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## Can Yellow Buses Still Do It Alone?

By Ben DeGrow

### Summary

A shortage of bus drivers and increased interest in educational options call us to find additional ways of getting children to school.

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The school bus need not be the only way to get students to the classroom.

Adapt or falter: That may be the choice facing Michigan's local K-12 public school systems in the wake of prolonged disruptions brought on by COVID. One area where schools and families need more flexibility is transportation.

As is the case in so many activities these days, the task of getting children to and from schools is afflicted by a tight labor market. Bus drivers, whether employed in-house or contracted through a private business, are widely reported to be in short supply. Fewer drivers are coming back to work after pandemic-induced school closures sidelined their services. The situation is so bad that the superintendent of one small mid-Michigan district earned a commercial driver's license so he could pitch in on some bus routes.

But the challenging new reality begs the question of whether districts should stay fully invested in yellow buses as the sole means of giving students a ride. Today, more families are getting children to and from school on their own. At the peak of school-run bus systems, in the early 1980s, over 60% of students nationally rode to and from school at public expense. That rate declined over the next few decades, though the latest numbers are not available.

Public schools in Michigan are not required by law to provide transportation to general education students, though about one-third of charter schools and nearly all conventional districts do. Nearly 4% of public school budgets are dedicated to student transportation. Given the difficulties in finding qualified bus drivers, many local schools should be prepared to provide this service in different ways.

State policymakers should start by looking west. Arizona recently awarded \$20 million in competitive Transportation Modernization Grants to schools and local governments that offer innovative solutions for the challenge of conveying students safely and promptly to campus. Strategies include deploying passenger vans and giving stipends to parents. Further, one of Colorado's largest school districts recently partnered with a child-friendly ridesharing service to make sure no child would be left without a way to get to school and back.

For Michigan schools to follow suit would require some changes to state policy. Current law prevents schools from using vehicles that can transport 11 or more students, "except for the standard yellow bus."

As RedefinED executive editor Matthew Ladner points out, states that offer more parental choice in education depend less on yellow buses, which

are designed to move students within prescribed attendance boundaries. Some families can afford to navigate their way to schools beyond those boundaries, but transportation can be a barrier to exercising choice for parents with fewer financial means.

Low-income families, in particular, could benefit from extra financial aid to help move their children to and from another district, charter or private school. Instead of depending on the standard bus service that isn't designed to move their children to their desired destination, they could use the new funds to pay for creative alternatives. One potential source of financing includes the Student Opportunity Scholarships plan recently vetoed by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer. Paying for student transportation could be one use of those funds.

Parents who exercise choice aren't the only ones who could use greater flexibility in transportation. Even for school systems collecting and delivering students within standard school boundaries, yellow buses shouldn't necessarily be expected to tackle the job alone.

Frustrations associated with COVID schooling have only hastened and expanded the desire for change, while a shifting labor market has hampered schools' ability to meet transportation needs. The time has come to open the door to more creative alternatives.

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