How to Strategically Differentiate Service

Seven practical policy solutions for creating a more accessible, student-centered, and equitable transportation network that add flexibility and lower costs.

Why

School systems seek to personalize instructional delivery and mental health supports, but they have not taken the same approach to student transportation. If "one size fits none", then it is a logical outcome that the "yellow bus for everyone" transportation service that many schools provide will not meet student and family needs.

Achieving consistently strong transportation results for every child requires varying support based on student need. Differentiating service not only ensures each individual child receives the just right transportation service they require, this approach also makes efficient and strategic use of resources, helping improve service quality and reliability across the entire system and benefiting every rider.

Connecting to Teaching & Learning

The approach to differentiating student transportation has many parallels with how educators personalize instruction. In teaching, the first focus should always be ensuring effective core instruction is challenging, engaging, and delivered in a safe and welcoming environment. Educators design learner-centric instructional approaches that tailor the support, methods, and process to help each child accomplish identified learning goals. Flexible educational environments—in which students can encounter, engage, and express their understanding in a variety of ways—ensure that all students can access and participate in meaningful learning opportunities.

The concept of differentiation is the same when applied to student mobility: tailoring transportation to meet specific student needs. Schools must personalize transportation to meet every learner's needs and to ensure transportation is not a barrier to accessing learning and enrichment.
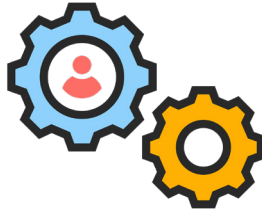
How to Differentiate Student Mobility

Building an intentionally differentiated student mobility system starts by ensuring there is strong core service (typically routed buses and vans) that meets the mobility needs of most students. To assess the strength of service, a school district should set clear goals for important student transportation performance measures, such as on-time performance, seat utilization, trip utilization, driver attendance, ridership, and parent/student satisfaction. These goals must consider their unique students and community to determine what options are available (e.g., public transit, rideshare, caregivers with private vehicles).

This analysis of assets and gaps will guide the development of a range of mobility options that can be strategically deployed with increasing customization based on demonstrated student need. Those needs should determine how Schools provide more individualized solutions and leverage multiple modes. Leveraging multiple modes and adopting varied schedule design approaches can be especially effective for ensuring access to after school and weekend learning opportunities. Lastly, schools must align their transportation evaluation plan with the level of differentiation. The more customized the transportation support, the more frequently it should be evaluated for implementation fidelity and impact.

Service Design Levers for Differentiating Service

In order to differentiate service, a school district should intentionally provide a spectrum of student mobility options. There are countless means of differentiating transportation service. While this list may be both exciting and daunting, school teams don't need to differentiate along every dimension, for every student. Start by identifying those students for whom transportation is an identified challenge. Then, determine what adjustments are feasible and could make a difference. Even seemingly small changes can have an impact. Examples of service design levers that could be utilized to differentiate transportation include:

➡ **Vehicle:**
Full-size bus, small bus, multipurpose vehicle (MPV), van, truck, sedan

➡ **Driver:**
District driver, school staff member, outsourced vendor

➡ **Service Frequency:**
Fixed schedule, circulating routes, multi-tiered, repeat runs

Route Design:
Transit-style shared routes for secondary and schools of choice, hub & spoke

Service Levels:
Walk-to-stop distance varied by grade level or school programming, closest safest corner, curb-to-curb, community/hub stops, deviated stops

Eligibility:
Vary by student grade level or school programming (inner + outer boundary)

Timing:
Adjust the time a student is picked up or dropped off

Public Transit:
Free or discounted transit pass, service connectors or integration points

Parent Stipends:
Payment in-lieu of regular service (up front or retroactive, restricted or not)

Rideshare / Carpool:
On demand/flexible booking, tech-enabled or supported carpooling

Active Transport:
Investment in safe infrastructure, crossing guards, walking school bus

Attendant / Aide:
Vehicle attendant, 1:1 attendant, nurse, public transit guide

Travel Training:
Attendant travels with student (solo or group) and provides guidance

Communication:
Wait times, calling, texting, text/app-based ETAs & updates

Addressing Chronic Absenteeism

Transportation is one of the top issues that educators and parents identify as a root cause behind chronic absenteeism. The first focus must be on improving core service across the system to ensure that student transportation is reliable, on-time, and safe. Then, for students who are chronically absent and for whom transportation is an identified challenge, educator teams should collaborate with the family and student to select interventions and adjustments that may resolve issues.

For instance, if a student frequently oversleeps and misses their bus, a school system has a variety of options:

➡ **Expand Communication Support:**
Utilize an automated and human-assisted text notification system to alert the family that the vehicle is approaching,

➡ **Increase Wait Time:**
Add a few minutes of additional vehicle loading time in the route manifest for the student's stop to create a time buffer,

➡ **Adjust Timing:**
Adjust the order of stops so that the student is picked up later in the route,

➡ **Move Stop Location:**
Move the stop to a closer location so the student' doesn't have to walk as far,

➡ **Offer Other Modes:**
Offer parent payment in lieu of service to accommodate later and abbreviated travel.

Fostering Independence and Ensuring Access for Students With Disabilities

Personalizing mobility support is especially important when an individual education plan (IEP) team determines that transportation is a related service for a student. When tailoring transportation service for students with disabilities, it is crucial that educator teams align service with accomplishing the learner's identified IEP goals and with consideration of their unique strengths and needs. IEP teams determine eligibility for transportation services to assist a student in benefiting from special education and related services.

Progressively fostering independence and ensuring access to the least restrictive environment is likewise an important lens through which to design mobility solutions. For instance, could a student be successful with a stop located at the closest, safest corner to their home rather than relying on curb-to-curb transport from their residence? Would providing a travel guide/aide or offering travel training make utilization of public transit a more feasible option? Adopting transportation accommodations like these should be meaningfully reviewed each year during annual IEP meetings to ensure that the plan in place is the best fit for the students current and long-term goals.

Too often, school systems tend to conceptualize transportation accommodations as binary choices: a student receives highly accommodating (and potentially, isolating) curb-to-curb transportation or the student is routed and provided service in the exact same manner as every other general education student. This is largely due to a lack of vision and understanding on the part of IEP teams of all the ways that student mobility support can be tailored. To facilitate the provision of more nuanced and personalized accommodations, school systems should provide clear guidance and a suggested protocol for reviewing and determining transportation accommodations. Such guidance should outline the spectrum of mobility options that could be provided and the purpose or benefit of each support.

4MATIV is transforming student mobility. With our technology and performance management platform and multi-modal approach, we get students to school for less cost and with less hassle so they can access the learning opportunities that maximize their potential. For more information, visit 4mativ.org.