



# SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION POLICIES IN DETROIT





## **AUTHORS**

Jeremy Singer

Ben Pogodzinski

Sarah Winchell Lenhoff

Walter Cook

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## **RESEARCH NOTE**

This research used data collected and maintained by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI). Results, information, and opinions solely represent the analysis, information, and opinions of the authors and are not endorsed by – or reflect the views or positions of – grantors, MDE, and CEPI or any employee thereof. This research also used data collected and maintained by the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD). Results, information, and opinions solely represent the analysis, information, and opinions of the authors and are not endorsed by – or reflect the views or positions of – grantors, DPSCD, or any employee thereof.

## **DETROIT EDUCATION RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP**

The Detroit Education Research Partnership is a collaboration between researchers at Wayne State University's College of Education and a constellation of community partners interested in improving Detroit schools. We orient our work around the pressing policy needs of the Detroit education community, and we seek to inform improvement in the stability and engagement of school experiences for Detroit youth. We believe that education reform in other places has important lessons for our collective work in Detroit, but that any solution for Detroit will have to respond to the unique strengths and needs of our community. Using continuous improvement methods, we work in partnership with schools, community organizations, and policymakers to identify the key problems that impede improvement in Detroit schools. We then collaboratively determine what stakeholders need to know to solve those problems and design research studies to collect, interpret, and disseminate that information to the audiences that need it most. Learn more about our work and provide your input at <https://education.wayne.edu/detroit-education-research-partnership>.

## **REFERENCE FOR THIS REPORT**

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# SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION POLICIES IN DETROIT

## COLLABORATIVE POLICY RESEARCH

This research is the result of a collaboration between Wayne State University's College of Education and a constellation of community partners interested in improving Detroit schools, called the Detroit Education Research Partnership. We orient our work around the pressing policy needs of the Detroit education community, and we seek to inform the design of local educational reforms. We believe that education reform in other places has important lessons for our collective work in Detroit, but that any solution for Detroit will have to respond to the unique strengths and needs of our community.

## SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION IN THE MOTOR CITY

School transportation policies have important implications for educational equity and outcomes. Transportation is especially relevant to (a) student enrollment patterns in the context of school choice, and (b) student attendance in the context of high rates of chronic absenteeism. In Detroit's school choice-rich context, whether students have reliable access to transportation shapes what schools they can reasonably choose. In addition, Detroit has the highest rates of chronic absenteeism of any major city, and a lack of safe and reliable transportation contributes to this problem. Yet, providing school transportation is costly and logistically complex, especially in a large city with an uneven geographic distribution of schools, a fragmented school governance landscape, and high levels of school choice.

In this policy report, we present the results of a survey about transit policies for nearly all schools serving Detroit students, both in the city and in the metropolitan Detroit suburbs. Our aim is to describe the transportation policy context in greater detail. Given the cost and complexity of school transportation, policymakers face dilemmas in balancing the goals of maximizing students' ability to *choose among all schools* and ensuring that students can *reliably get to one school*.

## MAJOR FINDINGS

- A patchwork of different school transportation policies exist in Detroit, with some schools offering traditional school busing, some offering shuttle-style buses, some offering subsidized public transportation, and many offering no transportation at all.
- DPSCD offers transportation to K-8 students who attend their assigned neighborhood boundary school and live 0.75 miles or farther from that school (with some exceptions), and as a result about 69% of K-8 DPSCD students had no access to school-provided transportation. The district pays the City of Detroit to provide free public transportation on DDOT buses to all high school students.
- A plurality of charter schools within the city and a majority of charter schools and traditional public schools outside of the city offered no transportation at all for Detroit students. Among schools that did offer transportation, most had geographically-based limitations.





## INTRODUCTION

**S**chool transportation policies have important implications for educational equity and outcomes. Transportation is especially relevant to (a) student enrollment patterns in the context of school choice, and (b) student attendance in the context of high rates of chronic absenteeism. In Detroit's school choice-rich context, whether students have reliable access to transportation shapes which schools they can reasonably choose (Bell, 2009; Chingos & Blagg, 2017; Cowen et al., 2018; Jochim et al., 2014; Sattin-Bajaj, 2018). In addition, Detroit has the highest rates of chronic absenteeism of any major city (Singer et al., 2019), and a lack of safe and reliable transportation contributes to this problem (Burdick-Will et al., 2019; Gottfried, 2014). Yet, providing school transportation is costly and logistically complex, especially in a large city with an uneven geographic distribution of schools, a fragmented school governance landscape, and high levels of school choice. In this policy report, we present the results of a survey about transit policies for nearly all schools serving Detroit students, both in the city and in the metropolitan Detroit suburbs. Our aim is to describe the transportation policy context in greater detail to inform the improvement of school and city transportation policies.

A patchwork of different school transportation policies exist in Detroit, with some schools offering traditional school busing, some offering shuttle-style buses, some offering subsidized public transportation, and many offering no transportation at all. A plurality of charter schools within the city and a majority of charter schools and traditional public schools outside of the city attended by Detroit students offered no transportation at all for Detroit students. In all, about 29% of Detroit students attended schools that offered no school-based transportation. Further, in the Detroit Public School Community District (DPSCD) and among Detroit charter and suburban schools that offered transportation, most had geographically-based limitations that excluded many additional students from access to transportation.



# WHY IS SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION IN DETROIT A CHALLENGE?

## Geography and Infrastructure

Part of the reason school transportation is difficult in Detroit is that transportation systems face greater service areas to cover compared to other cities. Geographic comparisons between Detroit and other cities can be difficult because surface-level indicators (e.g. population, land area, density) do not necessarily reveal much about its relative policy and public service needs (Hill, 2015). Still, considering the city's population in relation to its built infrastructure (e.g. "feet of street per resident"), Detroit is a relatively low-density city (Linn, 2011). Further, a spatially uneven history of school closings and openings in the city further complicates the geographic landscape for school transportation, as schools are not sited responsively to the city's population distribution and density (Green et al., 2019). For example, while schools have closed throughout the city over the past two decades, many new schools have been opened in the city's downtown core (Green et al., 2019). Relatively few students live in this area of the city (Lenhoff et al., 2019), and the average student attending school downtown travels nearly 6 miles to get there (Singer et al., 2019b).

In addition, while many schools and districts turn to public transit as an important component of school transportation (Burgoyne-Allen et al., 2019), Detroit's public transportation infrastructure is in need of improvements. After the city's history of divesting in rail-based public transportation and prioritizing buses along with personal automobiles and the construction of highways (University of Detroit Mercy Transit Research Team, 2013), public transportation has become a secondary mode of transportation. 60% of households in Detroit use a personal vehicle daily or almost daily, compared to only 7% who take the bus daily or almost daily (Gerber et al., 2017). Further, with Detroit's fiscal challenges persisting into the 2000s more



intensely than in other cities that lost a significant share of their population in the latter half of the 20th century (McDonald, 2014), the city's public bus system has suffered from significant bus repair needs, scaled-back route frequency, and a poor reputation as unsafe and unreliable (Hulett, 2013; Oosting, 2012). The city has made recent investments in the bus system in line with its strategic plan for transportation (City of Detroit, 2018), such as increased bus frequency on its ten most-utilized lines (Cwiek, 2018). Still, reliable public transportation remains a challenge—and an important one, given that roughly one-third of households in Detroit do not have access to a vehicle, (Gerber et al., 2017). Less than half of car-less residents are satisfied with their transportation options (Gerber et al., 2017). In addition, 43% of Detroiters without access to a personal vehicle report that they have missed work or an appointment because they did not have a way to get there, compared to just 14% for those with access to a vehicle (Gerber et al., 2017).

### ***Policy Context***

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Public education in Detroit is characterized by high levels of school choice. Students can opt out of their residentially-assigned public school by choosing a different DPSCD school, choosing a charter school in the city, or choosing a traditional public school or charter school in the suburbs (Singer, 2020). At the end of the 2018-19 school year, about 45% of resident Detroit students attended the Detroit Public Schools Community District, 31% attended one of the nearly 100 charter schools within the city, and approximately 23% attended either a traditional public school or charter school in the suburbs. In this choice system, only 18% of resident Detroit students attended the school nearest their home residence that offers their grade (Cowen et al., 2018). Even among DPSCD students, only 39% of students attended their designated neighborhood school. Additionally, an elementary student in Detroit lived on average 2.44 miles from school, while a high school student lived an average of 3.93 miles from school. By comparison, elementary students from metro Detroit suburban districts lived on average 1.8 miles from school and high



school students lived an average of 2.5 miles from school.

Because Detroit students are served by myriad school systems, there is no uniform transportation policy to organize school sponsored busing. Collectively, a public transit system that many families consider inadequate (Sattin-Bajaj, 2018), concentrated residential poverty that leaves many families without access to reliable personal transportation (Gerber et al., 2017), a patchwork of school transportation policies, and the distribution of students across multiple and relatively far flung school systems stand to complicate any efforts to coordinate a robust transportation system via government policy or coordinated school policies.

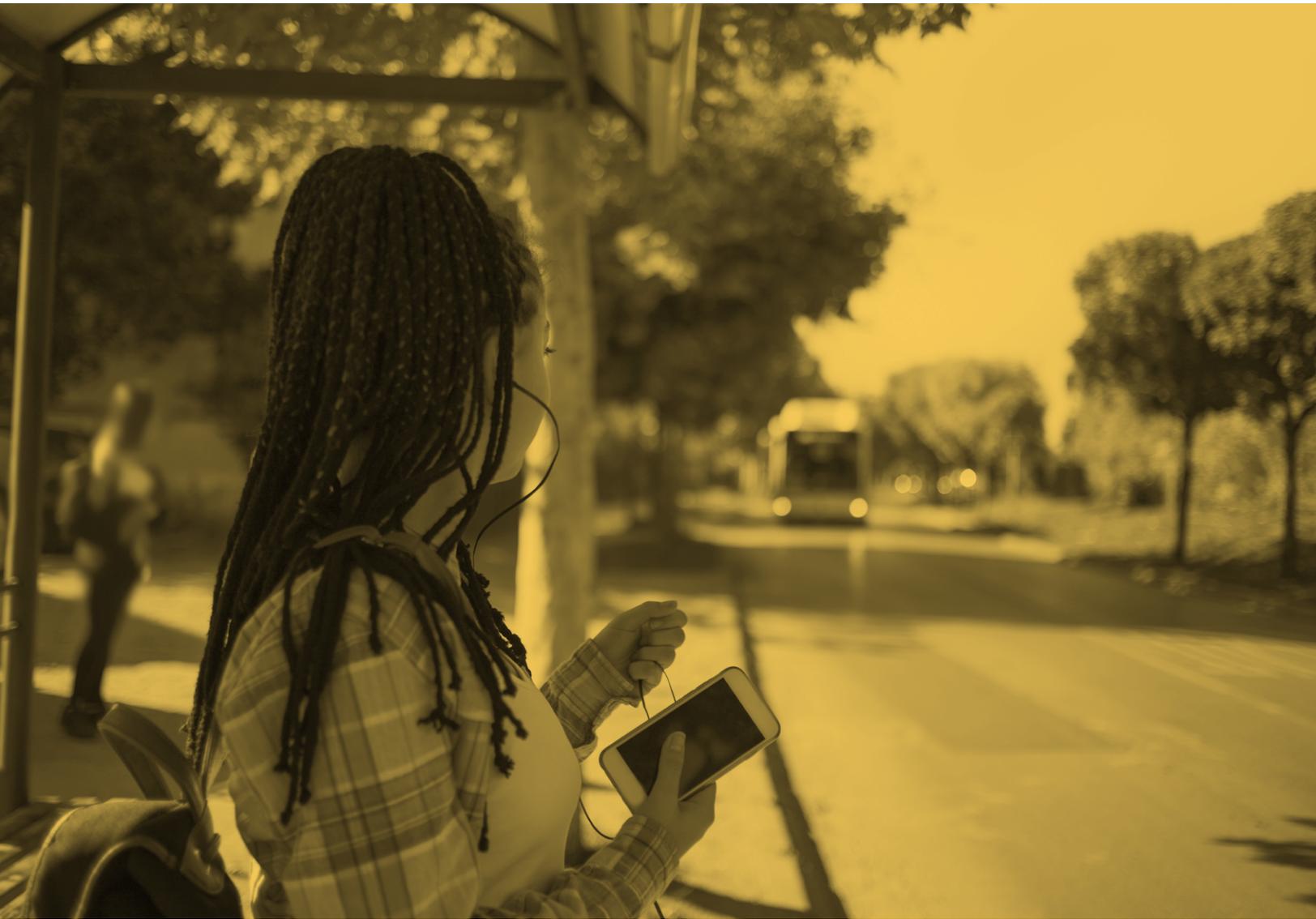
## ***Economics***

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Finally, the economics of school transportation are a significant challenge. School transportation is expensive, costing on average nearly \$1,000 per student who receives transportation services (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Even though the share of U.S. students who receive transportation services has declined over time, the total school-aged population has grown significantly, resulting in total spending on school transportation more than doubling since 1980 (Burgoyne-Allen et al., 2019). Over the past decade, local funding for districts has stagnated, and state funding is still recovering from budget cuts after the 2008 recession (Leachman et al., 2017), forcing districts to reduce transportation services or take other cost-saving measures to compensate (Burgoyne-Allen et al., 2019). Many districts also face school bus driver shortages, which can force districts to either increase pay to attract drivers or accept more limited service (Burgoyne-Allen et al., 2019). Additional costs can also come from transporting a larger population of students with special needs (Burgoyne-Allen et al., 2019). In Detroit, these economic challenges are particularly acute, given DPSCD's recent bankruptcy and restructuring (Allen Law Group, 2019), the loss of economies of scale due to fragmented school governance, Michigan's low growth in school



funding compared to other states (Arsen et al., 2019), and the high number of students who receive special education services in the city, especially in DPSCD (Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren, 2017; Detroit Public Schools Community District, 2017). The recent public health and economic crises brought on by the novel coronavirus pandemic threaten to exacerbate these funding challenges (Spangler, 2020; Turner, 2020).





# SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION POLICIES IN DETROIT

As a starting point for understanding student access to school transportation in Detroit, we collected information on transportation policies from DPSCD, along with most charter schools located in the city and most suburban public and charter schools in which at least 10 Detroit students were enrolled.<sup>1</sup> For DPSCD, we documented their transportation policies during a series of discussions with leaders in their transportation department, and we also analyzed transit eligibility rates using 2018-19 school year administrative data from the district. For Detroit charter schools and suburban charter and traditional public schools, we conducted a phone survey in Fall 2019 and asked school office staff to share details about the transportation available to Detroit students and whether there were any limitations or conditions. We conducted follow-up searches on school and district websites to clarify the information we received over the phone and to fill in missing information when possible. Table 1 shows the number of schools from which we collected information and the number of Detroit students who were enrolled in those schools in 2018-19.

**Table 1:** Schools Included in Survey (Spring 2019 Enrollment Data)<sup>1</sup>

	DPSCD	DETROIT CHARTER	SUBURBAN CHARTER <sup>2</sup>	SUBURBAN PUBLIC <sup>2</sup>
<b># Schools Surveyed (% of total)</b>	95 (100%)	73 (92%)	55 (83%)	107 (96%)
<b># of Students in Surveyed Schools (% of total)</b>	46,820 (100%)	27,941 (93%)	11,559 (85%)	8,225 (99%)

<sup>1</sup>We used enrollment data collected in Spring 2019, because they were the most recent data available when we conducted our survey (Fall 2019) that allowed us to identify Detroit resident students at the school-level. We excluded virtual schools and strict discipline academies, and center-based special education schools.

<sup>2</sup>Enrolling at least 10 Detroit students.

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<sup>1</sup> We excluded virtual schools, strict discipline academies, and center-based special education schools.



We describe four different types of transportation policies: (1) traditional school busing, (2) school bus shuttles, (3) subsidized public transportation, and (4) no transportation provided. While there are a variety of conditions and variations for each of these policy types, these general categories help describe the basic approaches that school districts take. Table 2 includes a summary of each type and common variations we observed. In all, about 29% of Detroit students attended a school that offered no transportation (Table 3). As we

**Table 2:** Types of School Transportation Policies

 <b>TRADITIONAL SCHOOL BUSING</b>	 <b>SCHOOL BUS SHUTTLES</b>	 <b>SUBSIDIZED PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION</b>	 <b>NO TRANSPORTATION OFFERED</b>
<p><b>Description of Policy;</b> The school bus picks up students at bus stops that are based on students' residential addresses.</p>	<p><b>Description of Policy;</b> The school bus takes a pre-specified route with stops where students can board the bus.</p>	<p><b>Description of Policy;</b> The school pays for free access to public transportation passes (e.g. Detroit Department of Transportation buses).</p>	<p><b>Description of Policy;</b> The school does not provide any form of transportation.</p>
<p><b>Common Variations or Conditions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Door-to-door pick up or stops within walking distance of a student's home.</li> <li>• Limited to students living a certain distance away from the school, or within a certain geographic area.</li> <li>• Limited number of total spots offered.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Common Variations or Conditions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One route or multiple regionally-based routes.</li> <li>• Transportation between schools.</li> <li>• Stops at specified cross-streets or at landmarks or businesses.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Common Variations or Conditions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students use their school-issued IDs to ride the bus.</li> <li>• School pays for and distributes monthly bus passes.</li> </ul>	

**Table 3:** Total Number of Detroit Schools and Students by Transportation Policy Type

	 <b>TRADITIONAL SCHOOL BUSING</b>	 <b>SCHOOL BUS SHUTTLES</b>	 <b>SUBSIDIZED PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION</b>	 <b>NO TRANSPORTATION OFFERED</b>
<p><b># Schools Surveyed (% of total)</b></p>	<p>95 (29%)</p>	<p>42 (13%)</p>	<p>26 (8%)</p>	<p>167 (50%)</p>
<p><b># of Students in Surveyed Schools (% of total)</b></p>	<p>40,313 (43%)</p>	<p>13,155 (14%)</p>	<p>13,475 (14%)</p>	<p>27,602 (29%)</p>

Note: We used enrollment data collected in Spring 2019, because they were the most recent data available when we conducted our survey (Fall 2019) that allowed us to identify Detroit resident students at the school-level. We excluded virtual schools and strict discipline academies, and center-based special education schools. These figures only represent the category of transportation policies offered. They do not represent the number of students eligible for transportation or who have practical access to those transportation options, nor do they reflect transportation usage. Figures also do not account for special transportation accommodation offered to students with individualized education plans (IEPs). Schools are counted based on the primary school transportation policy offered. Some DPSCD and charter schools offered multiple types; for example, 7 DPSCD elementary-middle schools are also served by the city's GOAL Line.



review below, most schools that offered transportation had geographically-based limitations that excluded many additional students from access to transportation.

**“ In all, about 29% of Detroit students attended a school that offered no transportation, and most schools that offered transportation had geographically-based limitations that excluded many additional students from access to transportation.**

### **Detroit Public Schools Community District**

As the largest district, DPSCD is also the largest school transportation provider in Detroit. For K-8 students, the district provides traditional school bus transportation conditional on two factors. First, to be eligible for transportation, students must attend the school to which they are assigned based on their residential address and the district's neighborhood boundaries. In 2018-19, only 46% of K-8 DPSCD students—about 18,000—attended their neighborhood assigned school. Second, students must live farther than 0.75 miles from their assigned school to be assigned a bus stop. Sixty-three percent of K-8 students that attended their neighborhood school lived 0.75 miles or closer to their school. As a result, even after exceptions (e.g., required special education services), about 69% of K-8 DPSCD students had no access to school transportation. Further, among neighborhood school-going students, only approximately 19% who attended their neighborhood school lived 0.25 miles or closer, which is typically thought of as reasonable walking distance for children (Yang & Diez-Roux, 2013). As such, nearly 8,000 students attending their neighborhood school lived between 0.25 miles and 0.75 miles from their school—beyond a reasonable walking distance but too close to be eligible for bus services. When K-8 students are eligible for



transportation, they are assigned a bus stop that is no more than 0.25 miles from their home. Students attending application-based schools do not receive transportation.

Some exceptions to these rules exist. The most common exception is related to special education services: if the district is required to provide students with school bus transportation based on the terms of their individualized education plan (IEP), then those students will receive that transportation for any DPSCD school in which they are enrolled. In many cases, IEPs also specify that students will be picked up directly in front of their home, rather than at a stop within 0.25 miles. Another exception is for students who are assigned to a school outside of their school boundary because their neighborhood school is over-enrolled. In this case, the district will provide the student with transportation to the new school to which they are assigned. In total, in 2018-19, there were approximately 1,800 students who were eligible for school sponsored transportation even though they attended their neighborhood school and lived 0.75 miles or closer to their school. Of these students, 16% were classified as receiving special education services. Others among these 1,800 students received transportation as an exception to the policy are homeless or housing unstable students, or students whose neighborhood school was oversubscribed and thus were required to enroll in a different school. Additionally, there were approximately 2,800 K-8 students who were eligible for school sponsored transportation who did not attend their neighborhood school, and 55% of these were classified as receiving special education.

For high school students, the district and the city began paying the City of Detroit to provide free public transportation on Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) buses. Any student enrolled in any high school in the district can show their student identification card in order to ride the bus for free during the school week. The district and the city currently do not have data on high school students' DDOT ridership. As with K-8 students, high



school students receiving special education services can be an exception: if a high school student's IEP includes transportation services then they will be picked up by a school bus. In 2018-19, there were 744 special education high school students (about 5% of all high school students) eligible for school sponsored transportation (i.e., not DDOT transportation).

In addition to the policies outlined above, several DPSCD schools are also served by “shuttle”-style buses that make stops along a fixed route to and from school. For six schools (four high schools and two elementary schools), the district operates shuttles. (The district does not currently have ridership data for these shuttles). In addition, eight of DPSCD's schools in the Northwest are served by the city's GOAL Line, which operates as a shuttle-style bus service. (Michigan State University researchers note in their evaluation of the GOAL Line that relatively few students ride the bus to get to school in the morning; Edwards et al., 2019).

### ***Charter Schools in Detroit***

There are 79 charter schools in Detroit,<sup>2</sup> all of which are open to enrollment for students who live anywhere in the city. Michigan charter schools are not allowed to have attendance boundaries that exclude students from enrolling. The transportation policies of Detroit charter schools vary widely. Of the 73 Detroit charter schools with which we spoke, 47% offered no transportation at all. The remaining schools were largely split between traditional school busing, with some conditions and limitations (26%); and “shuttle”-style buses that were regionally-based or that connected schools in the same charter network (23%). In addition, a network of three alternative high schools, primarily serving homeless youth, provided free bus passes for DDOT buses to students.

Among the charter schools that offered traditional school busing, there was significant variation in their transportation policies. Four schools reported

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<sup>2</sup> Excluding virtual schools, strict discipline academies, and center-based special education schools.



no limitations, with one explicitly describing door-to-door pick-up for all of its students. Otherwise, most had some kind of limitation. Five schools had limitations based on the amount of spots available, simply because they had only one or two buses that they used to pick up students. One explained that they had buses for the east and west sides of the city but that there was a waiting list because the buses were full. The other charter schools offering traditional bus service had geographically-based limitations. Some of those schools only picked up students who lived within certain ZIP codes or areas of the city. Others only picked up students within a certain radius of the school.

There was also some variation between schools with “shuttle” systems. Eight of the schools taking this approach described using one or two buses to pick up students along predetermined routes. These routes were generally regionally-based in association with the school’s location, rather than covering the entire city. Some had shuttle stops defined by specific intersections, while others used businesses like local restaurants or pharmacies as pick-up spots along the route. Seven other schools—four belonging to one charter district and three belonging to another—offered shuttles between their different schools. Finally, two schools reported the city’s GOAL Line as its only form of transportation offered. (Six charter schools total are served by the GOAL Line.)

### ***Suburban Charter Schools***

We also collected information from most of the suburban charter schools that enrolled at least ten Detroit students. The large majority (69%) offered no transportation for Detroit students, while 24% offered “shuttle”-style transportation. Eight of those schools had stops as part of a “shuttle” bus route that runs through Detroit and the suburbs. As such, they tended to be geographically restricted based on where the school is located; for example, only on the northern, eastern, or western edges of the city. Another five schools used a “depot” approach, picking up students who arrive at one of



a few pre-determined stops; for example, one school used specific housing subdivisions as its stops.

The remaining four suburban charter schools that provided transportation to Detroit students (7%) took a traditional school busing approach, but with significant limitations. Three that were located very close to a border of Detroit—two in Hamtramck and one in Redford Township—picked up students living in Detroit if they lived within a specific geographic area (2 miles from the school for the Redford school, and near the Detroit-Hamtramck area for the Hamtramck schools). The other, located in Dearborn, offered a limited number of bus stops to Detroit resident students and used a lottery to select families.

### ***Suburban Public Schools***

Finally, we collected information from nearly every suburban public school enrolling at least ten Detroit students. (Thus, the suburban schools we surveyed do not represent all schools in which Detroit students are allowed to enroll in by policy; only the ones in which they were substantially enrolled.) Our low rate of missing information for suburban public schools is because transportation data for out-of-district residents was frequently accessible on school or district websites in the event that we could not reach someone by phone. Eighty-six percent of the traditional suburban schools offered no transportation to Detroit students. Of the schools that did offer transportation, four schools in Oak Park offered traditional school busing. They did not have any geographic conditions or capacity limitations, but did note that Detroit residents must re-register for transportation each year. One other Oak Park school, its alternative high school, provided free public bus passes to its Detroit students. The remaining schools offering transportation to Detroit students used a “shuttle” approach. The River Rouge and South Redford school districts used a “shuttle” approach for their within-district transportation and incorporated Detroit stops into their shuttle routes, allowing families in Detroit to ride the bus as long as they could get to one of



those stops. Again, the stops in Detroit were regionally-based according to the location of the suburban districts. Finally, three schools had designated pick-up stops for students. One was Ferndale’s University High School, which picked up and dropped off students at three different spots throughout Detroit at designated times. The other two were Clintondale’s “creative learning centers”—one in Highland Park and the other in Dearborn—and each had a single pick-up/drop-off stop for Detroit students seeking transportation. Notably, Clintondale did not provide this transportation option to schools located within the district proper.

**“ These gaps in school transportation access have implications for equity, because students who are at a greater economic disadvantage may also be in greater need of transportation support in order to get to school regularly and reliably.**

## **PROBLEMS AND DILEMMAS FOR SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION POLICY IN DETROIT**

Our survey of the school transportation policy landscape in Detroit reveals a patchwork of policies that ultimately leaves many students without direct access to school-provided transportation. A large number of students in Detroit go to schools where no transportation at all is provided; and while subsequent student-level analysis is necessary for Detroit charter schools and suburban schools, the details of current transportation policies suggest that many students who attend schools offering transportation still may not be eligible for it or able to access it reliably. These gaps in school transportation access have implications for equity, because students who are at a greater economic disadvantage may also be in greater need of transportation support in order to get to school regularly and reliably (Chingos & Blagg, 2017).

When considering policy changes that could give more students direct



access to school transportation, there are some problems that policymakers and school and district leaders can address. For K-8 students, DPSCD can consider decreasing the distance from school that a student must live in order to be eligible for transportation. If DPSCD used 0.25 miles for transportation eligibility instead of 0.75 miles, it could immediately give nearly 8,000 students access to a school bus to and from school. In addition, the city can coordinate with district and school leaders as it continues to revise and implement its strategic transportation plan. The city can continue to improve bus timeliness and safety conditions of public buses to ensure that families can rely on them, and can explore ways to better align bus lines and schedules with student commuter patterns.

In addition, however, the factors we described above—the dynamics of school choice, along with the cost burden of school transportation, the geography of schools in the city, and the current transportation infrastructure—create dilemmas for Detroit’s transportation policy planning that require political decisions and not just technical ones. At the school or district level, providing transportation for as many students as possible becomes more costly as students who live farther away or who are dispersed throughout different parts of the city enroll in the school. Yet, restricting transportation geographically or limiting service capacity, as most schools in Detroit do, can exacerbate some students’ barriers to regular school attendance or exclude them from being able to attend the school altogether. Coordinating transportation systems at a city-wide level, as the city government and the Community Education Commission have considered, would require policymakers to wrestle with similar dilemmas. For example, providing transportation to schools across the city in order to maximize families’ school choices would operate in tension with the goal of creating “20-minute neighborhoods” and ensuring that students have reliable transportation or access to schools in their neighborhoods (Boyle, 2016).

Addressing these dilemmas and improving school transportation policies is



likely to be further complicated by the public health and economic crises related to the novel coronavirus pandemic. Facing budget shortfalls, districts may decide to reduce transportation services in order to maintain funding for staff and core instructional resources (French, 2020; Wisley, 2020). Further, the city may need to maintain some reduced bus service for financial and public health reasons (Hall, 2020). As a consequence, at a time when families may face even greater barriers in getting to school, districts and the city may provide even fewer resources to support them.

**“ Given the cost and complexity of school transportation, policymakers face dilemmas in balancing the goals of maximizing students’ ability to choose among all schools or ensuring that students can reliably get to one school.**

The problems and dilemmas of school transportation policy reflect the costs and complexities of transportation and the added challenges of a choice-rich context. Other cities like Denver, New Orleans, New York, and Washington, D.C. might offer some lessons (Chingos & Blagg, 2017), but it’s important to note the geographic, policy, and economic differences between those cities and Detroit, in addition to the fact that Detroit has a significantly higher share of chronically absent students (Singer et al., 2019a). Additional research is needed to inform policymakers, which will require more precise data on transportation eligibility and usage. Districts might be able to create more optimal conditions for their transportation, such as, identifying a different distance or geographic cutoff, or adding or modifying the stops on a shuttle-style route. DPSCD can also consider offering transportation to students attending a group of schools in their area rather than a single assigned school. The city can work with DPSCD and charter schools to consider modifications to their bus schedules, including frequency on key routes and new routes to support commute patterns to and from school. Ultimately, given the cost and complexity of school transportation, policymakers face dilemmas in balancing the goals of maximizing students’ ability to *choose among all schools* and ensuring that students can *reliably get to one school*.



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