



RESEARCH REPORT

“It’s Hard to Separate Choice from Transportation”

Perspectives on Student Transportation Policy from Three Choice-Rich School Districts

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October 2018



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Acknowledgments

This report was funded by the Walton Family Foundation. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

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I thank Betheny Gross and Megan Gallagher for their invaluable ideas and input as well as Matt Chingos, Kristin Blagg, Danielle Sanderson, Missy Cosby, Joshua Cowen, Jane Arnold Lincove, Jon Valant, Nathan Barrett, and Sean Corcoran for their research assistance and feedback.

Executive Summary

The rapid proliferation of school choice policies across the country over the course of the past three decades has resulted in significant changes in the number and type of schooling options available to students. As school districts have adopted school choice policies, new questions have arisen about school transportation policies. States and local school districts have responded in a variety of ways to the issue of student transportation in the context of choice. These policies have different implications for the extent to which families can engage in choice and how schools respond. To date, there has been limited understanding of how school transportation policies are implemented on the ground and how differences among them may influence the local school choice landscape.

In this report, I draw on interview data collected from 26 district administrators, charter school leaders, charter authorizers, and stakeholders in Detroit, New Orleans, and New York City to explore how people responsible for school transportation implement transportation policies and perceive its impact on their work and families' school choices. There were three prominent themes that I discuss through the report that district and school actors identified as especially salient to their work on school transportation.

First, I explore the challenges that district administrators, charter school personnel, charter authorizers, and other key stakeholders cite when describing student transportation. I identify common challenges across districts as well as obstacles unique to each site or sector (e.g., district schools versus charter schools). These include the logical complexity associated with managing transportation for large numbers of students, high levels of student mobility, safety concerns, and inadequate public transit infrastructure.

Next, I discuss the costs that districts and schools incur when implementing school transportation policies and analyze differences across choice contexts with distinct policies. District officials cited high special education busing costs and expensive, outdated contracts with bus companies among the most prominent financial burdens. For their part, charter school leaders identified additional personnel costs (e.g., bus monitors) and out-of-pocket transportation expenses as most costly.

Finally, I provide a summary of interview participants' reports on the ways in which transportation policies influence student recruitment practices and how this relates to other important factors, such as

school location and accessibility of public transportation. Within each of these thematic sections, I pay particular attention to references made to the relationship between student transportation policies and equity in the context of school choice. I close with a discussion of current and proposed innovations around student transportation in each of these cities and directions for policy work and empirical research on the topic.

“It’s Hard to Separate Choice from Transportation”

The rapid proliferation of school choice policies across the country over the past three decades has resulted in significant changes in the number and type of schooling options available to students. As school districts have adopted school choice policies—ranging from inter- and intradistrict choice to magnet programs and charter schools—new questions have arisen about school transportation policies. States and school districts have responded to the issue of student transportation in the context of choice in a variety of ways with different implications for the extent to which families can engage in choice and how schools themselves respond. To date, there has been limited understanding of how school transportation policies are implemented on the ground and how differences among them may influence the local school choice landscape generally.

In this report, I draw on interview data collected from 26 district administrators, charter school leaders, charter authorizers, and stakeholders in three choice-rich school districts: Detroit, New Orleans, and New York City. I explore how people responsible for school transportation implement transportation policies and perceive its impact on their work and families’ school choices. Because our interview sample was restricted to representatives from the charter school sector and district-level leadership, the report only touches on questions about transportation and choice for district schools and charter schools—other forms of school choice are not addressed.

This report is part of a series of reports published by members of the Urban Institute Student Transportation Working Group designed to examine student transportation policies in choice-rich districts and what they mean for the school choices families can and do make. In the first report we reviewed the extant research on student transportation generally and presented profiles of the school choice landscape and transportation policies in Denver, Detroit, New Orleans, New York City, and Washington, DC (Urban Institute Student Transportation Working Group 2017). Our second report analyzed travel times between students’ homes and schools in the five focal districts to provide a descriptive portrait of the relationship between where students live, where they attend school, and the location of other school options (Urban Institute Student Transportation Working Group 2018).

This report focuses on three prominent themes that district and school actors identified as especially salient to their work on school transportation. First, I explore the challenges that district administrators, charter school personnel, charter authorizers, and other key stakeholders cite when

describing student transportation. I identify common challenges across districts as well as obstacles unique to each site or sector (e.g., district level versus charter school level). Next, I discuss the costs that districts and schools incur when implementing school transportation policies and analyze differences across choice contexts with distinct policies. Finally, I provide a summary of interview participants' reports on the ways in which transportation policies influence student recruitment practices and how this relates to other important factors, such as school location and accessibility of public transportation. Within each of these thematic sections, I pay particular attention to references made to the relationship between student transportation policies and equity in the context of school choice. The report closes with a discussion of current and proposed innovations around student transportation in each of these cities and future directions for policy work and empirical research on the topic.

District Overviews

Detroit

There are an estimated 110,000 students living in Detroit who attend a Michigan public school (Citizens Research Council 2016). The city has an extensive set of school choice offerings (predominantly charter schools) and the state's flexible enrollment policies allow students to select from among a host of charter, district, and interdistrict choice options. Consequently, only about half of Detroit residents attend district schools in the city of Detroit. The largest share of Detroit's students attend charter schools both in and outside the city limits (roughly 40 percent in 2015–16) and the remainder attend district schools outside their home district (Citizens Research Council 2016). Like New York, charter school applications are managed at the school or network level and require individual applications.

The city of Detroit has faced considerable demographic and financial challenges in the past 25 years. Since 1990, Detroit's population declined 34 percent. The combination of overall population decline and competition from charter schools and out-of-district options resulted in severe financial distress for the city's district public schools: in 2016 the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) had approximately 3.5 billion dollars in outstanding debts. Moreover, although DPS has been under state financial management at various points over the past decade, prolonged academic failure led to a state takeover in 2012, with the Education Achievement Authority assuming responsibility of 15 traditional district public schools. The state-run entity ceased operations after the 2016–17 school year and, under the leadership of new superintendent Nikolai Vitti, the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) took control for the 2017–18 academic year.

The Office of Student Transportation at DPSCD coordinates transportation, which is only guaranteed for students attending neighborhood (district public) schools. Students who choose to 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 (table 1). 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, and students in grades 9–12 who live more than 2 miles from their neighborhood school and meet low-income criteria receive public transportation passes. Students with disabilities who qualify for special bus service get other forms of individualized transportation.

Detroit has a limited public transportation infrastructure, particularly given the size of the city in terms of square miles. Though there are public bus networks and small rail systems primarily in the downtown area, they serve a small fraction of the city's vast geographic expanse and are relatively inefficient. Compared with New York, where a 10-minute drive takes about 20 minutes by public transit, in Detroit a 10-minute drive is likely to take 32 to 34 minutes. For high school students who only receive public transit passes, a school that is 15 minutes away by car may take more than 50 minutes by public transit.

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. Taken together, limited access to cars coupled with poor public transportation and restrictive school transportation policies complicate the full exercise of choice in Detroit.

A number of proposals have been put forward to address problems with public transit and school transportation in Detroit both separately and in tandem. The Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren (2015), a group of philanthropic and advocacy organizations, identified some of the challenges associated with school transportation for students in Detroit and recommended a series of reforms. Ultimately neither these recommendations nor a ballot initiative in November 2016 to develop a comprehensive transportation plan across four counties, including Wayne County where Detroit is located, were adopted. The multibillion dollar ballot proposal, which called for rapid bus transit, commuter express routes, and local bus service to underserved areas, failed by a narrow margin. The newest plan to respond to the longstanding transportation barriers in Detroit comes from Mayor Mike Duggan. In Spring 2018, Mayor Duggan proposed the creation of a unified bus system for charter and DPSCD students in the northwest part of the city where there is a concentration of district schools and charter schools. The plan would have buses running in a loop and would transport students living in the area to child care, school, and after school activities within the targeted area. Discussions are still under

way, but this represents one of the boldest plans advanced by a local political leader in Detroit in recent years to respond directly to the transportation crisis in the city.

New Orleans

New Orleans is the smallest of the three cities profiled in this report, with about 49,000 students attending public school in the 2016–17 school year. This figure reflects the steady student population growth that the city has been experiencing in the nearly 15 years since Hurricane Katrina, but it remains far below the roughly 66,000 students attending New Orleans public schools in 2004 before the hurricane. At present, 95 percent of students attending public school in New Orleans attend charter schools, making it nearly a complete charter district (Babineau, Hand, and Rossmeier 2018). Through the OneApp system, families can apply to almost all of the charter schools in New Orleans using a single application, and school assignments are centrally administered. There is also a sizable private school sector, and low-income students may apply for private school vouchers through the Louisiana Scholarship Program, which served around 7,000 students statewide in 2015–16 (Mills and Wolf 2017).

The governance structure and marketplace of schools in New Orleans changed dramatically after Katrina when the Louisiana State Legislature increased the state’s power to intervene in schools. The Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education had created the Recovery School District (RSD) in 2003, before Katrina, to allow the state to take over chronically low-performing schools—many of them in New Orleans and formerly under the authority of the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB). With greater state control over local education in 2005, the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education moved 100 schools formerly under OPSB leadership to the RSD and left OPSB with only 17 schools. Over time, the RSD closed, consolidated, and transformed the schools under its purview converting all schools to charters and opening new charter schools. All of the RSD’s schools were classified as type-5 charter schools, which meant they were independent and autonomous local education agencies with requirements specific to that classification, including transportation. OPSB converted the majority of its schools to charters as well, but under a different classification with distinct different transportation requirements (Vaughan et al. 2011).

Louisiana state law requires public school districts to provide transportation for students living farther than one mile away from school (table 1). Because the charter schools operating under the RSD are each considered a local education agency or separate district, they are responsible for providing and paying for student transportation to and from school. In the large majority of cases, this means that charter schools are running yellow buses, although some also give public transit passes for older

students. The Cowen Institute reported that, in 2015, the most recent year for which charter school expenditure data were available, charter schools in New Orleans spent an average of 6 percent of their total budget on transportation, with some schools spending as much as 13 percent (Babineau, Hand, and Rossmeier 2018). New Orleans's public transportation system is weak in ways that are similar to Detroit's, with bus networks and a street-car system primarily serving downtown. However, with so many schools providing yellow bus service, the limitations of the public transit system is less of an issue for students and families, at least in terms of getting to school.

The remainder of the public schools serving students in New Orleans have different transportation requirements. Students attending OPSB schools are eligible for yellow bus service based on grade and distance. Schools that are not type-5 charters that are authorized by OPSB may negotiate their own transportation policies and are not mandated to provide yellow bus service, even for younger grades. A final set of charter schools (type 2) authorized by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education have more flexibility in determining the mode of transportation provided to students as long as it is free to students (Babineau, Hand, and Rossmeier 2018).

The variation in transportation requirements for schools serving students in the same city has been a source of significant conflict in New Orleans, particularly in light of the limited and unreliable public transit system and low rates of car ownership among high-poverty households (30 percent of households in the highest-poverty quartile of census tracts lacked access to a car in New Orleans.)

The governance structure overseeing public schools in New Orleans is set to change yet again at the start of the 2018–19 school year, when all RSD schools will come under the authority of OPSB (Babineau, Hand, and Rossmeier 2018). This shift, voted on by the Louisiana State Legislature, establishes OPSB as the authorizer and governing entity for the vast majority of public schools in the city, save a small number that the state oversees. Despite the “unification” of RSD and OPSB schools under a more centralized form of governance, significant charter school autonomy will be preserved under the new structure, with OPSB overseeing parental choice and performance-based accountability and leaving day-to-day operations to the schools. Transportation policy figured prominently among the issues discussed in negotiations leading up to the unification plan given disparities in current mandates for charter schools in the city. Under OPSB's leadership, all schools will be required to provide transportation similar to the type-5 (formerly RSD) charter schools, with a phase-in period allowed for schools not currently offering yellow bus service to align with school's individual charter reauthorization timelines.

New York City

New York is the largest public school district in the country, serving over one million students in kindergarten through grade 12. School choice policies have been a staple of the New York Department of Education's (NYCDOE) portfolio for many decades with some form of choice available at every grade from prekindergarten through high school.¹ There is a small but robust charter school sector, and charter school enrollments have been steadily increasing since the first charter school law was passed in 1998. In the 2017–18 school year, 10 percent of all students in NYC public schools attended charter schools (NYC Charter School Center 2018). In other words, roughly 114,000 students were enrolled in the 227 charter schools located in all 5 boroughs of New York. Unlike some other large urban districts that have moved to a centralized charter school application system, including New Orleans, NYC families who wish to apply to one or more charter schools must apply to each school directly.

The Office of Pupil Transportation (OPT) at the NYCDOE oversees transportation for all students in New York, including students attending district and charter schools as well as some nonpublic schools (table 1). 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 higher 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 mandate special transportation receive tailored bus service.

New York has a well-developed public transit system, which is reflected in its student transportation policies. Earlier analysis found that the average door-to-door public transportation time from a student's home to eligible schools within their home borough is roughly twice the time it takes to drive from the same points, but, in cities with less-efficient systems, public transportation can take three times the time of driving (Urban Institute Student Transportation Working Group 2018). However, even the city's network of subways and buses is not without its problems.² Moreover, rates of car ownership in census tracts with the highest proportion of families in poverty in New York are significantly lower than in cities with less robust transportation systems. For example, 71 percent of households high-poverty tracts in New York do not have access to a car (compared with 37 percent in low-poverty tracts), but in New Orleans, 30 percent of households in the highest-poverty tracts do not have access to a car.

Student transportation policies in New York have remained relatively stable in recent years, in part since they are largely determined by the state. At the same time, Mayor Bill de Blasio recently expanded

bus service provision to students living in temporary housing as part of a larger set of initiatives launched in 2016 to improve educational access for homeless students. Further, in April 2018, Richard Carranza took over as chancellor of the NYCDOE, and his position on student transportation policy and changes to it remains to be seen.

TABLE 1
Summary of Available Transportation for Students
Transportation options provided by each city

	Mode	Student Access
Detroit, MI	Yellow bus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Grades K–8 and students with special needs ■ Grades 9–12 who attend an Education Achievement Authority (EAA) school
	Public transit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Grades 9–12 who attend a Detroit Public Schools (DPS) school
New Orleans, LA	Yellow bus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Grades K–12 enrolled in Orleans Parish School Board (OSPB) or type-5 (RSD) charter schools
	Public transit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ N/A
New York, NY	Yellow bus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Grades K–6 and students with special needs
	Public transit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Grades 7–12

Source: Adapted from Urban Institute Transportation Working Group, *The Road to School: How Far Students Travel to School in the Choice-Rich Cities of Denver, Detroit, New Orleans, New York City, and Washington, DC* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute), table 2.

Notes: This is a broad summary of student transportation policy in these cities. See appendix for full policy descriptions. 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.

Interviews

Detroit, New Orleans, and New York represent diverse contexts in which to explore questions about how transportation policies and the availability of public transit influence school choice. Though New York has the smallest charter school sector of the three (in percentage terms), it has the most advanced public transit system. Moreover, student transportation is centrally managed by the NYCDOE and more students are educated in charter schools in New York than in New Orleans and Detroit combined. By contrast, New Orleans is almost entirely made up of charter schools and each school or charter management organization (CMO) is responsible for coordinating and funding student transportation. There are also relatively few public transportation options available. Finally, Detroit falls somewhere in the middle in terms of proportion of students served in charter schools. It has the fewest student transportation requirements for charter schools and the weakest public transportation infrastructure, particularly given the geographic size of the city.

To comparatively examine how student transportation policies are implemented in each of these settings and understand administrators' and charter leaders' perceptions of how these policies relate to school choice, I conducted interviews with three sets of key actors:

1. district officials knowledgeable about the student transportation policies and district-level implementation of them
2. charter school leaders and personnel responsible for coordinating or overseeing student transportation at a school or CMO level
3. charter school authorizers

I also interviewed other relevant stakeholders in each district, including representatives from advocacy organizations and local foundations involved in student transportation issues. Interviews focused on participants' roles and involvement in transportation policy or day-to-day work on student transportation, the challenges and costs associated with student transportation, how transportation provision and public transit impacts student recruitment efforts, and their views on the importance of transportation for families' enactment of school choice.

The number of interviews from each city varied as did the sector represented based on responsiveness to participant recruitment (table 2). In the end, I conducted telephone interviews lasting from 40 to 70 minutes with 26 people across the three cities. Participants from New York included two senior administrators working in the Office of Pupil Transportation (OPT) at the NYCDOE, six charter school leaders, personnel ranging from the chief operating officer of a small CMO to the operations manager at one charter school, and a representative from a large charter advocacy and support organization. Charter school participants came from both large networks (more than 15 schools) and smaller ones (4 schools in the network.) In Detroit, I interviewed two administrators at DPSCD, four charter school leaders, three charter school authorizers (from the same organization), and two members of the advocacy and philanthropic community. New Orleans-based participants included two district officials at the RSD, one from OPSB, three people from the charter school sector including large- and small-CMOs, and someone from a prominent charter advocacy organization.

TABLE 2

Interview Participants

Participant	Sector	Role	Transportation provided
Detroit			
1	Charter school/network	Chief operating officer	No transportation provided
2	Charter school/network	Director of talent and growth	Bus transportation provided at some schools in network
3	Charter school/network	President	Contracts to provide bus transportation
4	Charter school/network	Executive director	Owns buses
5	Charter authorizer		
6	Charter authorizer		
7	Charter authorizer		
8	Stakeholder	Philanthropy	
9	Stakeholder	Research and advocacy	
10	DPSCD Office of Student Transportation	Administrator	
11	DPSCD Office of Student Transportation	Administrator	
New Orleans			
1	Charter advocacy	Executive director	N/A
2	Charter school/network	Founder/CEO	Yellow bus
3	RSD	Administrator	
4	Charter school/network	Director of operations	Yellow bus
5	OPSB	Administrator	
6	RSD	Administrator	
New York City			
1	Nonprofit/charter advocacy	Program manager	N/A
2	NYCDOE Office of Pupil Transportation	Administrator	N/A
3	NYCDOE Office of Pupil Transportation	Administrator	N/A
4	Charter school/network	Director of operations	Yellow bus (OPT) and metro cards
5	Charter school/network	Director of operations	Yellow bus (OPT) and metro cards
6	Charter school/network	Executive director	Yellow bus (OPT) and metro cards
7	Charter school/network	Chief operating officer	Yellow bus (OPT) and metro cards
8	Charter school/network	Operations manager	Yellow bus (OPT) and metro cards
9	Charter school/network	Operations associate	Yellow bus (OPT) and metro cards

Challenges Associated with Student Transportation

Whether managing yellow bus service and MetroCards for hundreds of thousands of students across New York’s five boroughs or scheduling bus routes for a school of 200 in New Orleans or Detroit, student transportation presents challenges at every level. Interviews revealed a number of challenges common across settings, including complicated logistics, children’s behavior on the bus, safety concerns, and poor service from bus companies. At the same time, site-specific challenges reflect the unique features of each setting, including different eligibility rules, weather, and efficiency of public transportation. I review the shared and individual challenges identified by district and charter participants and describe the range of strategies they developed in response.

District-Level Challenges

LARGE GEOGRAPHIC AREAS

Given the decentralized school governance structure in New Orleans and school or CMO-level control over transportation, only district officials from New York and Detroit described the challenges they face in overseeing student transportation citywide. Despite large differences in the number of students for whom they provide transportation and the policies governing transportation, representatives from the respective student transportation offices at the NYCDOE and DPSCD cited similar difficulties in effectively carrying out their work. To start, the size of the cities themselves constituted an obstacle with which they had to contend. One official from OPT marveled at the “sheer scale” of the boroughs, adding “you could fit Chicago Public Schools inside of Brooklyn.”

In Detroit, large distances separating parts of the city combined with urban blight and undependable public buses are at the center of the problems associated with good student transportation. One charter school authorizer highlighted the scale of the challenge in Detroit by comparing the context to New Orleans, another city with which she was familiar. She commented, “This city, I think, has a much more complex issue because it’s way bigger than New Orleans. When you talk about transportation, I can only imagine as the school operator what the cost might be compared to my little, tiny budget in New Orleans. I can go from one school to another here in Detroit and it’s still in the city. That basically would have taken me across the state in Louisiana. It’s a burden that, I think, particularly coupled with how big the city is and the challenges around the weather and the economy and the lack of working transportation just on its own—it’s just really crippling.” Even with such exaggerated descriptions of the relative size of Detroit in comparison to New Orleans, the realities of

greater distances and time coupled with weak public transit rendered student transportation a key issue of concern for Detroit stakeholders ranging from foundations and political leaders to charter authorizers and building principals.

LOGISTICS AND HIGH STUDENT MOBILITY

The time and personnel demands of day-to-day management of student transportation is another source of concern among district administrators. Between responding to daily requests for routing changes and other logistical issues like public transit cards not arriving to schools on time, interview participants dislike the inefficiency of having so much managed centrally. One OPT representative in New York shared his vision for having the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) be responsible for all matters related to MetroCards as a way to reduce their workload and cut out their role as “middle man.” He described the current procedures and his ideas for improvement:

Well, so in terms of our coordination with MTA, that happens currently just with the fact that they ship us cards and then we actually pack and ship those for 500,000 students at a time....We're very much a part of that process. I would love for that to be a no-brainer, and any child who qualified would get a card. It would just be something they already had. It wouldn't be something that OPT, that my department, did....Kind of like everybody eats school lunch, everybody gets a MetroCard. If you're a kid in New York City, you get a MetroCard. It would just be a lot easier.

In other words, under his proposed system, the MTA would interact directly with schools to verify the number of students eligible for MetroCards and send them directly to schools rather than having OPT coordinate.

One official from the Office of Pupil Transportation marveled at the “sheer scale” of the boroughs, adding “you could fit Chicago Public Schools inside of Brooklyn.

Officials in both New York and Detroit described ongoing changes to transportation policies (e.g., Mayor de Blasio's homeless student initiative that, midyear, adds over 300 routes “which is in many cases twice the size of a large school district, large transportation department, in the United States”) and high levels of student mobility as factors adding complexity to their jobs. One charter authorizer in Detroit pointed to the loose enrollment policies as a driver of the high mobility. She explained,

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. I think it almost, to the school sense, 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. There is no policy. I can pick up my kids. I have two 8-year-olds right now. [They've] been to more than eight schools. I can pick up and leave tomorrow and nobody will question me. I will—I have left schools here. We left a school this year, and we never received a phone call. Nobody called us and asked us where we went. Nobody called to ask us why we were leaving.

The difficulties associated with managing bus services for student in the general education population, however, pale in comparison to district administrators' critiques of the complex and potentially litigious work of providing transportation for students receiving special education services.

SPECIAL EDUCATION BUSING

Special education busing proved to be the most salient student transportation concern for district administrators in New York and Detroit. Though the high costs associated with providing door-to-door or special bus service for students with disabilities was cited most frequently, the difficulty of orchestrating individualized routes across large geographic areas was repeatedly emphasized. One DPSCD representative described the challenge as follows: "When you've got a total of 12,500 kids scheduled on our morning and afternoon runs, 3,300 getting picked up at their house, getting door-to-door treatment....Our challenges are special ed. cost containment, keeping them in programs close to home. There are certain schools that they like too that are 10–15 miles away." In New York, officials disagreed with the policy of providing separate busing for students with disabilities and juxtaposed it with the guidance under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requiring that students with disabilities be educated in the "least restrictive environment." Tackling special education busing through policy changes as well as changes to contracts with bus companies is thus a high priority for district administrators in New York and Detroit.

LIMITED PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE

In contrast to New York's vast network of public buses and efficient multiborough subway system, residents of Detroit and New Orleans do not have access to reliable public transportation that covers the majority of the city. This affects district and charter school leaders in Detroit, and nearly every interview participant emphasized the problem of poor public transit. The chief operating officer of one Detroit charter school network that does not provide student busing summarized a widely expressed sentiment to this effect:

The economic circumstances that I'm sure you're fairly well-versed in just in terms of Detroit means that a lot of infrastructure is not there or has gone into decay—prior to the last few years when investments have started coming in. That means that public transportation, reliable and

accessible public transportation, has been a huge challenge for the city of Detroit. If you don't have the minimum required infrastructure vis-à-vis transportation...you're not really solving anything 'cause you're not improving the students' families' ability to choose—go to good schools and leave bad schools—because they can't physically get to and from those places.

The founder of another charter school, who recently expanded to a second site in Detroit and bought her own buses to guarantee student transportation, described the conditions in Detroit as “tricky.” She explained how the lack of transportation combined with unsafe streets created barriers for families to get to school every day: “[L]ots of streets don't have lights. Detroit, it's very dark in the morning, and there's [no] street lights. Without transportation, it is hard for families to get to school on time, because they don't want to be walking down a dark street to get their kids. It's this tricky ridiculous mix of no transportation plus no street lights [that equals] kids showing up for school [at], like, 9:15 every day during the winter.”

The student transportation obstacles are less severe in New Orleans, in large part because most charter schools contract with yellow bus companies to bring students to and from school every day. However, public transportation there is also seen as inadequate and schools are generally unable to rely on the regional transit buses even for students in older grades who could travel without adult supervision. This has implications for the cost of student transportation in New Orleans, an already contested issue. One RSD official compared New Orleans with New York, highlighting the ways in which strong public transportation facilitates school choice. She also raised key questions about the role of public transit and student transportation policy overall in choice-rich contexts:

Like NYC for example, it is such a unique place because there is a transportation system that is historically dependable. At the high school level in New York, you could say, ‘Look, here's a subway card, take the subway to school and go anywhere you want.’ That's a challenge [in New Orleans]. What is your public transportation landscape? Is it robust? Is it safe? Is the provider willing to work with schools and districts to make it easier for kids to get there? I don't think the answer has to be yellow bus or bus, especially as kids get older. In most districts the public transport system is not robust or easy to navigate. Districts have to ask themselves, if they are districts that want to promote choice: What does that mean if families can't get there? How far do we want to go to support choice?

This comment gets at the heart of ongoing conversations about what must be provided to families to allow for the full exercise of school choice.

Detroit Challenges

Macrolevel issues of economic decline and failing public infrastructure directly impact the work of personnel in the Office of Student Transportation at DPSCD in ways that stand out from other cities.

One senior official described the transportation challenges that families in Detroit experience, which, in turn, affect the type of student transportation services the district could provide: “The fact that a lot of parents don’t have cars, don’t have ability to get their kid to school or to a bus stop far away. If you have to walk a mile, that’s quite a distance. In some neighborhoods, you are passing a lot of burned down, vacant houses on your way.” They also contend with more direct challenges, such as hiring enough bus attendants (adults who ride the bus to monitor student behavior), positions one DPSCD representative described as “not very desirable.” In Detroit, student transportation is part of a larger citywide discussion of economic renewal and the centrality of improved public transportation for overall progress.

New Orleans Challenges

The most prominent challenges associated with student transportation in New Orleans at the city level are political challenges, reflecting the ongoing tension between people resistant to the transformation of the public school system post-Katrina and the widespread adoption of school choice. Interview participants ranging from charter advocates to district administrators at OPSB described persistent complaints lodged against the student transportation policies on the grounds that students are spending too much time on buses. By and large, participants viewed these complaints about transportation as a means to attack school choice generally. Someone from an advocacy organization summarized the conflict as follows:

Some who are very critical of choice and the set up in New Orleans often times point to transportation. They say things like ‘All of our babies are standing on the corner in darkness at 6 o’clock in the morning, waiting for the bus, 1-2 hours ride.’ Transportation is not just a battle between schools around dollars and who you are serving. It’s an issue in the community about who should have first choice to certain schools. Some people want to return to neighborhood schools.

Similarly, representatives from OPSB as well as the RSD reported hearing dissatisfaction from members of the community about the cost of busing and the length of student travel but receiving few, if any, complaints directly from parents about transportation times. One senior OPSB official related his experience:

I think that a lot of the voices of people interested in this are not necessarily the parents. I just feel like we hear from parents on lots of issues. I, at the central office of OPSB, don’t really hear a lot from parents about bus times. I hear a lot from board members about it, city council members, and others. A lot of people who I think are—who like to point out issues with the choice moment that we have here in New Orleans and the rapid proliferation of charter schools will point to that as a huge issue because they say think of all this money that’s being wasted. You’re spending money. That is an issue we hear about. That is spending resources that could be allocated

elsewhere because you're shipping kids all over across the city. Because of this choice situation that we have, you've got kids driving all over the city where if you were zoned to a district school, you might have half the amount of buses on the road because half these kids could be walking to school. That is an issue I hear a lot about.

The intensity of the debate about student transportation in New Orleans and continual critiques led to OPSB putting out a request for proposals for a study of student transportation, bus routes and the amount of time students spend on buses. Charter school leaders and advocates have been strongly supportive of the study arguing that having actual data and “not the stories people like to tell about the 4-year-olds on the bus for three hours” will help clarify whether real issues exist and the best course of action to address them.

“Districts have to ask themselves, if they are districts that want to promote choice: What does that mean if families can't get there? How far do we want to go to support choice?”

New York City Challenges

The Office of Pupil Transportation in New York is tasked with overseeing student transportation at a scale that is unparalleled in any other district in the country. Consequently, unique challenges arise. To start, representatives from OPT pointed to the difficulties of being responsible for busing students across multiple school sectors and geographic areas because of state laws requiring the NYCDOE to bus some New York residents out of district and to private schools. One participant explained,

Just the fact that we are busing, as we mentioned, not only the New York City area, but also up to 50 miles outside of the city, Rockland and Westchester and Bergen County, New Jersey, and Connecticut for special education. We're also busing all of our students who are in archdiocese schools, Yeshiva, Islamic,[and] Greek Orthodox. We're busing students after 4 [o'clock] for both instructional and religious purposes, boys and girls separate. All of those programs are managed by us as well.

Relatedly, they deal with a dizzying number of bus companies and contracts, some of which have not been renegotiated in decades. A comment by a senior OPT official put the scope of the contractual challenges into perspective:

We're currently an entirely contracted fleet, the largest ground fleet in North America, with more than 9,500 buses and about 8,000 bus routes. Those are all contracted. Our bus companies—there's about 72 bus companies now, both [prekindergarten] early intervention all the way up to grade 12. And many of those contracts have not been bid since 1979. A lot of what

we're also doing on a daily basis...[is] to work with our contracting and procurement unit to manage the varying nuances of the different types of contracts.

In response to the issue of outdated and often expensive bus contracts, OPT staff has prioritized the work to rebid contracts and negotiate more efficient and cost-effective agreements and services.

School-Level Challenges

Regardless of the policies governing student transportation and the degree to which transportation is managed centrally or at the school level, charter school personnel encounter a range of common challenges associated with student transportation. Issues of safety on public transportation along with student behavior on yellow buses are of primary concern. Additionally, overseeing student transportation places considerable logistical demands on school staff, and charter leaders express frustration about the lack of control over the quality of the bus companies and drivers. They cited frequent bus driver absences, unprofessional behavior, and poorly maintained vehicles among the issues they most often faced. Finally, though some participants emphasized how bus transportation limited school contact with parents, others described the benefits to parents of having longer bus rides before and after school that could effectively serve as child care and of busing as a means to reduce lateness and absences.

STUDENT SAFETY IN TRANSIT

Safety concerns of school personnel and of parents whose children ride buses and using public transportation to get to school are among the most significant challenges that charter school personnel identified in Detroit, New Orleans, and New York. 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. The other thing too is that we are in neighborhoods, that while I think that all of New York City—you have to be on your Ps and Qs no matter what. I do think that we live in neighborhoods where there is a perception of it being a little bit [unsafe]. Sometimes, parents don't want their kids to be walking around.

Neighborhood safety was similarly mentioned in Detroit, and this was additive to parents' fears about public transportation, as one charter school leader in Detroit explained: "Detroit has a lot of unsafe neighborhoods. Then you're asking younger kids or high school students to ride the buses. A lot of our kids actually carry knives, and little things like that on their person. If they ride public transportation

which...a lot of our families tell kids if they are gonna ride public transportation they need to have some sort of thing on them.”

One way that some schools respond to families’ anxiety about student travel to school is to increase communication about transportation. A charter school network in New York City, for example, uses an app that will text parents with updates including if the bus is running late for pick up or drop off. Another charter network, also in New York, helps students practice riding public buses and subways to help them prepare for when they are no longer eligible for yellow bus service after sixth grade.

LOGISTICAL DEMANDS

Though OPT in New York is responsible for coordinating transportation for thousands of students across many different charter schools citywide, many of the day-to-day tasks of managing student transportation fall to school-based staff in New York charter schools (and district schools). 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 host of new logistical challenges distinct from those discussed by district-level administrators.

Developing efficient bus routes is a time-intensive and complicated process requiring expertise and flexibility, particularly at the start of the school year when enrollment changes are ongoing. The director of operations of a network of over 10 charter schools 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 it’s complicated and then we have to add two more kids.” Even when not responsible for setting up bus routes, as is the case for charter schools in New York where 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. These are stressful and time-consuming endeavors themselves.

“Transportation is not just a battle between schools around dollars and who you are serving. It’s an issue in the community about who should have first choice to certain schools.”

Student misbehavior on the school bus and efforts to implement effective strategies in response to behavioral issues emerged repeatedly in interviews with charter school personnel in all three cities. Interview participants relayed concern about students' safety as a consequence of dangerous behavior and lack of confidence in bus drivers' capacity to manage behavior problems. They also discussed the importance of developing and enforcing strict policies with severe consequences to try to limit such issues. The president of a charter school network that offers busing in Detroit provided the following overview on the topic of school bus behavior:

We've had a couple of incidents. We've had the standard stuff like a kid trying to smoke weed on a bus. We've had different, a couple different fights on a bus. We've had kids trying to throw stuff out the window on the road, but every time, we've handled it the way like, okay, so this is your warning, this is what you're in jeopardy of losing, we work through it, we handle it around like the bus driver reports to the principal, it follows a very specific process.

The director of operations at a New Orleans-based network described the bus as an extension of the school building, emphasizing the importance of having consistent expectations for behavior and associated discipline policies on the bus and at school, which, in their schools, included the possibility of being suspended for something that happens on the bus ride.

One of the ways in which charter schools have attempted to reduce the likelihood of behavioral incidents on the bus is by hiring bus attendants. This is standard practice for yellow buses used to transport students attending DPSCD schools. For some charter schools, especially in New Orleans and Detroit where all transportation expenses come directly from their own budgets, paying for an additional staff person to ride the bus may be cost-prohibitive. Instead, some charter schools 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 be recognized by students as a formal part of the school community. The CEO of a group of three charter schools operating in New Orleans explained her strategy to train bus drivers:

The schools themselves, their relationship to the bus company is super important. One, we like to meet all the bus drivers. We train them ourselves for a morning about the expectations we have. We want to make sure our bus drivers, like 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 for them to stay at the school for breakfast duty to they can be "embedded in the culture" and "not just the person who rides the bus." This is a person who works at the school.

DIFFICULTIES WITH BUS COMPANIES

Efforts to integrate bus drivers into the school community notwithstanding, charter school personnel cited substantial challenges with the quality and responsiveness of the bus companies and the drivers they employed. Issues of unreliable drivers and frequent bus breakdowns are commonplace across cities. One New Orleans charter school leader spoke about having had “some lackey bus drivers” and another leader in Detroit described managing the human resources side of busing as “fairly all-consuming.” She elaborated, “This past Sunday we had a bus driver quit, because as a school, we're not that sexy of a job for a bus driver, unless they have supplemental income, or unless they're a multifaceted person that can do different things....We blow through bus drivers really quick.” Interview participants in New York felt the least empowered to address issues with drivers and bus companies given their lack of involvement in contract negotiations. Conversely, charter school personnel in New Orleans and Detroit discussed using their leverage with contracting to “get rid of bus drivers...tell the companies that [a] person can't work with our kids anymore or our families because they were rude.”

BENEFITS AND DISADVANTAGES OF BUSES

Charter school personnel expressed a range of perspectives on the drawbacks and benefits of busing for students and parents specifically. They also described some of the other implications of providing busing for their school operations. Multiple charter school leaders found the loss of parent contact because of busing to be one important disadvantage of having students take yellow buses to school. Interview participants described busing as “creating a distance from parents” and “causing a disruption in the relationship with parents” since the carpool line may be the only time school leaders and teachers can interact with parents.

Even among those who support busing, the amount of time that some students spent traveling to and from school is seen as cause for some concern. One director of operations for a charter school in New York estimated that some middle school students might travel as far as “an hour and some change” on the bus. Another charter leader in New Orleans reflected on the implications of the transportation policy for students who travel farthest: “I think that probably the worst part for families is when kids are on the bus for a long time, the buses are not air-conditioned, so this month [August] is pretty terrible to be a kid who's riding the bus for an hour each day.” Yet, several participants were also quick to point out that longer bus rides could be a positive for families, especially if they served as a form of free child care for parents who are working and cannot get home earlier.

Finally, the attendance benefits of providing busing to students was an argument that charter school leaders in both Detroit and New Orleans highlighted when describing their perspectives on

student transportation and decisions about which services to provide. One COO of a large network in Detroit that does not offer busing acknowledged the tight linkage between transportation availability and student attendance, particularly in a place like Detroit where weather is an influential factor. He stated: “You can get high absenteeism just because they [parents] don’t want their little one walking 10 blocks in the cold or in the rain or the car breaks down, and you may not see a student for three days while it’s getting fixed. Things like that are a high impact on attendance, which then, as you know, has impact on student outcomes. That’s tying the transportation issue to the actual student outcome objective that we’re all here for.” The idea that busing would reduce lateness and absences was confirmed by charter leaders in Detroit and New Orleans whose schools did provide yellow bus service. One New Orleans charter leader recounted a decision to start school an hour later to encourage more families to take the bus rather than be driven to school—a decision that paid off with a decline in lateness because of higher bus ridership.

Costs Associated with Student Transportation

Student transportation is a demanding and expensive enterprise. Many of the challenges that district and charter school personnel identified have high associated costs. Some costs occur purely in the provision of student transportation, such as contracting with bus companies and paying for staff to manage day-to-day operations. Other costs emerge as school leaders look for ways to respond to transportation issues like hiring bus attendants to monitor student behavior or paying for transit cards when buses are not provided on certain days. Charter school leaders faced with budget pressures have pursued a range of strategies to try to contain transportation costs while ensuring that students get to school safely.

District-Level Costs

Special education transportation is unquestionably the largest transportation cost for districts. Students with disabilities may receive a range of bus services, including door-to-door transport, based on the needs specified in their individualized education plan. District administrators in New York and Detroit underscored the budget implications of such personalized busing and discussed a number of proposals to try to reduce them. In New York, for example, where students with special education classifications made up 13.3 percent of the total public school population in 2016–17 but accounted for 75.4 percent of the transportation budget,³ administrators mentioned efforts to try to encourage more “mainstreaming” of students on buses serving general education students. They also planned to discuss

special education transportation in contract renegotiations with general bus service providers. For their part, Detroit officials expressed interest in moving toward more neighborhood assignments for students with disabilities, a practice they felt would benefit students educationally and reduce special education transportation costs.

Costs for Charter Schools

Student transportation policies in each city (and state) set the basic parameters for the types of student transportation costs that charter schools might incur. In New York, for example, yellow bus services and MetroCards are paid for out of the NYCDOE's budget. Conversely, charter schools in New Orleans and Detroit receive no additional per pupil allocation to cover transportation expenses. Therefore, the costs associated with transportation in New Orleans and for the few Detroit charter schools that opt to provide it for students are different and much larger than those for charter schools in New York.

SCHOOL BUSES

Charter school leaders approach student transportation in a variety of ways in New Orleans and Detroit, employing different tactics to balance quality service, cost, and efficiency. Some Detroit charter school networks 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 both New Orleans and Detroit is to purchase a small fleet of buses, a strategy that offers maximum control and unrestricted use of vehicles but additional demands, including bus maintenance. 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.

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. One senior administrator at a charter school network in Detroit described the implications of having to pay for busing at one school in the network to ensure sufficient student enrollment. He compared that school's ability to pay teachers higher salaries and recruit "good talent" with another school in the network in a

location did not necessitate buses:

When you're spending hundreds of thousand dollars on transportation at one versus the other, it's been much easier to find room in the budget to pay teachers up the different stages in the teacher career pathway when they've earned it at a school without busing versus one with busing. That's just a management trade-off we made. We had to make that because otherwise we had a really difficult time with enrollment. That's just something you have to do.

The founder of another set of two charter schools in Detroit who used private donations to cover the cost of purchasing buses summarized the trade-off as follows: "When someone writes a \$20,000.00 check, that could go to the classroom, or that could go to a bus, it becomes a push and pull. It certainly wasn't like a grant for busing or anything like that. It was a \$50.00 gift here, a \$5,000.00 gift here, a \$1,000 gift here, and just doing our best to juggle it, knowing that the parties were giving access to kids to school that needed it."

PERSPECTIVES ON PAYING FOR SCHOOL BUSES

In spite of significant expense and the trade-offs that had to be made to pay for busing, most of the charter school personnel in New Orleans and Detroit whose schools did offer yellow bus service found it to be a worthwhile expenditure. Apart from the benefits in terms of filling available seats, interview participants linked transportation to questions of equity in school choice. Charter leaders understood the provision of school buses as necessary to guarantee that all families, regardless of income and access to cars, could attend their schools. The charter school personnel in Detroit in particular, expressed a strong commitment to educational equity and access when justifying their decisions to pay for busing when none was required by law.

The founder of a charter school network in Detroit whose schools have an explicit equity focus summed up her perspective as follows:

For me, it's very much an access decision. I do not want any barriers to stand in the way of our kids being able to stay as students in our schools. I know that transience of kids is one of the most negative influences of a child's education....In order for kids to be at school, in a caring environment, every single day, the best way of ensuring that is by providing consistent access to transportation at stops that are in their neighborhoods.

Another charter leader in Detroit described the decision to purchase buses as consistent with the overall goal of her schools: "The mission and focus of our schools, I would describe it as committed to an equitable education for all kids, regardless of where they live....We wanted to make sure that we were...doing everything we could to remove obstacles for our kids and families to get to our school. That was a big, pushing component for the initial bus."

In New Orleans, transportation and access were seen as deeply interconnected. The full sample of interview participants from New Orleans affirmed the view that school choice could not occur without busing. A senior administrator in the RSD captured this belief stating, “If you are going to say you have school choice, it is somewhat meaningless if parents can’t get to the schools they are choosing. I do think school choice and the requirement to provide transportation go hand in hand....For students who are more vulnerable, they might not have a car, the parents don’t have flexible jobs, they don’t have money for transportation. Not providing it essentially negates choice.” In the end, school leaders recognized the trade-offs that paying for buses required but shared one New Orleans’ participants’ position that “I’m on that side that that is worth the money it costs to provide busing, that access is more important to me than the money.”

Responses to High Busing Costs

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

One commonly used strategy to minimize transportation costs among charter schools in New Orleans was tiering. When schools tier, they use the same bus to pick up kids 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:

Over the years we’ve thought through ways to make that cheaper....Both of our schools tier in. Basically that means three buses go out and pick up a group of kids, drop them off early. A group of kids gets there [at a school] at 7:45 and then that’s before school starts. Those same buses go back out and up more kids and get them back here by 8:10. Then the doors open at 8 for everybody, if you’re a car rider, if you’re a walker, you’re a busser. Then by 8:15 everybody is in the building. And that’s the same thing that happens in the afternoon. You’re getting paid per bus, so let’s say there are nine buses, instead you actually only have six. The bus company is going to give you a break on how much. You are only paying for six but they’re doing, three of them are doing two routes.

Though most participants discussed tiering within a single school, some also mentioned attempting to tier across different schools within the same charter network. If start times can be coordinated and the geographic distances are manageable, sharing buses across schools is an option that could help with cost containment. At the same time, charter personnel identified some potential challenges with cross-school tiering given questions like school calendars and timing, and they expressed significant

reservations about the idea of tiering with schools from a different CMO. An OPSB administrator who had previously run operations at a charter network in the city of New Orleans recounted his understanding of pitfalls of buses shared across CMOs: “More often than not that idea or thought has failed repeatedly because it gets down to someone having to give on what time their school starts or what time it goes out or the days they’re in session. People up to this point have not been overwhelmingly willing to change the design of their program to save a little bit on transportation.”

“For students who are more vulnerable, they might not have a car, the parents don’t have flexible jobs, they don’t have money for transportation. Not providing it essentially negates choice.”

GREATER RELIANCE ON PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

In New Orleans, where transportation costs were both highly politicized and significant for nearly all of the schools in the city, charter school leaders considered a number of other options to reduce expenses, even if they did not proceed with implementing them. For example, one charter leader discussed pursuing a plan to combine public transportation with yellow bus service for students in a high-demand high school in her network, one approach that could produce some costs savings. Other participants mentioned the possibility of cutting the number of bus routes, which could reduce costs but likely increase students’ time spent on the bus. Contract renegotiation or rebidding was another strategy that charter school leaders identified as a particularly effective way to address costs. One former director of operations of a charter network highlighted this option:

The other way the school can save money of course is by changing vendors or better negotiation with the vendor. If you’re talking about—if you ask me who’s a quality provider of the busing in the city, I would say it’s probably one of the national companies here that has very new buses with air conditioning and top of the line—they’ve invested a lot of money in their buses. Other companies have buses that are 15 years old or 10 years old. They may not have air conditioning, but it might be \$50 a day cheaper, which in the long run of things, 10 grand a year and multiplied by seven or eight buses, that gets you another 80 grand. You can get another teacher.

REDUCE ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

To pay for yellow bus service for students attending charter schools in New Orleans and Detroit, charter operators discussed efforts to limit costs directly associated with school transportation. They also looked for ways to reduce other expenditures to find sufficient funds in their annual school budgets

and raise private money to cover transportation costs. 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. She said,

I don't make \$400,000.00 a year, or \$300,000.00 or \$200,000.00. 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 focus on talent. It's the primary driver of everything in our organization. I offer a lot of paid time-off, better benefits, more flexible scheduling for a lot of my people, to make up for not having super high salaries. I have great people that work at [CMO], but they work at [CMO] because they're committed to the mission, and they still make a good living....I can afford it [providing busing], because I'm not taking money out of the schools to pay significantly high central office salary.

Another Detroit-based charter director described her successful efforts to find philanthropic money to pay for busing. She used the message of transportation as a means to equity via school choice to appeal to donors: "Our kids need to get to school. We serve a hundred percent kids in poverty, a hundred percent kids of color....At [school name], where we raised the money to buy the buses, that's our proposition. I think we're really good at it. We have people from which we can pull and say, don't you think our kids need a great school? Well, if this bussing service goes away, they don't get it." Confronted with high transportation expenses and budgetary constraints, charter school operators look for innovative ways to run high-quality schools that meet the range of students' and families' needs, including free transportation to and from school.

OTHER EXPENSES

Charter schools that are not responsible for the cost of student transportation are spared significant expenses relative to their counterparts in other cities who must fund transportation themselves. At the same time, there are costs outside of bus contracts that schools face. In New York, transportation-related expenses that OPT does not cover include training and salaries for bus attendants and MetroCards for students on days when yellow buses are not available because NYCDOE district schools are not in session. School leaders in New Orleans and Detroit lamented not being able to hire bus attendants, calling it "cost prohibitive" given the cost of busing itself. Though charter school personnel in New York agree that bus attendants are a costly budget item, those who chose to hire them also believe they are important.

One operations director at an NYC network hired bus attendants after receiving phone calls from people in the neighborhood where the school was located describing students' bad behavior on the bus. He recounted having to negotiate multiple layers of bureaucracy to learn about the mandated procedures to get bus attendants certified and the hundreds of dollars per attendant for training and

certification, on top of their salary. “The training costs, back in 2014, it cost \$250 or so. Now it costs \$300. Then, after that, we pay them for the hours of training that they went through, and then I think reimburse them \$135 or whatever it is that the DOE charges for fingerprinting. Twelve dollars is now the starting hourly rate, and every year they get a \$0.25 increase.” Another charter school leader estimated that her network spends \$5,000 a year on training bus attendants alone.

Yellow bus service is not provided by OPT on days when NYCDOE schools are closed. Charter schools determine their own academic calendars and, for many years, they had to pay for students’ MetroCards or pay for buses out of pocket when district schools were not open. In one example, a charter leader in New York said her school starts three weeks before the NYCDOE begins, resulting in high costs for MetroCards and angry parents whose kids qualify for busing but are not yet getting services. Ultimately, after significant lobbying efforts coordinated by the New York City Charter Center, the New York City Council passed a bill to provide MetroCard coverage for the gap between the beginning of the district school year and individual charters’ start dates thereby eliminating this cost to charter schools.

Transportation and Student Recruitment

Student transportation has cost and human resource implications for schools and presents logistical challenges at the school and district levels. Transportation policies and school-based decisions about which type of transportation to offer, if any, also influence and are influenced by student recruitment considerations. Interviews with district and charter school leaders and authorizers underscored the significance of school location and public transportation accessibility for choices about transportation provision and about student recruitment approaches charter schools in all three cities use.

Detroit

The relationship between school location, student recruitment, and transportation was most evident in interviews with charter leaders and authorizers in Detroit, where a competitive educational marketplace creates extensive enrollment pressures for all schools, charters, and DPSCD alike. In theory, student transportation policies are determined entirely by the charter schools or CMO’s and cannot be required by the state or the charter authorizer. Yet, with low rates of car ownership and poor public transportation infrastructure, student transportation, or the likelihood that enough students will be able to get to a particular school, become important considerations when authorizers are evaluating

charter school applications and renewals. A representative from one of the largest charter authorizers in the state of Michigan explained how transportation factors into their evaluation processes in light of the conditions in Detroit:

I think the authorizers right now are looking to see that there's a well thought out plan in place in the application and that a child who is enrolled through the open enrollment process is not denied enrollment because of transportation....It's an increasingly competitive environment in two respects. First for kids and second for charters. From the perspective of an authorizer, if there was a school that I would consider not having thought through transportation in your charter application that would work against you in the application process, which is going to affect the decision on whether or not you get the charter. That and, in a city like Detroit, it's just getting crowded. There's a lot of choice. You kind of need to be competitive.

In light of the high stakes of student transportation for charter schools in Detroit—in terms of costs and chances of getting a charter application approved or renewed—school location becomes a critical issue. If a school is located in an area with a large number of families or in a central business hub, it may be less dependent on yellow buses to attract and enroll enough students. Conversely, operating a school in a more remote area that could benefit from having a new high-quality educational option nearby may be a riskier endeavor for charter operators, especially if providing student transportation becomes essential. A senior administrator in a Detroit-based charter network that has a mix of schools, some of which provide busing and others that do not, explained his network's calculus in determining whether to pay for student transportation: "So, if there is a building in a far off, industrialized part of the city with no houses nearby, and there is no transportation, it is going to be really hard to attract families. Maybe if there was also a business hub there, but we still don't have transportation. And it is also important for attracting good teachers and staff." These same factors also affect whether charter operators are willing to accept requests to open new schools or turn around persistently failing ones. Neighborhood characteristics, specifically population and accessibility, are powerful determinants, as one charter operator who manages turnaround schools related: "If we were to get to the east side [of Detroit], or were going to investigate an eastside high school option, great, there's a demand in the area for it, but are scholars going to be actually able to take advantage of that high school that we're operating without us having to pay thousands and thousands of dollars of bus transportation or van transportation or whatever?" In essence, charter schools in Detroit must balance mission, cost, and ability to recruit students when making decisions about student transportation.

The high costs of taking on student transportation in Detroit are partly offset by its effectiveness as a recruitment tool. Interview participants described parents almost immediately asking if busing was provided upon initial contact. "One of the first questions that families usually ask of our schools is do you provide bus transportation? It's often families [who] are trying to get to the highest-quality schools

but have challenges with transportation,” one charter leader recounted. Another participant understood parents’ desire for transportation both in terms of the convenience and the sense of security it gave them: “Families will tell you it’s very important to them. They know that their children are safe that in the winter, they’re warm, that they will get from point A to point B, and then back home again. It is very important for families. They don’t worry about their kids when they’re picked up. It’s just a much different feel.”

The Detroit-based charter operators, whose decision to offer transportation stemmed directly from their commitment to equity and access, voiced another perspective on the topic of transportation. In the context of poor public transportation and vast geographic distances, they saw other schools’ and charter networks’ decisions to not provide busing as a mechanism to screen the students who could attend their schools. The founder of one group of charter schools articulated this view, one that several interview participants shared: “I think, they position themselves more as destination schools, so there’s an ability to elevate their status, because the level of access that is afforded for that school is basically if a parent can drive their child there. If you’re located in Midtown on the water or have a campus next to Wayne State University, or something like that, the only way you’re getting there is if your parent’s [drive] you.” Regardless of whether their schools provided transportation, all charter school personnel and authorizers interviewed from Detroit understood that without transportation schools would either “be dominated by neighborhood kids because they can walk” or only accessible to families who could get a child there by car.

New Orleans

Even in New Orleans, where bus service is mandatory for almost all schools, charter representatives emphasized the salience of a school’s geographic location for strategic decisions around recruitment. According to a senior official at OPSB, before the city moved to a unified enrollment system in 2012, schools were “very purposeful about where they were recruiting from because of transportation....It was ‘I want kids that are close to my school so that they can walk to school and so that I don’t have to pay for busing.’” The incentives change with the introduction of centralized enrollment because the barriers for families to apply to all schools were removed and busing expanded for most schools. Yet, a small number of OPSB charter schools have not yet implemented busing, which many interview participants from New Orleans view as a reflection of their desire to keep “certain types of kids” out of their school.

Moreover, even among the charter schools that are required to provide transportation, there is variation in how generous their services are. This has implications for which schools families can choose given their financial or other constraints. One official from the RSD provided an overview of how variation in bus routes can influence choices: “I think different schools do a better job and worse job of making convenient bus routes for families, so that can be a bone of contention....I think schools can be more or less accommodating and that impacts how much families want to go to that school.” Another RSD senior administrator spoke more pointedly about schools just barely fulfilling their legal obligation to provide student transportation and what that means for school choice:

The requirement to provide transportation, it is not super detailed. There is the spirit of the law and letter of the law. There are some schools [that] follow the letter of the law and do the minimum in terms of transportation, for example they will have only one bus stop in New Orleans East. New Orleans East is enormous. If you are giving families one bus stop that’s nowhere near their home, that’s not providing transportation. Technically, you are but are you really? There are schools that get as close to the line...as they can get.

In the end, the sentiment in New Orleans is that “it’s hard to separate choice from transportation.”

New York City

School siting decisions and proximity to public transit hubs was a topic of keen interest to charter school operators in New York. Like New Orleans and Detroit, charter schools faced significant competition from district schools and other charters to reach desired enrollment. The NYCDOE policies limiting eligibility for yellow bus service to students below seventh grade means that schools more easily accessible by public transportation have an easier time attracting students. Thus, even without having to bear most of the financial burden of providing transportation, issues of how far students have to travel to get to school and how convenient the school is for parents—by foot, car, or public transportation, are central concerns of New York charter schools. One director of operations attributed the difficulties that one school in his network has experienced with enrollment to its location and the associated transportation barriers: “One of the reasons that we’re not [oversubscribed] is because of transportation. Parents accept the seat, and then they go to where the school is and they’re like, ‘Whoa, this is too far.’ After you get off the train you have to take the bus for 15 minutes.”

Transportation and accessibility also factor into charter networks’ decisions about opening new schools. Similar to Detroit, a centrally located school helps New York charter operators with student recruitment as well as their ability to attract teachers and staff. One school director with schools in the Bronx explained how she evaluates whether to pursue another school building:

We look at geographical location first to see that it's far away enough from other schools....If it's close to public transportation, that's wonderful. That's actually more for staff because we need our staff to be able to get there. Lots of people in the Bronx also drive so the thought is that eventually we will get to a place where the children can either walk or there'd be enough parents that are driving anyways that they can drive their kids.

Her final comment reveals the desire to move away from reliance on busing and MetroCards and toward more neighborhood recruitment. Significantly, charter leaders in all three cities made statements to this effect, both when discussing ways to reduce costs and transportation challenges and describing recruitment methods. This preference for relying on local recruitment—without student transportation provided—was most consistently identified by New York charter school participants as a goal and an anticipated direction for the future of their schools and networks.

Neighborhood-Based Recruitment as a Cost-Reduction Strategy

Despite their commitment to serving all students who wish to attend their schools, especially in New Orleans where the unified application system facilitated such citywide choice, charter leaders in New York, New Orleans, and Detroit cited focusing on more neighborhood-based recruitment of students as a response to high costs and other transportation challenges. One New Orleans-based charter operator explained her network's rationale to pursue this strategy: "Now that most of our schools are in their permanent homes, their forever homes, we are working on our end to make sure that the students we are recruiting are from the neighborhood, because I think that's sort of a long game. Our transportation costs will go down if kids in the neighborhood come to our schools." Another charter leader in New York described the benefits of "phasing out busing" and enrolling greater numbers of students from the immediate neighborhood in terms of eliminating some "negative externalities." He said,

We don't have...the behavior issues on the bus that can spill into the school and impact the school culture. Right? Also, we don't have to pay for bus matrons, and then another thing that you, that we are anticipating when we move, even before we get rid of busing, just the fact that we're moving to a new place, the school becomes more of a neighborhood school, and we have more students from the local area attending the school, rather than students [who] are coming from super far.

Similarly, in Detroit, where some charter schools offer yellow bus service only by necessity to ensure adequate enrollment rather than to ensure equity, finding school buildings in more centrally located areas is a goal to eliminate the need for expensive busing.

Detroit-based charter operators saw other schools' and charter networks' decisions to not provide busing as a mechanism to screen the students who could attend their schools.

Relatedly, New York City–based charter leaders were vocal about their goal of functioning as neighborhood schools, which was consistent with their interest in moving away from busing. One school leader described the mission of her school and CMO “to service the South Bronx since it is such a high need area....That is our geographical focus....The thought is there is enough need in the South Bronx that we can continue to open schools here until children are serviced properly. It’s not so much about getting rid of busing or cost savings. It’s just that we want to blanket this neighborhood until kids have appropriate options for school.” This perspective, though distinct from those shared by charter operators in New Orleans and Detroit who embraced busing as an equity level and were committed to citywide choice, demonstrates a different take on how educational equity might be pursued in a choice-rich context.

Conclusions

Student transportation policy can have important implications for the extent to which families can engage in school choice. Travel time, distance to school, safety en route to school, the availability of busing and transportation costs may all influence whether families can consider sending children to school outside of their neighborhood. Transportation policies also play a role in how schools operate, including recruitment strategies, budgeting and even decisions about whether to open new schools. Yet, until recently, the relationship between student transportation policy and school choice was left largely unexplored.

This study brought together perspectives of district administrators, charter school personnel, authorizers, and key stakeholders in three choice-rich districts with distinct transportation and school choice landscapes. New Orleans, New York, and Detroit offer diversity in the size of the charter sector, governance structures for charters and transportation, and the requirements around providing transportation to students in charter schools generally. Interviews revealed a host of challenges associated with managing and implementing student transportation policies common among these districts. At the same time, site-specific conditions produce unique challenges that district and charter representatives described in detail. The high costs of paying for student transportation was another

unifying theme across cities, yet district and school leaders have developed a range of different innovations and responses. Finally, transportation policies and practices directly impact student recruitment in these three cities. Interview participants described the influence of school location and public transportation accessibility in their schools' transportation work and shared various, sometimes competing, perspectives about the best ways to adapt their transportation and recruitment practices to fulfill their educational mission.

Beyond the salience of transportation-related costs and recruitment considerations, a number of other factors emerged as influential in the student transportation decisions taken at the district, authorizer, CMO or school level. The role of equity concerns in transportation decisions, or in the rationale provided for decisions related to student transportation, was highly varied based on the transportation policy context and the individual leader's or school's commitment to equity in educational access. Nearly all interview participants from New Orleans fiercely defended the expansive transportation policy on equity grounds. In fact, charter school leaders in New Orleans and Detroit whose schools provided buses justified the costs of doing so explicitly in terms of achieving equity goals. Yet none of the district or charter school representatives from New York raised equity as a transportation-relevant issue. Student transportation can function as a barrier or be used to facilitate access. Future research should more deeply examine how charter school leaders and stakeholders define equity in the context of school choice and what role student transportation plays in those definitions. Such analyses would add relevant insight to ongoing debates about choice, access, and equity more broadly.

There are some schools [that] follow the letter of the law and do the minimum in terms of transportation, for example they will have only one bus stop in New Orleans East. New Orleans East is enormous.

The degree of centralization of student transportation services currently in place and perspectives on the extent to which student transportation should be centralized was as another key dimension of difference across sites. Views on the desirability and potential efficiency of centralized student transportation services may be strongly related to feelings about autonomy. Charter school operators' experiences with and views on the benefits and drawbacks of coordinated transportation services should be further investigated. In particular, given advocates' strong emphasis on the importance of

charter school leaders' autonomy, understanding the conditions under which these leaders believe the advantages of lost autonomy outweigh the disadvantages would be valuable for policymakers and district administrators working in changing district structures.

Finally, all three of the cities profiled in this report are undergoing important changes in school choice policy and transportation. The evolution of their transportation policies should be followed closely. In New Orleans, charter schools previously not required to provide student transportation will be phasing in these services. Researchers should study how these schools adjust their budgets and other operations to accommodate this new cost and operational demands and examine the role that OPSB plays in supporting this transition. In Detroit, the mayor's transportation proposal has gotten significant public attention but has yet to be implemented. Studies of how a city like Detroit is using transportation as part of a large strategic plan aimed to address years of economic and education decline are much needed. Last, special education transportation is in need of reform—in New York City and elsewhere—to solve issues of cost and the separation of students with disabilities from the general education student population. Initiatives on the part of district leaders and advocates to respond to transportation challenges in all of these areas should be monitored and studied empirically by researchers and policymakers concerned with providing students with safe, adequate transportation to schools of their choice.

The next generation of school choice research requires new tools to better understand how school choice policies are working, for whom, and what mechanisms contribute to (or constrain) their effectiveness as levers for educational opportunity and success. Student transportation offers a useful lens through which to analyze the conditions under which families in choice-rich districts are making choices and how multiple policies influence district and school leaders' operational decisions. Whether unrestricted school choice can happen in the absence of full student transportation remains to be seen. However, better attention could be paid to student transportation to improve empirical and conceptual understandings of school choice and its outcomes.

Notes

¹ For a more complete discussion of the school choice offerings in New York City, Detroit and New Orleans, see Urban Institute Student Transportation Working Group (2017).

² Sarah Maslin Nir and Brian M. Rosenthal, “‘Overcrowding’ Is Not at the Root of Delays, Subway Chief Says,” *New York Times*, February 20, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/20/nyregion/subway-delays-overcrowding.html>.

³ “School Based Expenditure Reports School Year 2016–2017 Citywide,” NYCDOE, accessed October 9, 2018, https://www.nycenet.edu/offices/d_chanc_oper/budget/exp01/y2016_2017/function.asp?R=2.

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