.” Accomplishing that in choice-rich cities will take innovation and a willingness to go beyond long-established practices.

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