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DPS Transportation Policies to Match Its School Choice Policy

*Denver Public School's antiquated transportation policies need to be updated
to better serve the mobility needs of its students*

Matt Samelson/Donnell-Kay Foundation

60,940 students – it's a big number. Big enough that it would be the fourth largest school district in Colorado. But it's not a school district, it's the number of Denver Public School (DPS) students that were ineligible for transportation services to and from school during the 2017-18 school year.¹ We certainly can do better than that. It's time for the DPS school board to reexamine its transportation policies and services when nearly 66% of its students are ineligible for transportation.

Under the current DPS transportation policy, students are eligible for transportation if they attend their designated neighborhood school and live a specified distance from that school – more than 1 mile away for elementary school, 2.5 miles for middle schools, and 3.5 miles for high school.² A multitude of exceptions exist where transportation is provided: students with special needs, shared enrollment zones (for example, students in the Far Northeast and Near Northeast have access to the Success Express), and magnet programs, like the Denver School for the Arts or Polaris Elementary. But even then, only one-third of students have DPS transportation.

The antiquated transportation policy does not match the district's school choice program. DPS is frequently held up as a national example for its school choice process. The district encourages families and students to exercise school choice. Their website states: "Equity is at the heart of SchoolChoice. We believe all students should have access to quality schools, regardless of background or address. Any student who wants to attend a school other than their neighborhood school can take part in SchoolChoice."³

But here's the catch: by and large, as soon as students exercise choice, they don't have district transportation. And if a student does not own a vehicle, or her parent or guardian can't drop her off at school or he cannot afford to buy a RTD pass, then school choice without transportation is not a choice at all.

A recent report by the Urban Institute, "Student Transportation and Educational Access" studying five school-choice rich cities, including Denver, stated: "Urban education systems around the country are implementing school choice policies aimed at expanding low-income students' access to high-quality schools. But for too many students, the promise of choice is an

¹ Nicole Portee, executive director for DPS transportation, presentation to DPS Mill Levy Override Committee, December 12, 2017. Available at <http://bond.dpsk12.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/MLOC-December-12th-Meeting.pptx.pdf>

² DPS Board of Education Policies, Regulation for Transportation of Students in School Buses, EEA-R1. Available at <https://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/Public?open&id=policies#>

³ Denver Public Schools Choice & Enrollment. Available at <http://schoolchoice.dpsk12.org/>

empty one because they cannot physically access the school via school- or parent-provided transportation.”⁴

State law does not require school districts to provide transportation services, but DPS chooses to give transportation to some of its students. However, the current distribution of transportation services is neither equal nor equitable because it’s based on distance and the act of not choosing a school. A more equitable policy would provide transportation services to those students that need it to get to school.

In 2018, the DPS board and staff could undertake several actions to enhance its transportation offerings and align its transportation policy with its school choice policy by:

1. Changing the DPS Board transportation policy for high school students
2. Examining the efficiencies of the current DPS transportation offerings
3. Improving Success Express ridership through a community-led process
4. Asking the community to approve a transportation mill levy override

1. Change the DPS Board transportation policy for high school students

DPS board policy states that high school students enrolled in their neighborhood school that live more than 3.5 miles away from it are eligible for district-provided transportation. For high school students that qualify via this policy, the transportation provided is a monthly, local RTD pass. But the reality of transportation eligibility for high school students is jumbled because of the many exceptions, privately-run programs, and school-based decisions to purchase transportation.

In order to more equitably provide transportation to high school students, the DPS board should decrease the walk zone distance to either 2 or 2.5 miles and remove the requirement that the student must attend the school serving their residential area. High school students that live either 2.0 or 2.5 miles or farther from their school, no matter what the governance structure of the school, would be eligible for transportation services. As a portfolio school district, DPS has a wide variety of traditional, magnet, charter, and innovation schools. By design, students and families have numerous school models, programs, sizes to choose from. But with all of these choices, the concern of transportation must be taken into consideration by students and families when picking a school.

Nearly every charter school in Denver is a choice school (without a designated neighborhood boundary), so students attending them are ineligible for DPS transportation. Except DPS does allow charter schools to buy into the Success Express shuttles it runs. For example, students that attend DSST Green Valley Ranch and live in Far Northeast Denver can ride Success Express because the school pays the district \$149.44/student or roughly \$82,000 for the service. District policy requires DSST to pay for every student attending DSST Green Valley Ranch, even those who will never use the shuttle. Other charter schools, such as KIPP Denver Collegiate, will buy RTD monthly passes for its students that need transportation assistance. Private organizational efforts for transportation include the East Angel Friends & Alumni Foundation’s Student Assistance Fund, which buys RTD passes for qualified students at East High School. The Fund’s

⁴ Urban Institute, “Student Transportation and Educational Access: How students get to school in Denver, Detroit, New Orleans, New York City, and Washington, DC,” April 2017, p. V. Available at https://www.urban.org/research/publication/student-transportation-and-educational-access/view/full_report

support is significant, sometimes spending up to \$40,000 in a school year to help students. It's great that East can fundraise, but it's the exception not the norm. Every year dozens of DPS high school administrators dip into their operating dollars in order to help their students get to school.

Access to transportation is unnecessarily complicated. To illustrate this problem, below is a list of the 15 DPS high schools with the highest ratings on the School Performance Framework (SPF) in 2016-17. For most of these schools (13 of 15), the majority of students exercised choice to attend the school. But the transportation offerings are varied, even if the student exercises choice. Some schools have access to Success Express, some schools provide RTD passes even if you choose in, some follow the district policy, and others do not provide transportation at all.

Top 15 High-Performing DPS High Schools (2016-2017)

School	SPF (2017)	% of Students Choicing into School	Region	Governance	DPS transportation?
Strive Prep - RISE*	Distinguished	100% (2.8%)	FNE	Charter	Success Express
KIPP Northeast Denver Leadership Academy*	Distinguished	100% (7.15%)	FNE	Charter	Success Express
Denver School of Innovation Sustainability and Design	Distinguished	100%	SE	Innovation	RTD bus pass if 3.5 miles away
DSST College View	Distinguished	100%	NNE	Charter	Southwest Express
DSST Stapleton	Distinguished	100%	NNE	Charter	No transportation services
Denver School of Arts	Distinguished	100%	NNE	Magnet	RTD bus pass if 3.5 miles away
DSST Green Valley Ranch*	Distinguished	100% (4.5%)	FNE	Charter	Success Express
Denver Online	Distinguished	100%	NA	Pathways	No transportation services
DSST Cole	Meets expectations	100%	Central	Charter	Success Express
DSST Byers	Meets expectations	100%	SE	Charter	No transportation services
KIPP Denver Collegiate	Meets expectations	100%	SW	Charter	School buys RTD passes
Northfield	Meets expectations	60%	NNE	Traditional	RTD bus pass if 3.5 miles away & is boundary school
CEC Early College	Meets expectations	100%	NW	Magnet	RTD bus pass if 3.5 miles away
East	Meets expectations	49%	Central	Traditional	RTD bus pass if 3.5 miles away & is boundary school
Thomas Jefferson	Meets expectations	35%	SE	Traditional	RTD bus pass if 3.5 miles away & is boundary school

*These three schools are in the Far Northeast High School Enrollment Zone, and all eight schools in the zone are considered a boundary school. Therefore, DPS choice data for the zone are incomparable to other regions. The single digit choice rates in parenthesis are provided by DPS. In reality, unless the student chooses one of these schools as her first choice, it's unlikely she'll get in.

The school district promoted school choice, and high school students took them up on the offer. Given the wide variety of high school options in DPS, most students are exercising choice. In the Near Northeast, Central, Northwest, and Southwest regions, the majority of students choose a school other than their boundary school. Of the six regions in DPS (Far Northeast, Near Northeast, Central, Northwest, Southwest, and Southeast), only two regions have at least half of its high school students attending their boundary school: Far Northeast and Southeast, 65% and 51% respectively. It should be noted that the 65% of students attending boundary schools in Far Northeast is not a direct comparison to the other DPS regions. The Far Northeast has a high school enrollment zone with eight high schools that are all considered boundary schools. Except for the shared campus where West Early College and West Leadership Academy are located, all other high school boundaries include a single school.

Region	Attend Boundary School	Choice in Region but not Boundary School	Choice out of Boundary School and Region
Far Northeast	65%	9%	26%
Near Northeast	40%	18%	42%
Central	35%	43%	22%
Northwest	33%	42%	25%
Southwest	28%	47%	25%
Southeast	51%	16%	33%

Source: DPS Strategic Regional Analysis, Fall 2017⁵

It's worth noting that high school students in the Far Northeast have access to a yellow bus shuttle service (Success Express) for school as long as they attend a school in the Far Northeast region. Nonetheless, in 2016-17, nearly 1,400 students (26%) from the district's most geographically remote region exercised choice, as DPS promotes and asks them to do, and leave the region for school, which then requires them to figure out their own transportation. The six high schools that receive the most students from the Far Northeast – East, Northfield, George Washington, DSST Stapleton, South, and Thomas Jefferson – are between 7 and 17 miles from the Evie Garrett Dennis campus in Far Northeast, but the Far Northeast students attending those schools do not qualify for a bus pass. Now, however, if they had chosen to attend the Denver School of Innovation and Sustainable Design (DSISD), a district-run innovation school without a boundary, 14 miles away, they would have received a bus pass to get to school. Students choosing to attend DSISD deserve to have a bus pass to get to school, but so do students who choose to attend East, Northfield, George Washington, or any other high school in DPS.

The DPS walk zone for high school students for district transportation eligibility is more than 3.5 miles, which takes the average student more than an hour to walk. This is the largest walk zone in the Denver metro area. It's significantly further than the walk zones for the four other national school-choice rich school districts included in the Urban Institute report. In fact, middle school students in DPS are required to live more than 2.5 miles from their school in order to receive

⁵ Available at https://www.dpsk12.org/wp-content/uploads/Fall2017_SRA.pdf.

transportation, a distance further than high school students in Detroit, New Orleans, New York City, and Washington, D.C.⁶ A walk zone of 2.0 or 2.5 miles, while still far, would at least be more on par with other districts in the Denver metro area.

Distance	School District
0 miles	Washington, D.C.
1.0 mile	Sheridan, New Orleans
1.5 miles	Littleton, Westminster, New York City
2.0 miles	Adams 14, Brighton, Cherry Creek, Douglas County, Detroit
2.5 miles	Adams 12, Boulder Valley, Jefferson County
3.0 miles	Aurora

Using DPS data for high school students as of January 2017, we can model increased transportation eligibility if the policy was agnostic to school governance model and the walk distance was decreased to either 2.0 or 2.5 miles. If the walk zone for DPS high school students was set at 2.5 miles, the number of high school students eligible for DPS transportation would increase by 6,571 students with 63% of them qualifying for free and reduced lunch (See Exhibit A). If the walk zone was 2.0 miles, eligible students would increase to 8,359 with again 63% of those students qualifying for free and reduced lunch.

Asking transportation-eligible students to opt-in for an RTD pass would be the fiscally responsible decision. Not all of the students eligible for an RTD pass would take DPS up on the offer. Some students have cars; some students would simply choose not to have a bus pass. But for the eligible students, the process to sign up for a pass should be straightforward: register once just prior to school year and receive a year-round, regional RTD pass.

However, the opt-in component may not be necessary if RTD decides to create a more affordable youth pass option. Last year, RTD convened a working group to examine all of its passes and to make recommendations for pass programs going forward. The work group is expected to make its final recommendations to RTD senior staff on February 27, 2018. Staff will then make a recommendation to the elected RTD board, who have final say. One recommendation under consideration by the working group is to create a youth pass that would be free to youth 12 and under, and would offer day, monthly, and yearly passes at a 70% discount for youth 13 years old through graduation from high school. If RTD does in fact create this type of youth pass, DPS could partner with the City and County of Denver to cover the other 30% of the fare for high school and middle school students.

A youth pass provided at no cost to Denver high school students would act as a key to the city by expanding their education, employment, and extracurricular opportunities. Improving a student's mobility gives them better access to school and to employment. Additionally, it would support increased use of the city's MY Denver Card, which provides access to the city's libraries, cultural facilities, swimming pools, and recreation centers.

⁶ Urban Institute, at p. 12

2. Examine the efficiencies of the current DPS transportation offerings

Of the 31,746 DPS students eligible for district-provided transportation, only 60% of them ride daily. More than 12,500 eligible students choose not to use DPS transportation services. With that many eligible non-users, work needs to be done to determine if the district should reallocate unused transportation resources to ineligible students who would use the services.

The DPS transportation department is tasked with the complicated task of moving nearly 400 buses through Denver’s increasingly congested streets. It manages pick up and drop off services at 176 DPS schools with 83 different school calendars. It also supports recurring early release or late start schedules for 63 schools. Tack on a driver shortage and the logistical gymnastics grow. The department has approximately 40 less drivers this school year compared to last year. The cost of providing yellow bus service to DPS students has grown from \$19.8 million in FY2013 to \$26.3 million in FY2018. In consideration of all of these factors, it is time to examine the current transportation system to determine what efficiencies are to be found.

DPS could copy the “transportation challenge” that Boston Public Schools (BPS) conducted in 2017.⁷ BPS needed to improve the efficiency of its yellow bus transportation services because its transportation budget had skyrocketed to 11% of the district’s budget. In order to tackle this issue, BPS posed several questions on optimizing bus stop locations, improving routing efficiencies, and improving bell times, and it challenged the tech community to help solve this issue by sponsoring a hack-a-thon.

The transportation challenge was conducted efficiently and quickly. A single BPS employee – a member of the district’s finance team – dedicated 50% of his time for several months to conduct this work. Other than his time, BPS did not spend any money on this project because the \$30,000 winner’s prize was donated. In terms of timing, the project was completed and implemented in eight months. Work on the project started in-house early in 2017, the project kicked off publicly on April 1, the winning submission was announced on July 25, and the new plan was implemented at the start of the school year in September.

Based on the new transportation plan, BPS estimates it will save \$5-7 million this school year. In conversations with BPS staff, the district is very open to sharing how it conducted this work, solved problems, and implemented the winning proposal.

A DPS-sponsored hack-a-thon has the potential to improve transportation efficiencies and reduce costs, which would allow the district to focus on how to provide transportation services to students currently ineligible for, but in need of transportation.

3. Improve Success Express ridership through a community-led process

It’s time to engage in an honest, community-led conversation to determine if the DPS Success Express is achieving the original goals of the shuttle service, and if those original goals are still the most pertinent for students, parents, and the community. This is necessary because during the 2016-17 school year, the percentage of eligible students that actually ride Success Express daily hovered at around 10%.

⁷ Transportation Challenge: Solving Routing and Bell Times. Boston Public Schools.
<https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/transportationchallenge>.

Beginning in 2007, community members and Together Colorado, then known as Metro Organizations for People, started a discussion with DPS about expanding transportation opportunities for students in the Near Northeast region of the district. Most students (82%) in the Near Northeast region were ineligible for transportation. Parents were trying to navigate different options on how to get students to schools like Bruce Randolph that were adding high school grades to the middle school, and principals in Near Northeast wanted to keep high-mobility students enrolled in their school as well as implement new programmatic offerings, such as after-school tutoring.

While the transportation conversation started in Near Northeast Denver, it extended to Far Northeast Denver in 2009-10 when the district undertook a massive reorganization in the region to address the large number of poor-performing schools. The final turnaround plan for Far Northeast Denver included creating new feeder patterns, closing schools, opening charters, collocating traditional and charter schools, creating an enrollment zone, allowing for extended days and school year, and creating the Success Express shuttle.

DPS rolled out the Success Express in Near and Far Northeast Denver for the 2011-12 school year to much fanfare. The program increased transportation eligibility in the two regions immensely and was expected to save the district \$650,000-1,000,000 in transportation costs. The shuttle was held up as a great innovation for improving transportation and school choice within a district. But after six years, Success Express daily ridership does not appear to reflect a solution adequately addressing a transit problem.

In Far Northeast Denver, 15,949 students were eligible to use Success Express last school year. According to DPS Transportation, the Far Northeast had roughly 1,700 active riders daily. The percentage of eligible students riding daily is only 10.7%. The figure is even lower in Near Northeast Denver where 5,647 students were eligible to use Success Express. Again, according to DPS Transportation, the region only has about 500 active daily users. This is only 8.9% of the eligible students. The shuttle is certainly innovative, but it's time to examine how the service can be improved, and that requires asking the community what mobility issues it is facing.

In 2014, Paul Teske and Todd Ely from the University of Colorado Denver School of Public Affairs, published a case study on the shuttle service – “Success Express: Transportation Innovation in Denver Public Schools.”⁸ Teske and Ely concluded:

Although leadership was necessary so the transportation changes could move forward, the key lesson learned was the genuine need to involve all interested and affected parties in the dialogue in order to identify and understand the problems, and then make sure that the solution addressed them.⁹

⁸ Paul Teske and Todd Ely, Success Express: Transportation Innovation in Denver Public Schools. Center for Education Policy Analysis, School of Public Affairs, University of Colorado Denver. February 2014. Available at <http://milehighconnects.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Success-Express-2014.pdf>

⁹ Id. at 27.

Teske and Ely’s conclusion about Success Express is incredibly important. With daily ridership of Success Express so anemic, we need to ask students, parents, community members, and community organizations why is that the case. Why are so few students riding Success Express? This conversation needs to take place in neighborhoods across the Near and Far Northeast regions. DPS absolutely needs to be at the table for these conversation, but it does not need to lead the conversation.

4. Ask the community to approve a transportation mill levy override

DPS needs to consider asking Denver voters to approve a transportation mill levy override.

There are several factors to consider when mulling a transportation mill levy:

- Operating costs for the district’s yellow bus fleet keep growing. The DPS Transportation budget has increased by 32% from FY2013 to FY2018.
- Transportation eligibility needs to be broadened for DPS students, so they can get to the school they choose.
- If RTD does create a Youth Pass, DPS will likely be asked to contribute funds with the City and County of Denver in order to provide a year-round, regional bus pass to youth in Denver at no cost to the youth.

In 2017, the Strengthening Neighborhoods Initiative, a 42-person member committee, spent six months studying how gentrification is impacting DPS schools. The committee was asked “to review changing demographics and housing patterns in our city and the effect on our schools and to make recommendations on our policies around boundaries, choice, enrollment and academic programs in order to drive greater socio-economic integration in our schools.”¹⁰

One of the recommendations put forward to the DPS board of education on December 11, 2017 included an expanded transportation option. The recommendation told the district to “explore holding a special election to ask Denver voters to raise more money for transportation. Prioritize spending any additional dollars on helping underserved students and those living in enrollment zones access ‘a greater diversity of school options.’”¹¹

State statute allows a school district to ask its voters to approve a transportation mill levy to cover excess transportation costs.¹² The State of Colorado reimburses districts roughly 24% of its reported transportation expenditures. In FY2016-17, DPS reported transportation costs of \$25 million. The state reimbursed DPS \$5.7 million, resulting in excess transportation costs of \$19.3 million, which would be the maximum dollar amount DPS could ask voters to approve.

In 2016, Denver County had \$14.7 billion in assessed property value. Therefore, if DPS had asked Denver residents for a one mill increase dedicated for transportation, it would have raised

¹⁰ The Resolution for Strengthening Neighborhoods, School District No. 1 in the City and County of Denver, March 16, 2017. Available at [https://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/AKHTAX69CBC4/\\$file/Resolution%20for%20Strengthenin%20Neighborhoods%20Final.pdf](https://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/AKHTAX69CBC4/$file/Resolution%20for%20Strengthenin%20Neighborhoods%20Final.pdf)

¹¹ Melanie Asmar, “Gentrification is changing Denver schools. These recommendations aim to address that.” Chalkbeat, December 12, 2017. Available at <https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/co/2017/12/12/gentrification-is-changing-denver-schools-these-recommendations-aim-to-address-that/>

¹² Colo. Rev. Stat. § 22-40-102 (1.7)

an extra \$14.7 million in 2016. An increase of one mill would cost the typical homeowner in Denver about \$28 per year.

Aside from raising money to address transportation needs in the district, a transportation mill levy has the added benefit of pushing more money into classrooms. Every dollar raised by a transportation mill replaces a dollar that had been spent on transportation needs, which can now be used for education purposes. Using the example from above, an additional \$14.7 million could be directed to classrooms.