

ACCESS & EQUITY IN AUTHORIZING: TRANSPORTATION

THE CASE FOR TRANSPORTATION IN CHARTER SCHOOLS

Charter schools are schools of choice. They offer a public alternative to assigned schools for families. Having another school option is important, especially for families whose neighborhood schools are not high-quality or are not a good fit. Families that lack personal access to reliable transportation face a barrier when attempting to access a charter school that does not provide transportation.

This may lead to inequities: transportation usually comes at a cost that can pose a significant burden for low-income families and impact their choice of school.

What Transportation Means in Today's Context

For many, the mention of school transportation elicits visions of classic yellow buses stopping to pick up students directly outside their front doors. However, school transportation often looks different today. Take New York City, for example. The New York Department of Education (DOE) provides transportation to all city students who live more than 0.5 miles from their school, regardless of whether they attend a traditional school, charter school, or even non-public school.¹ Some students are eligible for yellow bus transport, but most students are provided with a free MetroCard that allows them to ride the city's subways and buses to school.

WHY ACCESS AND EQUITY MATTER IN AUTHORIZING

When done well, charter school authorizing has the power to transform children's lives. This starts with authorizers' integral role ensuring every charter school is accessible and equitable for all. Good charter school policy is essential to support authorizers in implementing practices that promote this equity and accessibility. That's why NACSA provides guidance on a variety of equity and access policy issues that can impact children's and families' experiences with charter schools.

Defining Access and Equity

Different working definitions of terms like access and equity can lead to confusion as well as disparate visions and actions. NACSA uses these definitions:

Educational Access²: The ways in which educational institutions and policies strive to remove any barriers that might prevent some students from equitable participation in certain courses or academic programs.

Educational Equity³: Raising the achievement of all students, while narrowing the gaps between the highest- and lowest-performing students and eliminating the racial predictability and disproportionality of which student groups occupy the highest and lowest achievement categories.

¹ <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/docs/default-source/default-document-library/a-801-english>

³ Adapted from <https://www.edglossary.org/access/>

⁴ Adapted from <https://www.edglossary.org/equity/>

In San Antonio, the school district uses what is known as a hub system.² There are multiple bus stops all over the city. After students are picked up from a stop, they are driven to a hub where they transfer to another bus that takes them to their school.

In some cases, school districts even use for-hire transportation companies (such as [Zūm](#)) to serve homeless students, as well as single- and dual-rider routes.⁵

Gone are the days when student transportation automatically meant door-to-door, yellow bus service. When considering student transportation, authorizers and charter schools can and should think creatively.

Authorizing and Transportation

As important as this issue is to ensuring equitable access, some states say nothing in law on charter school transportation. Currently, only 16 states⁶ have laws that lay out how transportation must be provided to charter students. Others don't require transportation but do require the school to address transportation in their charter school application. However, NACSA research shows that in states that do not require transportation, only 25 percent of new school proposals included transportation plans.⁷

Here's where authorizers can step in to ensure access and equity, with good charter school policy as the foundation for authorizers' regulations and practices. Transportation policies don't need to be identical in every state, especially since state contexts vary, but the issue should be addressed in ways that put student needs first.

Is It Okay Not to Provide Transportation?

While choice and transportation tend to go hand-in-hand, there may be certain circumstances where not providing transportation would have little impact on accessibility. For example, if a charter school is designed to serve an extremely small geographic area, the overwhelming majority of families within that area may be able to access the school by walking or other non-school-provided transportation.

Additionally, there are some school districts that simply do not provide transportation to any students. For example, in Indiana, state law allows districts to end busing with three years notice to families. Some Indiana school districts have announced that they will seek to terminate transportation services due to costs.⁸ If a district does not provide transportation to any of its students, it may not be fair to expect charter schools within that district to provide transportation either.

⁴ <https://www.saisd.net/page/transportation-home>

⁵ <https://stnonline.com/special-reports/not-your-parents-carpool/>

⁶ As of January 2018: <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquestNB2C?rep=CS1707>

⁷ <https://www.qualitycharters.org/research/pipeline/transportation>

⁸ <https://www.governing.com/topics/education/gov-indiana-school-bus-ruling.html>

WHAT'S HAPPENING AROUND THE COUNTRY

One size rarely fits all, so it is not surprising to see states treat charter school transportation differently. Below is a summary of common policy approaches to transportation, as well as benefits and challenges with each.



NEW HAMPSHIRE

District transportation for all within a catchment zone

All students who reside in the school district in which the charter school is located must be provided transportation by the district in the same way that transportation is provided for peers who attend that district's traditional schools. Any and all additional related transportation costs are paid by the charter.

Challenges

Like many other states, New Hampshire charter schools may accept students from multiple districts or from across the state. Therefore, one challenge of this transportation policy is that only students living within the district benefit, while those outside it have more limited access. Depending on the school location (for example, if located in a wealthier district), this could still create inequity and limit access.

Additionally, it may be hard for a charter school to carry any extra costs, especially at the beginning of its charter term. This can be exacerbated by the requirement that the transportation be the same as the district (often traditional yellow bus service), which is often expensive.

Charters may find it particularly burdensome since there is no specific funding mechanism for schools that opt to provide transportation to students outside the district.

Benefits

Assuming a majority of a school's students come from the district or community in which they are located, limiting a transportation requirement to a specific district or catchment zone can still result in more students having access than if no transportation was provided.

1996

Year Charter Law
Established

2

Number of Authorizers
and Types (LEA, SEA)

26

Number of
Charter Schools

3,422

Number of Students
in Charter Schools



MAINE

Required transportation plans, funding available

In Maine, a charter school must have a plan for providing transportation to students within their catchment area. They must also describe what they will do, if anything, to provide transportation to students outside the catchment area. Charters receive transportation funds for all enrolled students, regardless of where they live.

Challenges

Maine charters may find it particularly burdensome to provide transportation to students, due to the state's rural nature. While districts are required to forward transportation dollars to charters based on the cost of transportation services provided by the public charter school to the student in the form of per-pupil dollars, it is unclear if that amount actually could cover the full costs associated with busing students across district lines.

Benefits

The law does not specify that charter schools must provide the same type of transportation as the district, so schools can tailor transportation solutions that make sense for them and their students.



TENNESSEE

Required transportation plans, funding available

In Tennessee, charter schools are not mandated to provide transportation, but they must address transportation in their application. If they choose to provide transportation, which must be done in the same manner as the district, they receive transportation funds like a traditional school (only applies to students living in the school district). Charter schools that choose not to provide transportation do not receive these funds.

Challenges

Similar to New Hampshire, Tennessee law limits the types of transportation that can be provided.

In addition, numerous families are likely indirectly being denied access because schools can choose not to provide transportation, causing educational inequity.

Benefits

Because there is funding available for schools that choose to provide transportation, Tennessee's charter schools do not face the kinds of financial burdens that charters face in states without transportation funding.

2011

Year Charter Law Established

1

Number of Authorizer and Type (ICB)

9

Number of Charter Schools

1,955

Number of Students in Charter Schools

2002

Year Charter Law Established

5

Number of Authorizers and Types (SEA, LEA, ICB)

109

Number of Charter Schools

34,984

Number of Students in Charter Schools

POLICY OPTIONS

Charter school transportation law and how it is implemented can be impacted by a variety of contextual factors, including but not limited to:

- **The educational program offered by a school**
- **The availability of mass transit**
- **The location of a school and whether students can safely walk there**
- **The impact that a lack of transportation will have on school segregation**

Given that state contexts widely differ, authorizing policy on transportation may vary. However, NACSA offers the following policy guidance:

Require transportation plans.

State lawmakers should require charter schools to have transportation plans. These plans can include multiple ways that enable students to travel to school. It should be clear if the plan applies to all students, or just those within the boundaries of the district or catchment area. If a school does not plan on providing transportation, it should have to give a rationale.

Allow for flexibility—both for authorizers and for schools.

Authorizers are in a unique position to understand the landscapes in which they are approving charter schools and authorize in a way that is community responsive. Therefore, state laws should give authorizers the ability to require charter schools to provide transportation that is in line with, but does not exceed, transportation options provided at other public schools.

Additionally, with other forms of transportation beyond yellow bus door-to-door service, policies should allow schools to determine what forms of transportation will best meet student and school needs.

Provide funding.

If lawmakers require charter schools to provide transportation, state law should also provide adequate funds to cover the cost of such services. This allocation can look differently depending on the state. For example, the New York Department of Education covers all transportation costs for New York City schools, both traditional and charter. In other places, state laws include transportation funds as part of the per-pupil dollars that are allocated to charters. When no transportation funds are provided, such as in Detroit, charter schools are forced to make significant financial trade-offs and may opt to not provide transportation in order to address other equity issues, such as quality teacher recruitment. Adequate funding can prevent such untenable dilemmas.

CONCLUSION

Charter schools have a unique opportunity to break down barriers and open doors to all families. However, that isn't possible if entry is limited to those with the resources to get their child to school—a risk, if schools do not help families, especially economically disadvantaged ones, access transportation. Authorizers can and should facilitate equitable access to all charter schools via transportation, and state laws and policies need to be in place to support authorizers in making this happen.