National Statistics on School Transportation

School Transportation Costs

- In 2004-05, the most recent year for which statistics are compiled, 55.3% of the 45,625,458 children enrolled in public K-12 schools were bused to school at public expense.
- The United States spends $17.5 billion per year on school bus transportation at an average cost of $692 per student transported.[1]
- The percentage of children bused has been declining steadily since the mid-1980s, when slightly more than 60% of children were bused. At that time, the average expenditure per student transported was under $300.[2]
- In FY2009, approximately $180 million in federal Safe Routes to School funding will be made available to each state's Department of Transportation to help school districts make it safer for children to walk and bicycle to school.

School Transportation Funding Mechanisms

The majority of states provide some support to local school districts for pupil transportation, but the funding mechanisms vary widely. The primary types of funding include:[3]

- Five states provide no funding to local jurisdictions to support pupil transportation.
- In nine states, the state provides a lump sum to a school district for pupil transportation, based on the share of the state's pupils the jurisdiction transports.
- Nine states establish a list of the types of expenditures and percentage of expenditures they will reimburse and then provide allocations to each local school district based on expenditures.
- A total of nineteen states set a "unit cost" for each pupil transported or mile driven and allocate funds to a local school district based on their numbers. Ten of these states make adjustments to the formula based on geographic conditions.
- Eight states utilize formulas based on a combination of factors, including pupils transported, miles driven, and geographic disparities, to provide allocations to local school districts.

Cuts in School Budgets Affect School Transportation

- During the summer of 2008, rising fuel costs had a significant impact on the availability of school buses. According to a survey of school superintendents, one-third of school districts consolidated bus routes to conserve costs, and another third were considering eliminating bus routes or bus stops close to school.[4]
- While fuel costs have since dropped significantly, school districts are facing new financial challenges due to a worsening economy and state budget crises. As a result, at least 20 states have implemented or proposed budget cuts to K-12 education, including cuts in state per-pupil funding and education grants to local school districts.[5]
- Based on the average per-pupil expense and the average number of children per bus, a school district saves an estimated $37,000 per school year by eliminating one bus route.

Replacing School Buses with Parent and Teen Vehicles

If students who lose access to school buses are instead driven by parents or older, teenaged siblings, there will be negative impacts on safety, traffic, health, and the environment.

- The average school bus transports 54 student passengers, replacing approximately 36 family vehicles.[6]
- Each parent that replaces a bus ride with driving their child to school uses approximately 180 additional gallons of fuel per year, spends an additional $663 on fuel, and puts 3600 miles on their car.[7]
- Each year, approximately 800 school-age children are killed in motor vehicle crashes during normal school travel hours. About 2% of these deaths occur on school buses, while 74% occur in private passenger vehicles. Approximately 22% are bicycle or pedestrian accidents. More than half of these deaths overall are due to a teen driver.[8]
- As much as 20 to 30% of morning traffic is generated by parents driving their children to schools.[9]
- Pedestrians are more than twice as likely to be struck by a vehicle in locations without sidewalks.[10]
- Children exposed to traffic pollution are more likely to have asthma, permanent lung deficits, and a higher risk of heart and lung problems as adults.[11] One-third of schools in “air pollution danger zones” due to proximity to high-traffic areas.[12]

Increasing Walking and Bicycling to School

If the transition from school buses to walking and bicycling is done in a thoughtful, deliberate way through a Safe Routes to School initiative, many of the negatives impacts of increased car trips to school can be alleviated:

- A California study showed that schools that received infrastructure improvements through the Safe Routes to School program yielded walking and bicycling increases that were often in the range of 20 percent to 200 percent.[13]
- A safety analysis by the California Department of Transportation estimated that the safety benefit of the Safe Routes to School program was up to a 49 percent decrease in the childhood bicycle and pedestrian collision rates.[14]
- Kids are less active today, and 23% of children get no free time physical activity at all.[15] Approximately 25 million children and adolescents—more than 33%—are now overweight or obese or at risk of becoming so.[16] Walking one mile to and from school each day generates two-thirds of the recommended sixty minutes of physical activity a day. Plus, children who walk to school have higher levels of physical activity throughout the day. [17]
- Schools that are designed so children can walk and bicycle have measurably better air quality.[18]
- Returning to 1969 levels of walking and bicycling to school[19] would save 3.2 billion vehicle miles, 1.5 million tons of carbon dioxide and 89,000 tons of other pollutants—equal to keeping more than 250,000 cars off the road for a year.[20]

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