

Student Mobility Funding Playbook

Six funding recommendations that ensure policies and mandates receive the financial assistance they need to fully support student learning.

As with [the policy landscape](#), the funding landscape is also a tapestry of strategies and approaches that vary place to place and state to state, often with hyperlocal differences. And a system's policy and funding frameworks do not always track: a permissive policy environment does not necessarily yield a generous funding environment, and vice versa. Whether (and in what form) transportation is allowed, required, and funded exist in different permutations: transportation can be mandated but not funded, mandated but highly restricted and unfunded, or mandated and funded with few restrictions.

And it gets even more complicated. Some school systems are required to provide transportation for private/charter schools and some are not. Sometimes that requirement comes with funding, and other times it doesn't. In Boston, districts are required to offer transportation for Catholic, parochial, and charter schools, but the district cannot dictate their hours or calendar, effectively leading to an underfunded mandate.

Here are six funding recommendations necessary to piecing together a smarter, more coherent funding puzzle.

1: Ensure Adequate Resources

While policy and funding don't always track, they should. That means if a state or the federal government requires something, it should be adequately funded. This extends to policy obligations regarding learning requirements and ensuring that funding for transportation-related expenses to meet them are adequately allocated, and that they compensate for inequities in revenue generation across localities. In short: there should be no unfunded mandates when it comes to ensuring equitable access for students. This includes McKinney-Vento and Special Education transportation needs, which are federal mandates, but which are most often underfunded at the state level. Texas and Arizona are examples of states that chronically underfund transportation services for McKinney-Vento students whereas Minnesota is an example of a state that provides generous reimbursement (up to 95%) for transportation expenses for students with special needs and McKinney-Vento students. Any concerns about how that funding is used can be mitigated by ensuring accountability and transparency and by establishing standards of efficiency.

2: Make Funding Flexible

Because different contexts and programs have different mobility needs and certain programs require higher fixed costs, there shouldn't be a one-size fits all funding solution. In addition, adequate funding must support innovative transportation ideas and shouldn't discriminate against multi-modal, learner-centric, and differentiated supply where a particular kind of supply option or mobility support mechanism is best suited to meet the access needs of some students, including access to off-site ELT learning opportunities (see [Policy Playbook](#)). That should include things like van/TNC/taxi service, direct parent reimbursement or stipends, ESA eligible options, active transport, and public transit, so long as they are deployed in a transparent, accountable way where it makes sense to do so.

3: Attach Funding to the Student

Since the public is interested in supporting student access to viable educational opportunities, funding should be linked to students and their learning needs. This means that where the student goes, the funding should follow. Reasonable people can disagree about whether the government should be supporting elite private schools or religious schools. But where there are publicly funded and well-regulated charter schools or publically funded career and technical programs to which we want to increase access, then funding to provide transportation to these opportunities should follow those students. This is especially true where charter schools are state funded and regulated and where transport provision is mandated (as indicated above). The structure of each state's funding formula should be driven by students' needs, and a significant portion of transportation-related resources should also flow through that need-based formula.

4: Differentiate and Weight Funding Allocations

Different contexts require different funding models. Some students have more complex service needs at the state level due to factors such as distance, density, and terrain. More funding should be provided to students who require additional mobility resources to access programming and to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities. The bias should always be to incentivize low-cost modalities. [Consider this scale](#)—proposed in draft legislation in the Arizona State Senate and promoted by A for Arizona and Allovue—which can serve as a model for how to distribute weights.

A Sparsity:

For states like Arizona, distance traveled in a single day is a significant factor, especially for how far open enrollment students are willing to go. It costs more for rural and remote students, but a sparsity weight can expedite more direct micro transit routes and grants to families to cut travel time down and ensure students have consistent methods to get to school.

B Youth Experiencing Homelessness and in Foster Care:

To account for high mobility and distance traveled, these student populations require additional funding for reliable and individualized routes to have real choices like their peers and stability in their educational journey.

C Extraordinary Needs:

This weight acknowledges the costs of services and prioritizes student safety for students with the most significant disabilities and enables schools to expand routes for 18–22-year-old students with special needs to access meaningful workforce training.



Grades 9-12:

To ensure all students can become ‘career ready,’ additional funding should be provided to help high school students access rigorous credential training and certification programs, apprenticeships, and internships year-round, not just the calendar school year.



High Poverty:

In states where there is a clear disparity in funding equity based on student need, it’s critical to understand whether the distribution of state revenue or the distribution of local revenue is driving inequities in total revenues. In some states—such as Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Texas—that do provide progressive state funding, the amount is still insufficient to counteract the huge disparities in local funding between high- and low-poverty districts. According to The Education Trust, “High-poverty districts should be receiving substantially more funding—not equal, and certainly not less—than their more affluent counterparts” ([Equal is Not Good Enough](#)). To ensure every student can participate in ‘Learn Everywhere’ programming, high-impact tutoring, sports, and other extracurriculars, students must be provided transportation home afterwards. A family’s income level and limited safe transportation options should no longer be the barrier to enrichment learning.

5: Invest in CDL Training Across the Board

With the nationwide shortage of CDL-trained drivers, it’s imperative that states and school systems invest in strategic training, specifically for school transportation. Because a CDL is such a valuable, portable credential, some of those trained with school dollars end up as commercial truck drivers. This is a general public workforce issue because school funding should not go to train truck drivers. In addition, states must increase the number of testing centers and extend hours so that more people can acquire CDLs. Even better, districts and vendors should establish their own qualified testing centers (with the proper oversight, of course). And because training takes time, states should offer support pay and incentives to encourage individuals to invest in these credentials.

6: Reward Collaboration

Funding solutions, efficiencies, and cost savings can also be found at the boundaries, where systems, districts, agencies, and other non-school entities meet and overlap. Locally, this means finding opportunities for districts to share transportation services with one another and with charter schools, private schools, and micro-schools that surround them (or that they contain within their boundaries). Many of those opportunities can be found in common transportation gaps. As [A for Arizona shows](#), “Common transportation gaps across communities include getting high school students to and from career training, clubs and work as well as after school opportunities for students of all ages. Partnering with other school systems and community partners for shared transportation solutions is cost effective, limits the need for new drivers, and is easier on students.” In general (and in the face of declining enrollment), sharing assets, leveraging network overlap, stacking services to decrease unit costs, and other joint efforts are also wise fiscal decisions because collaboration can help diminish school or district transportation costs. Given that some transportation costs are fixed (e.g., every vehicle needs a driver and a school system cannot pay the driver 4% less simply because revenues have fallen 4%) or fairly “lumpy” (e.g., if a bus holds 60 students and there are 61 riders, two vehicles are needed), resource sharing and cooperative agreements can help address budget constraints.



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