

Student Mobility Policy Playbook

Seven practical policy solutions to create a more accessible, student-centered, and equitable transportation network that adds flexibility and lower costs.

While completely reconfiguring student mobility systems requires long-term strategic planning and real political will, these seven practical strategies can be the start to unlocking equitable, student-centered, and cost-effective student mobility solutions.

1: Expand Vehicle Allowances

In some regions, a yellow bus is the only vehicle allowed to transport students, no matter if it carries one student or 60 and no matter how far those students need to go. This inefficiency can be remedied by allowing for smaller vehicles like sedans, mini-vans, SUVs, and 10 passenger vans. Fifteen passenger vans should also be considered. While these have been historically prohibited due to rollover risk, new safety features and a lower center of gravity on EV models now make them safe. Compared with buses, all these vehicles are cheaper to run and maintain and are more readily electrified. And with the right driver and features like student tracking, cameras, seatbelts, and other safety technologies, these vehicles can actually increase safety, all while expanding opportunities.

2: Rethink Driver Requirements

To address driver shortages, states should replace Class A Commercial Driver's License (CDL) requirements for small bus sizes with the easier-to-acquire Class B CDL. Passenger vehicles should not require a CDL at all. CDL requirements for small buses and passenger vehicles shrink driver pools because it is expensive and onerous to secure a CDL, causing drivers to drop-off during the long process to qualify and requiring knowledge not applicable to driving school vehicles. In addition, shortages in testing sites and appointments and a lack of qualified personnel for testing create prolonged delays for certification. Expanding the kinds of vehicles that can be operated without a CDL and making CDLs easier to acquire will improve the driver pool and make it easier to create a diversified and efficient fleet.

3: Establish Clear and Aligned Safety Standards

To diversify modes and options and ensure new operators are fit to transport our most precious cargo, clearer definitions of what makes a driver safe to transport students across modes need to be established. States must articulate a consistent set of criteria for all drivers—regardless of mode of school transport—that consider varied methods for assessing and measuring driver readiness, performance, and risky behaviors. States should encourage adoption of research-driven training requirements and policies for managing behavior, de-escalating crises, and transporting students with special needs. Consistent professional development on these crucial topics will make it easier for schools to confidently adopt new modes and transportation options that meet the needs of these students and families.

4: Allow for Diverse and Differentiated Modes

For students too far away or too impracticable to route, taxi services, rideshare programs, public transportation, and direct-to-parent stipends can offer safe, equitable, and cost-effective alternatives. However, these modes must be integrated into a thoughtful transportation strategy that includes state-level funding support and regulatory clarity. Personalized services should be incentivized and supported, but reasonable guardrails and oversight must be installed to prevent overuse. Direct-to-parent stipends can be cheaper than van services, but these programs should encourage carpooling and control for families who could easily ride buses or walk. Likewise, leaning on existing public transit can be a solution for some students, but given disparities in public transit access common in most communities, simply handing out bus passes to students isn't sufficient until it is determined to be a safe and equitable solution.

5: Simplify “Extra” Vehicle and Driver Requirements

With regulations for drivers and vehicles scattered across state education departments, the U.S. Department of Transportation, and state Departments of Motor Vehicles, operators and schools struggle to understand all the policies and statutes with which they must comply. Local regulations can mean additional driver tests, more vehicle equipment, and costly vehicle modifications that provide little benefit to students and families. While regulations are important and can encourage local control, too often the complicated array of rules makes compliance difficult and expensive, impedes small business growth, stifles local innovations, and scares off national players. States should seek to streamline regulations for student transportation, eliminate unused and impractical requirements, create clarity across agencies, and advocate for simplification at the federal level.

6: Help Manage Risk

Keeping students safe and mitigating risk are paramount to a successful transportation system. But if schools want to encourage more walking, adopt a carpooling app, or share their vehicles with another program, the matter of risk transference through insurance coverage gets messy because insurance markets typically are not ready to cover innovative solutions. If an accident happens on a public transit bus or to a biker using a school-sponsored bike, who is responsible? Unless insurers are willing to underwrite new transportation options with non-cost-prohibitive premiums, innovation will be stifled. So even if a district updates their own regulations to permit non-traditional transportation options, the lack of insurance may limit implementation. Until insurers feel more confident in their ability to understand and price coverage, states must step in to help underwrite and clarify risk for districts and schools implementing novel student mobility solutions.

7: Collect and Share Data

Because states have little insight into how local school mobility systems are designed and configured, each of the policy initiatives outlined above would benefit from comprehensive standards for collecting and transparently sharing data. Evaluating efficiency, for example, must evolve beyond simple odometer readings, route counts, or the number of scheduled riders to include metrics like cost per student-mile, seat utilization, and vehicle trip utilization. And because not all contexts are created equal, rural and remote districts, urban and suburban districts, and schools that provide innovative regional programming or programs for students with specialized needs must be compared with their peers. Doing so allows schools to offer more flexible options for students who cost more to transport. And without the systematic collection and sharing of data, forward-thinking districts can't determine how best to electrify their fleet.



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