

# Driving Change:

## How Transportation Innovation Gives Families Power to Choose

November 2021



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# Introduction

Over the last 20 years, the variety of school options has grown for many Hoosier families. Choices like inter-district choice, magnet schools, charter schools, virtual schools, “Innovation Network Schools”, choice scholarships (or “vouchers”) to attend non-public schools, adult education schools, and schools for special populations mean more students can get the education that fits them best. Families across the state have enthusiastically enrolled in these options and demand continues to grow across all school types.

While school choices have increased, the way children get to school has largely not changed. This lack of innovation has led to challenges Indiana schools and districts of all types now face, like driver shortages, long travel times, and high costs for smaller schools. **For families, the availability and quality of transportation affects every single school day for their children.**

Access to school transportation not only impacts what school choice a family can make, but is also a significant factor in student learning. Research has shown that chronic absenteeism can lead to lower academic performance and contribute to higher high school dropout rates.<sup>2</sup> Transportation systems play a critical role in ensuring many Hoosier children are able to choose and access high-quality schools with timely attendance each day.

Smaller schools without the bargaining power of larger school districts, like public charter schools, have often struggled more with vendor instability and the unexpected, unwanted burden of managing their own transportation when partnering with a bus company is not an option. Due to these disruptions, schools may not offer transportation options that work for all families, causing some to have to select a different school that may not be the best fit for their student.

The traditional yellow school bus is generally the only form of school transportation available to students in Indiana. While other states have made it easier for schools and districts to offer new, safe school transportation options, Indiana’s laws remain highly restrictive. **It is time for state laws to become more flexible to allow schools and districts to create transportation systems that are more accessible, efficient, and safe for Hoosier students.**

This report provides creative strategies and solutions Indiana schools can implement to improve school transportation statewide. These recommendations call for educators, families, and community organizations to envision a modern transportation system that strengthens and protects Hoosier families’ access to the schools of their choice. **Commitment to safety, flexibility, and collaboration, both in policy and between schools of all types, will advance this vision to the benefit of students and families.**

650,000

Hoosier public school students  
ride yellow school buses to  
and from school every day



# Values

This report presents ideas for shifts in state law and how districts and schools manage school transportation. It is important to begin with a set of guiding principles, or non-negotiables, for recommendations that keep education and safety as a priority, while also finding ways to increase efficiency and access to transportation.

**Indiana has a strong history as a national leader in providing school choice to all families to help provide educational equity. The following guiding principles should be honored to balance school choice, autonomy, access, and equity in redesigning an outdated transportation system:**



The safety of students should always be prioritized over goals for cost savings.



School choice policies should ensure students have the opportunity to not only attend a high-quality school that is a good fit, but also have transportation to access that school.



All students attending public schools who do not live within one mile of their chosen school, whether district-operated or charter schools, should be offered some form of free transportation from anywhere within the district's attendance boundary.



The transport time for any student to a public school should be less than one hour each way, ideally with even shorter times for younger students.



Schools should have the autonomy to set bell schedules, decide their transportation management strategies, and choose which vehicles they use. However, improving service and access will require collaboration between schools of all types within regions.

An equitable vision for any school system ensures that students have high-quality schools close to home. For too many students in Indiana, particularly students of color, a quality school close to home remains out of reach. Thousands of Hoosier students live in “schooling deserts”, meaning they live more than 30 minutes of travel time away from a highly-rated school. There is also evidence to suggest these “deserts” disproportionately impact students of color.<sup>3</sup>

A school transportation system can be a powerful tool to help mitigate “opportunity gaps” some children have in accessing high-quality schools, especially students whose neighborhood school is not high-performing.



# Issue Overview

In Indiana, approximately 650,000 public school students ride 13,365 yellow school buses to and from school every day. This represents about 60% of the total student population in the state—well above the national average of 47% who ride the bus. Hoosier students attend schools across a nationally unique choice landscape with a diverse portfolio of high-quality public options, as well as the nation’s largest voucher program.

School transportation still relies heavily on yellow buses and a small number of transportation management companies who operate in Indiana. Schools of all sizes, types, and locations in Indiana face the same issues—driver shortages, higher costs, and limited access to available management companies. **Improving school transportation will have a direct impact on the quality of education for hundreds of thousands of Hoosier students. To do this, updated laws and systems need to be put into place with collaboration across schools and districts.**

Research shows transportation can positively impact student attendance and gives parents power to select the school that works best for their child.<sup>4</sup> Even so, Indiana has generally not offered or provided legislative support for transportation solutions for its school choice programs.

Transportation spending is important because every dollar spent on transportation is a dollar not spent on directly educating students. Schools across the state have very different spending patterns on school transportation. Charter schools that offer school transportation must pay for these services without the local tax revenues that have historically been used by districts for transportation. Many factors contribute to differences in transportation spending, including the fact that all schools are not required to provide free transportation; differences in geographic areas served by districts, charters, and nonpublic schools; differences in ridership demand; and different transportation management approaches. It is also clear that differences in enrollment policies directly impact transportation spending. For example, Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) offers students transportation no matter their school of choice within the district, whereas most students enrolled in the other ten Marion County school districts must attend their neighborhood school to access transportation.

These differences can be seen when examining the two largest school districts in the state, who have very different spending patterns. In 2018-2019, Fort Wayne Community Schools (FWCS) spent only \$627 per pupil on school transportation, well below the state average. In contrast, IPS spent more than twice that amount (\$1,435 per pupil). Additionally, IPS provides twice as many buses per 100 students than FWCS. Several differences impact these disparities, including ridership demand due to IPS’ unified citywide enrollment system and the ability of many IPS students to receive transportation to a school outside their neighborhood.

These statewide challenges indicate the need for solutions that will meaningfully improve transportation for students and affordability for schools of all types. Indiana families deserve transportation solutions that support efficiency without compromising school leader autonomy, student safety, and school choice.





# Indiana Schools by the Numbers

as of 2021-2022

**119**

charter schools

**38**

virtual school programs

**28**

magnet schools

**30**

Innovation Network Schools

**10**

special population schools

**17**

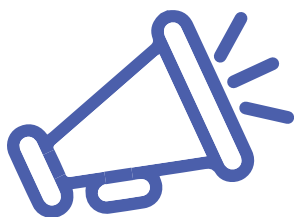
adult education schools

**36,700**

students attended private schools using a Choice Scholarship in 2019-2020

**64,685**

students transferred to a public school outside their home district boundaries



**Families: Make your voice heard.**

**Share your experience with student transportation in Indiana.**

**[themindtrust.org/transportation](https://themindtrust.org/transportation)**

# Challenges and Recommendations

## Key Challenges:



Safety



Drivers



Routing &  
Scheduling



Vehicles



Management



Data and  
Technology



## Safety

Changes to transportation laws or systems must prioritize student and driver safety while recognizing the need for innovation. Indiana should follow other states who have adopted laws that allow for modern school transportation that uses more than the yellow school bus. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) claims the yellow school bus is the “safest vehicle on the road; your child is much safer taking a bus to and from school than traveling by car.”<sup>5</sup> However, there is not sufficient data available to back this claim up.

**Crash statistics are not currently collected at the level of detail that would allow true comparisons between accidents involving yellow school buses versus other types of vehicles while transporting students between their home and school.**

For example, information on traffic accidents in Indiana does not allow for comparison between accidents involving yellow school buses versus other types of vehicles while transporting students to and from school.

**Our state could expand school transportation options if drivers of smaller, specially marked vehicles were held to the same safety standards as current yellow bus drivers.** More research should be conducted to better understand specific safety benefits of increased training, licensing requirements, background checks, drug testing, vehicle inspections, and vehicle safety design features, as it may be that extending these requirements to drivers of any type of school transportation vehicle could mitigate or eliminate any differences in safety outcomes between yellow buses and other vehicle types.

Arguments promoting the safety of yellow school buses point to specialized design features, such as the yellow color, flashing red lights, stop-sign arms, and rollover protection features. Yet some or all of these features can be installed on any type of vehicle. Additionally, smaller vehicles, like vans and shuttles, have smaller blind spots, resulting in a safety advantage for students and other pedestrians.

Many yellow buses also lack a key safety feature—seat belts. The NHTSA has determined that crash protection through “compartmentalization” of large seat backs in yellow school buses

**“The bottom line is, safety should come first.”**

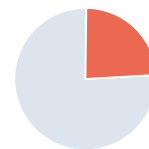
- Parent, Global Preparatory Academy at Riverside School 44

is sufficient to keep children safe, even though these buses typically do not have seat belts. However, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) concluded that “current compartmentalization...does not protect school bus passengers during lateral impacts, or side collisions, with vehicles of large mass and in rollovers, because in such accidents, passengers do not always remain completely within the seating compartment.”<sup>6</sup>

The American School Bus Council reports that “students are about 70 times more likely to get to school safely if they take the school bus instead of traveling by car”.<sup>7</sup> However, this data is based on NHTSA data comparing youth fatalities during school travel hours, regardless of whether those youth were traveling to and from school. The data also does not account for the stark differences in training requirements, licensing requirements, and vehicle inspections that apply to school buses but not regular passenger vehicles.

**Pedestrians were  
more than  
3X  
as likely to be killed by school  
vehicles than other vehicles.**

Bus stop safety is of critical importance when considering student transportation. The NHTSA claims that “the greatest risk to your child is not riding a bus, but approaching or leaving one.”<sup>8</sup> About 24% of school bus injuries involve students getting on or off the bus.<sup>9</sup> An average of seven school-age passengers are killed in school bus crashes each year while 19 are killed getting on and off the bus. Research found that 70 injuries and 17 fatalities in 2018-2019 were related to school bus crossings.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of what vehicles are used to transport students to school, safety precautions must be taken at every step of the process—including ensuring children are safe getting to and from bus stops.



**24%**  
of school bus injuries  
involve students getting  
on or off the bus

## Recommendations

The following policies are recommended to ensure maximum safety for all drivers and vehicles used in school transportation, regardless of type:



Establish state policy requiring all motor vehicle accidents related to school transportation be reported in greater detail. More data will give districts and schools a stronger understanding of the safest vehicle options for students.



Require all vehicles, including those with capacity of less than 11 passengers, to be well-marked as school transportation vehicles for safety and recognition purposes, comply with reasonable safety standards, and be routinely inspected both on a scheduled and random basis.



Require anyone hired to drive children to and from school in any type of vehicle, regardless of size, to undergo a driving record check, pass a criminal background check, and pass periodic drug tests.

# Drivers

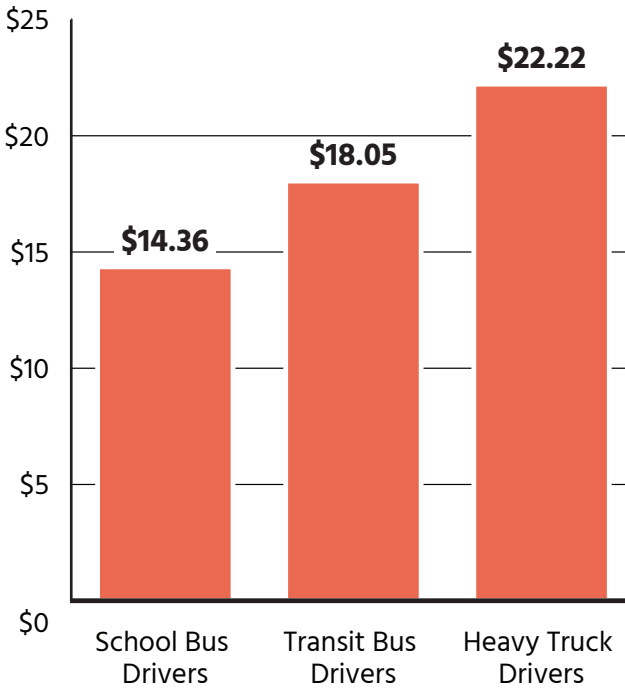
Schools across Indiana have been impacted by bus driver shortages, which were made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. **School bus drivers are central to the school experience for many students and are often the first face a student sees to begin their school day.**

Candidates face several barriers to becoming a school bus driver, including pay and training. In Indiana, school bus driver wages have been 20-35% lower than other careers requiring a Commercial Driver’s License (CDL). In 2018, the mean hourly wage for school bus drivers was \$14.36, compared to \$22.22 for heavy truck drivers.<sup>11</sup> School bus drivers are typically offered only about five work hours per day, leaving many unable to qualify for benefits or support their families without getting a second job. **It can be difficult for school bus drivers to find second part-time jobs that complement their driver schedules.**

The training cost and time required to obtain a CDL can be a significant barrier for potential drivers. Full certification can take four to six weeks, often at the driver’s own expense and dependent on the availability and proximity of the required training.<sup>12</sup> As of April 2020, there were only 15 third-party CDL testing sites in the state of Indiana.<sup>13</sup> For some districts, the nearest CDL testing site is a long distance away, making it an expensive choice for someone who is unemployed or earning a low hourly wage. For example, the nearest CDL testing site is over 80 miles away from the district central offices of MSD Warren County and South Spencer County.

In addition to holding a CDL, Indiana requires all school bus drivers applying for certification to complete a pre-service school bus driver safety course offered by IDOE or have operated a school bus for at least 30 days during the three year period preceding the effective date of the school bus driver’s employment.<sup>14</sup> The IDOE pre-service classroom instruction will be offered online through the end of 2021, and then transition back to in-person training in February 2022 at a limited number of locations.<sup>15</sup> It would be more effective to maintain pre-service in both online and in-person formats and make the online format available “on-demand” to allow for more flexible training hours.

2018 Mean Hourly Wage of Professions Requiring a CDL-Indiana



## Barriers to Becoming a School Bus Driver

School bus drivers are paid **20-35% less** than other careers requiring a Commercial Driver’s License

Certification can take **4-6 weeks** often at driver’s own expense

Only **15** third-party CDL testing sites in Indiana

Only work **5 hours** a day and often do not qualify for benefits



## Recommendations

Clear opportunities exist to make school transportation an attractive, viable career option for more Hoosiers. Finding ways to combat driver shortages will help ensure transportation is not disrupted or eliminated for students.

Indiana school districts who haven't already done so should advance the following initiatives as soon as possible:



Raise school bus driver hourly wages to a minimum of \$18 per hour or higher to be more competitive with other professions requiring a CDL.



Offer recruitment incentives, including signing bonuses and paid training hours, including paying for coursework to prepare for required exams or behind-the-wheel observations. Financial incentives can help ensure lengthy training periods don't cause candidates to drop out before completion due to lack of income.



Offer additional part-time and summer-time work within the school district to school bus drivers to enable them to qualify for benefits. School bus drivers who also work in schools during the middle of the day have the opportunity to become more deeply engaged in the life of the school and build stronger relationships with students. This approach not only strengthens recruitment efforts, but can also have a positive impact on schools and the students they serve.



Pay for these initiatives by identifying more efficient routing opportunities, tiering school day start and end times, and implementing or enforcing existing policies, such as "no bus zones" within walking distance of a school.

Additionally, the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) should consider the following to help make it easier for new drivers to become certified:



Expand the number of CDL testing sites to ensure access throughout the state. The IDOE should also subsidize the cost of the exams (currently ranging from \$75 - \$150) to encourage more applicants to take and pass the test or to retest if they are unable to pass it the first time.



Expand access to CDL training through online, on-demand course offerings and frequent in-person training opportunities targeted in locations experiencing school bus driver shortages.



Establish "one stop shops" throughout the state for as many school bus driver requirements as possible, including physical examinations, drug testing, criminal background checks, driving history, paperwork, and test administration.

## Safety, Convenience, and Care

Janika has six kids attending multiple schools. Juggling transportation for school and work with one car is a challenge, so access to safe, reliable, and efficient transportation played an important role when deciding which schools her kids would attend. Janika also wants her kids to feel cared for and treated well on their buses. Just as teachers are expected to care for students in school, bus drivers should care for students on the bus. When asked what she would say to school transportation decision-makers, she said, **"Try to imagine every child on the bus is your child. When you are making decisions, imagine what you would want for your own child."**

- Parent, Invent Learning Hub



# Routing & Scheduling

School transportation routes and schedules affect the length of a student's day and attendance. Ideally students should live within 30 minutes of a high-quality school, or on a bus with multiple stops, translating into no more than one hour transit time. Flexible vehicle options, like shuttles, vans, and smaller buses, make it easier to shorten the length of routes, and offer families greater efficiency.

Schools use a variety of systems to create routes:

- \* **Demand-Response** – This option lets schools continually update drop-off and pick-up locations based on rider needs. This requires a heavier operational lift and can create confusion for families.
- \* **Fixed Route** – A fixed-route option remains the same year-round. This can be more efficient operationally, but removes flexibility for families.
- \* **Hybrid** – This is a combination of a fixed route system and demand-response. This can help balance the two approaches, but does require staffing coordination to maintain.
- \* **Walk Zones** – Districts can establish zones within a certain distance of a school where transportation is not provided.

Placement of bus stops must ensure student safety and maximize time efficiency. Ideal bus stop criteria includes the following characteristics<sup>16</sup>:

- \* Reasonable walking distance and safe path to the stop
- \* Adequate lighting
- \* Sufficient space for students to wait at least 12 feet from the road
- \* Corner stops located at intersections that are not too busy
- \* Stops not near businesses that may pose a risk or are inappropriate for children, such as liquor stores, bars, adult entertainment, etc.
- \* Corner bus stops that offer the most options for routing and minimizing turns, resulting in time efficiency that can reduce ride times for students.

Some school systems have implemented tiered bell time schedules to better align bus routes. By staggering start times for different schools in the system, often according to grade level, schools can find cost savings, mitigate driver shortages, and implement later start times for older students. Tiered systems can have drawbacks for families, with older students getting home late in the day and younger students catching the bus early in the morning.

The ideal balance of school-based autonomy, respecting the needs of students and families, and benefiting from the efficiencies of central coordination can only be found through effective engagement and communication with students, parents, and school staff.

## Recommendations

Indiana school systems can implement the following initiatives to improve cost efficiency and service quality for families:

- \* Combine demand-response routes with fixed route “circulator shuttles” in an effort to minimize the number of demand-response routes that are necessary, and reduce the total number of vehicles required overall.
- \* Create or maintain “walk zones” of no more than one mile from school.
- \* Implement tiered bell schedules to reduce the number of drivers and buses required, expand the daily hours per driver, reduce costs, and align with the American Academy of Pediatrics recommendations for later start times for adolescents.
- \* Whenever possible, utilize intentionally-placed corner bus stops to help minimize route length and ride times and promote student safety.
- \* Identify opportunities for yellow school buses to be shared by multiple schools and/or districts.



# Vehicles

Yellow buses have a place in the transportation landscape when used for the heaviest routes. However, they can also be an expensive, inefficient, and environmentally unfriendly mode of transportation.

Indiana state law defines a “school bus” as having capacity for more than 10 passengers. However, when used by districts and nonpublic schools, they must have a capacity of at least 30.<sup>17</sup> With the exception of students experiencing homelessness, students in foster care, or students with disabilities, smaller vehicles are not allowed to be used for school-to-home transportation. Additionally, “special purpose buses” can be used to transport students between schools and to extracurricular activities or field trips.

**Indiana has already approved shuttles and large vans for some of the state’s most vulnerable students.**

Without the availability of smaller vehicles, schools and districts might struggle to fill up a large bus and must run longer routes in order to fully utilize them. This means longer travel times for students and higher costs for schools. Alternatively, a national survey conducted in 2015 found that the majority (58%) of states surveyed allow for home-to-school transportation on regular passenger vehicles (10 passengers or less).<sup>18</sup> States that allow alternative forms of school transportation also maintain strict safety standards for these vehicles and drivers.

To deliver on the vision of students reaching a high-quality school on school transportation within one hour, schools and districts must be empowered with the ability to use multiple vehicle types for student transportation. Currently, Indiana policy and regulations do not offer the flexibility to do this, creating an over-reliance on yellow buses. No federal laws prohibit smaller vehicles for school transportation, making increased flexibility a huge opportunity for states like Indiana.

## Financial and Environmental Impact of a Full-Sized School Bus



**\$90,000**  
cost to purchase<sup>20</sup>

**\$34,000-\$38,000**  
cost per year to operate and maintain<sup>21</sup>

**4-6 miles**  
per gallon

**9,000,000 metric tons**  
of carbon dioxide emissions per year<sup>22</sup>

## Recommendations

Schools should be empowered to implement the following strategies:

- \* Prioritize yellow buses for the most heavily populated routes.
- \* Use shuttles with capacity of 10-15 passengers, as well as large vans and passenger vehicles, for areas with lower population density, on routes with fewer riders, or for students who would benefit from a more direct route to and from school.
- \* Apply for government subsidies to acquire and operate propane, compressed natural gas (CNG), and/or electric buses in order to save up to 50% on fuel costs vs. traditional diesel buses.

Indiana should pursue the following policy initiatives to expand the types of vehicles available:

- \* Eliminate the requirement that public elementary and secondary schools may only use a “school bus” to transport children from home to school.
- \* Allow “appropriate vehicles” and “special purpose buses” to be used by districts, charter schools, and private contractors to provide home-to-school transportation.
- \* Eliminate the requirement that special purpose buses, when owned by a district, have capacity for at least 30 passengers.
- \* Maintain and expand government financial incentives to encourage the use of alternatively fueled buses, including propane, CNG, and electric buses.<sup>19</sup>





# Management

School transportation management is often a time-consuming and expensive task for schools and districts to manage, and one that directly impacts families. Schools often need to contract with companies to supply buses, create routes, and hire and train drivers. When transportation companies are spread thin and struggling with driver shortages, there is a risk that the company can cancel the contract or limit service. For schools that manage their own transportation in-house, there is potential for this to take time away from other management needs, or from instruction and programming. **Smaller districts and schools, or those located in rural parts of the state, are particularly impacted by these challenges.**

Schools can utilize several different management structures:

- \* **100% In-House** – A school or district would own all buses, directly employ drivers, and manage routing and all other aspects of transportation themselves.
- \* **100% Contracted** – A school or district would contract with a company to use their buses, hire and maintain driver staff, and manage routing and other day-to-day operations. The ability to use this option depends on the availability and capacity of service providers.
- \* **Public Transit** – Schools or districts may require or provide the option for students to use local public transit.
- \* **Hybrid** – Many schools and districts combine some or all of these models.

New and alternative management approaches are being used in other states, including:

- \* **Specialized Management Companies** – Providers that coordinate management or technology support, which can take the burden off of school staff and offer a higher quality of service to families.
- \* **Transportation Network Companies (TNCs) or “Ride Shares”** While the most commonly known TNCs, Uber and Lyft, provide transportation to adults, some ([HopSkipDrive](#), [Zūm](#), [RideAlong](#)) have begun offering school transportation for children who need more accessible options.
- \* **Alternative Transportation Providers** – Some companies, such as [Assist Services](#), provide personalized school transportation for students requiring special support such as students experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities, and out-of-district trips.
- \* **Carpool Coordination Services** – Schools and districts can offer coordination to create carpools for families who live in close proximity.
- \* **“Opt Out” Subsidies** – For students who live in the outermost boundary of a large area served by a school, direct payments to families who opt-out of yellow bus service may be beneficial.

## Recommendations

Schools have varied needs for transportation based on their enrollment, model, location, and other factors. Schools and districts should find a management solution that is cost-effective and maintains a high bar for service for students and families.

Some of the following strategies can help schools offer excellent transportation to families:

- \* Consider outsourcing to centralized management companies with advanced technology platforms and routing expertise. These vendors then manage transportation providers, cutting down on transportation management for the school.
- \* Support the expansion of carpool coordination for families that can benefit from this option. Entities like Commuter Connect could be critical partners for this.
- \* Consider providing opt-out subsidies to families farthest from the school they attend.
- \* Ensure management prioritizes strong family communication and student safety.

Indiana policymakers should consider the following priorities:

- \* Make intentional investments in public transit.
- \* Encourage and incentivize coordination of school transportation between schools and districts that share boundaries to create the opportunity for shared bus routes, equipment, and cost.



# Data and Technology

Many vehicles on the road have updated safety features, like blind spot monitors, that protect people inside and outside of the car. Vehicles used for school transportation can also benefit from similar technology updates, as well as features that can help families see their bus location in real-time.

Technology improvements include:

- \* **GPS** – A GPS system can help schools and families see where buses are and know if they are running on time.
- \* **Routing Software** – Transportation management companies typically use software to create the bus routes. This software, when paired with GPS, can help identify traffic patterns and monitor ride times, which can be used to adjust and improve routes.
- \* **Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) Systems** – Student IDs, when RFID enabled, can allow students to confirm when they get off or on a bus. This can be used to track attendance or to locate students who may have missed the bus or gotten on the wrong bus. This information can be shared with parents via smartphone app. RFID also allows schools to better understand route usage and determine if adjustments are needed.
- \* **School Bus Cameras** – Video recordings help schools monitor student behavior and driver safety issues. Cameras can also be used to monitor when cars pass a school bus illegally.
- \* **Blind Spot Monitors** – Alarm and/or video systems can help prevent collisions caused by school bus vehicle blind spots.
- \* **Collision Prevention** – These sensor systems trigger alarms and/or automatic braking when objects are sensed to be in danger of colliding with the vehicle.
- \* **Electronic Stability Control** – This sensor detects whether a bus is at risk of a rollover or loss of control on a slippery surface and automatically intervenes to help the driver maintain control.

Many of these technology improvements can not only make routes better for students and families and more efficient for schools, but also safer for drivers and pedestrians sharing the road with buses. All can be installed on yellow buses or alternative vehicles used for school transportation.

## Recommendations

While new technology comes with a financial cost, the potential safety benefits for children should be a top priority when considering these investments. Schools should:



Use GPS and RFID technology across all school transportation vehicles and for all riders. These systems offer major benefits for managing performance and service quality by reducing cost, bolstering parent communication, and ensuring student safety.



Review school transportation safety reports for the last several years and identify the most common characteristics of accidents involving school transportation vehicles to determine potential priorities for technology investments. For example, if a significant percentage of school bus accidents have involved vehicle blind spots, consider prioritizing the installation of blind spot monitoring technology in all school transportation vehicles.

# Center Township Case Study






Schools in Center Township have consistently struggled to provide reliable and financially sustainable bus transportation to all students. Just as Indianapolis has built a uniquely robust school choice landscape, new and innovative school transportation solutions are also needed to ensure all families can access an excellent education.

In spring 2021, The Mind Trust (TMT) began convening autonomous schools to identify pain points and opportunities within school transportation systems. The needs assessment revealed that schools were struggling to access adequate services as vendors across the state have struggled to keep up with driver workforce demands. Furthermore, the current ambiguity in state law about whether charter schools are exempt from regulations regarding vehicle types allowed for school transportation has hampered their ability to fully meet the needs of students and families.

In response to the needs of schools surveyed, TMT established its first transportation pilot, intended to provide needed transportation support to four independent charter schools and one IPS Innovation Network School in Center Township. These schools were identified as high need and likely to have limited bargaining power for over-committed services from school bus vendors.

Central to the project was the engagement of a specialized management partner, [4MATIV](#), to support participating schools in reimagining what transportation collaboration across all school types can achieve for schools and families. The pilot program centralized transportation services for all five schools under 4MATIV's management, with the goal of harnessing operational efficiencies and cost savings for schools. As a result, schools were able to redirect staff time away from transportation logistics to attend to other operational and academic priorities.

In partnership with 4MATIV, TMT established the following strategies and seeks to evaluate their impact through the pilot:

-  Centralized transportation service management, route development, and vendor management
-  Centralized operational management
-  Varied transportation delivery including: shared routes, shared buses, and multi-modal approaches
-  Cost and service efficiencies
-  Intentional collaboration among school leaders across sectors

In line with their entrepreneurial spirit, school leaders embraced the opportunity to collaborate to better meet the needs of students and to explore new and improved practices. However, the pervasive overextension of transportation vendors and chronic driver shortages threatened to derail the benefits of the pilot program.

In response to vendor needs, TMT launched an extensive bus driver recruitment campaign, "DriveIndySchools". Rather than find CDL drivers eager to drive school buses, a narrow market at any time, TMT leveraged deep partnerships with schools and communities to recruit individuals who were connected to schools and the communities they serve, and then train them to drive school buses. **A key lesson learned was that when those individuals were offered flexibility to serve in other roles within schools, thus maximizing the paid hours available to them, the candidate pool flourished with mission-minded individuals.**

Despite the benefits of the driver recruitment program and centralized management, there were no transportation vendors willing or able to serve the schools in the pilot. Center Township's transportation market is centered around yellow buses, limiting the availability of multi-use shuttles or vans to more appropriately meet the needs of smaller charter schools. **This left participating schools with no other choice than to purchase their own buses and shuttles to avoid losses in enrollment, and to narrow the scope of their transportation services, making it harder for families to access high-quality schools of their choice.**

The pilot continues to support schools through the 2021-2022 school year with routing and operational efficiencies, state compliance matters, and collaboration across schools. However, meaningful gains in cost efficiencies, service quality, and access to high-quality school choices will be limited without the policy and structural recommendations presented within this report.



# Conclusion

School transportation impacts the lives of more than 650,000 Hoosier students. While our state has made strides to provide a wide variety of education options to families, transportation policies and systems need to catch up. Families should be empowered to share their feedback on new school transportation systems and be given the opportunity to access transportation at the school that works best for them. Likewise, school leaders should have the opportunity to choose vehicles and partnerships that allow them to best deliver high-quality transportation to families.

Allowing schools and families flexibility in their best-fit options for transportation, alongside meaningful collaboration between schools of all types will be essential to create a sustainable, effective transportation system. As Hoosier students and families continue to recover from the economic and academic impacts of COVID-19, transportation innovations that support both schools and families will also protect families' ability to choose high-quality schools.



## Endnotes

- 1 Innovation Network Schools are public schools that have more autonomy than traditional districts and their own nonprofit boards. These schools are exempt from some regulations that restrict the practices of traditional public schools and have “full operational autonomy” under Indiana state law.
- 2 [https://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport\\_May16.pdf](https://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf);  
<https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/the-problem/10-facts-about-school-attendance/>
- 3 <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Indianas-Schooling-Deserts-by-Andrew-Catt-and-Michael-Shaw.pdf>
- 4 <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Transporting-School-Choice-Students-by-Michael-Q-McShane-and-Michael-Shaw.pdf>
- 5 <https://www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/school-bus-safety>
- 6 <https://rosap.nhtl.bts.gov/view/dot/14018>
- 7 <http://schoolbusfacts.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Safety-Benefits.pdf>
- 8 <https://www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/school-bus-safety>
- 9 <https://www.stanfordchildrens.org/en/topic/default?id=how-safe-is-the-school-bus-1-113>
- 10 <https://stnonline.com/special-reports/school-bus-injuries-fatalities-initial-report-for-2018-2019-school-year/>
- 11 <https://in.chalkbeat.org/2016/11/30/21099520/six-things-to-know-about-indiana-s-school-voucher-program-a-model-betsy-devos-could-support>
- 12 <https://www.indystar.com/story/news/education/2021/09/03/indiana-schools-bus-driver-jobs-how-to/8240970002/>
- 13 <https://www.in.gov/bmv/files/cdl-skills-test-sites.pdf>
- 14 IC 20-27-8-15
- 15 Per e-mail from Michael LaRocco, Director of School Transportation, IDOE, October 5, 2021.
- 16 [http://guide.saferoutesinfo.org/school\\_bus\\_locations/determining\\_school\\_bus\\_stop\\_locations.cfm](http://guide.saferoutesinfo.org/school_bus_locations/determining_school_bus_stop_locations.cfm)
- 17 IC 20-27-2-8
- 18 <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/NASDPTS-MFSAB-Survey-Results-January-2015-SUMMARY.xlsx>
- 19 <https://www.whas11.com/article/news/education/nafc-s-shifting-to-propane-powered-buses/417-22045653-6897-4155-a69b-b1a528b0547a>
- 20 <https://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=7584>
- 21 <https://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=7584>
- 22 <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/teenagers-invention-saves-fuel-for-school-buses/>



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## Special Thanks

We wish to give particular thanks to Ben Kleban, independent consultant and lead author and researcher for this report.  
We also wish to recognize the support and partnership of EdChoice and Institute for Quality Education.

