

Driving Change:

How Transportation Innovation Gives Families Power to Choose

REPORT SUMMARY

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The Mind Trust
Transformative education. Rooted in equity.

Introduction

Over the last 20 years, the variety of school options has grown for many Hoosier families. Choices like open enrollment districts, magnet, charter, 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 Indiana have enthusiastically enrolled in these options and demand continues to grow across all options.

While choices have increased, the way children get to school has largely not changed. This lack of innovation has created challenges Indiana schools of all types now face, like driver shortages, long travel times, and high costs for smaller schools. In Indiana, the traditional yellow school bus is generally the only form of transportation available to students. While other states have made it easier for schools to offer new, safe transportation options, Indiana’s laws remain highly restrictive. **It is time for state laws to become more flexible to allow schools to create transportation that is more accessible, efficient, and safe for Hoosier students.**

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

Values

Indiana has a strong history as a national leader in providing school choice to all families to help provide educational equity. As we recommend changes both to state law and school practice for school transportation, it is important to begin with a set of guiding principles that centers student wellbeing. The following values should be honored to balance school choice, autonomy, access, and equity in redesigning an outdated transportation system: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 attend a high-quality school that is a good fit *and* have transportation to school.
- * All students attending public schools who do not live within one mile of their chosen school should be offered some form of free transportation from anywhere within the district’s attendance boundary.
- * The time spent getting to school on provided transportation for any student should be less than one hour each way, ideally with shorter times for younger students.
- * Schools should have the freedom to set bell schedules and decide which transportation management and vehicles they use. Improving service and access requires collaboration between schools within regions.

An equitable vision for any school system ensures that students have high-quality schools close to home.

Issue Overview

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. **In Indiana, approximately 650,000 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.

Yet school transportation still relies heavily on yellow buses and the 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 to support flexibility and collaboration across schools and districts.**

Transportation spending is important because every dollar spent on transportation is a dollar not spent on directly educating students. Because of individual contexts, 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.

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.**

Recommendations

Safety

- * Establish state policy requiring all motor vehicle accidents related to school transportation be reported in greater detail.
- * Require all vehicles, including those with capacity of less than 11 passengers, 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 on any type of vehicle, regardless of size, to undergo a driving record check, pass a criminal background check, and pass periodic drug tests.

Drivers

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 Commercial Driver's License (CDL).
- * Offer recruitment incentives, including signing bonuses, paid training hours, and payment for coursework prep required for exams or behind-the-wheel observations.
- * 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.
- * 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.



Routing & Scheduling

- * 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 1 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

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.²

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 purposes 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.

Management

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.
- * Support the expansion of carpool coordination for families that can benefit from this option.
- * 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

- * Use GPS and Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology and across all school transportation vehicles and for all riders.
- * Identify the most common characteristics of accidents involving school transportation vehicles to determine potential priorities for technology investments.

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://www.whas11.com/article/news/education/nafcs-shifting-to-propane-powered-buses/417-22045653-6897-4155-a69b-b1a528b0547a>



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