



STUDENT TRANSIT AND OTHER MODES TO SCHOOL IN CALIFORNIA

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Project Objective

This study examined the current landscape of K-12 school transportation in California. We investigated from three angles: (1) the transportation options offered by California school districts to students, (2) the means of travel chosen by California families for their school commutes, and (3) the potential for public transit to solve transportation option gaps in districts that without school bus service.

Problem Statement

Traveling to and from school is something that a quarter of California's 13 million households must plan for daily during the academic year. Almost each weekday from August until June, about 7 million Californians ages 5 through 18 make their way from the doorsteps of their homes to the doors of their school — but they do so in a way that looks *notably* different from the rest of the United States. In short, while the school bus is a major player for these trips across the country, in California its role has been diminishing since the early 1980s. State law in California does not require K-12 school districts to provide school bus transportation to students, and state funding was limited from 1982 until 2022 — which became a recipe for infrequent school bus provision and use relative to other states.

Research Methodology

This study analyzed these differences by systematically collecting data on school bus programs and eligibility criteria for a sample of 119 California public school districts. We then used this sample to first analyze the policies across different types of districts by student and geographic characteristics. Next, we attached these policy criteria to students in a statewide travel survey data to understand how these policies may be tied to different trends in travel mode choice and trip characteristics. Finally, we estimated hypothetical trip durations had they occurred on alternative modes, so that we could determine the effects of substituting public transit trips for school bus trips.

Major Findings

- **Most California school districts (70%) provide some type of school bus service to at least some general population students.** Some districts guarantee transportation to students based on the distance between their home and their school exceeding a set distance threshold. Distance thresholds tend to increase as students age up in grade level. Other districts set bus routes and offer them to families without such a guarantee of home or near-home pickup. Although most districts provide service, those with comparatively higher shares of students of color were the most likely to offer no school bus transportation. (Note: Federal law requires all districts to offer transportation to special education students, homeless students, and foster youth.)
- **Though most districts provide some service, only 31% of California students are eligible for the school bus based on general criteria.** Further, students in public choice schools (e.g., magnet schools, charter schools, other district schools outside a student's assigned zone) are *much* less likely to be eligible for school bus transportation (23%) than neighborhood school students (36%).

- **Subsidized public transit passes are available in most California school districts (83%).** Over half of the transit programs are completely free to students and families (mostly in the inner San Francisco Bay Area and across Southern California). The rest of the programs require some payment from students and families (mostly in outlying parts of the San Francisco Bay Area and northern and central California), but the amounts and processes vary widely.
- **Far fewer students use the school bus in California than nationally.** (See Figure 1.) Californians travel to school in automobiles, although Black and Latino/a students are relatively more likely to rely on the school bus than their peers. Public transit is seldom used by K-12 students.
- **Public transit is not a practical alternative to the school bus for regularly-scheduled school transportation.** If the state's school bus riders were shifted to riding public transit for school trips, they would spend 61 minutes more per day round-trip traveling to/from school on average (see Figure 2). The effect is 50% greater for students in public choice schools.

Recent advances in state school transportation policy are a positive first step toward improving reliable and equitable access to education in California. In addition to the increase in state funds approved in 2022-2023, our findings suggest three additional steps:

1. California should require its districts to provide school bus transportation based on students' distance from home to school.
2. School districts that choose to implement public school choice programs — especially as interventions toward ameliorating educational inequality — must consider transportation as a core part of the program to ensure access is available for all students.
3. School districts should view subsidized transit pass programs for students as a compliment, not a substitute, to school bus service. Transit passes help students fulfill needs for infrequent trips that require spatial and/or temporal flexibility (e.g., trips home from band practice).

Reducing the time and burden that students spend on transportation to and from school frees them up to spend more time on other activities. Enhancing their mobility also offers access to alternative or additional educational opportunities, like school choice programs and extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, arts, and music) at nearly any school they attend.

Figure 1: School trip mode shares, California vs. U.S., 2017

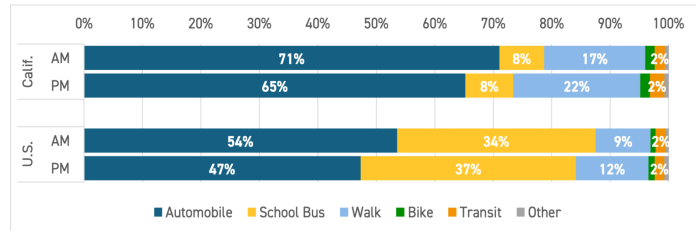


Figure 2: Time difference (in min.) for California school bus users vs. simulated travel on other modes, one-way trips

