



# The Mind Trust

Transformative education. Rooted in equity.

## **Protecting School Choice:** How Flexibility in Transportation Can Improve Access and Efficiency

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

November 2021



# Introduction

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To protect a strong school choice landscape, it is critical that Hoosiers leverage their innovative spirit to rethink and redesign the state's school transportation systems. Indiana is a national leader in education innovation with one of the most comprehensive school choice landscapes in the country. The state has a variety of school options for students and families, including inter-district choice, magnet schools, charter schools, virtual schools, "Innovation Network Schools", choice scholarships to attend non-public schools, adult education schools, and schools for special populations. Families across the state have enthusiastically enrolled in these options and demand continues to grow across all school types.

Despite these developments in Indiana's education system, Indiana's approach to school transportation has largely remained unchanged. System-wide challenges include:

- \* Indiana public schools have struggled to maximize service quality and manage financial sustainability of school transportation due to **rising costs, inefficient routing, "one size fits all" vehicle fleets, and chronic bus driver shortages.**
- \* Public charter schools, in particular, have often struggled with **vendor instability** due to many vendors leveraging school corporations as "lynchpin" contracts, and treating public charter or nonpublic schools as simply supplemental to their core business.

These challenges have significant ripple effects, including families selecting schools for access to transportation rather than "best fit" or most desired choice.

In a state that values choice and innovation, it is time for this to change. Transportation systems play a critical role in ensuring many Hoosier children, especially the most vulnerable, are able to choose and access high-quality schools with timely attendance each day. These recommendations call for government agencies, educational leaders, and policymakers to envision a 21st century school transportation system that strengthens and protects Indiana's rich school choice landscape. Commitment to flexibility and collaboration will advance this vision and leverage available assets and resources most efficiently—ultimately to the benefit of students and families.

## Special Thanks

We wish to give particular thanks to Ben Kleban, independent consultant and lead author and researcher for this report. We also wish to recognize the support and partnership of EdChoice and Institute for Quality Education.



# Values

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The following non-negotiables should be honored to balance school choice, autonomy, access, and equity in redesigning an outdated transportation system:

- \* The safety of students should always be prioritized over cost-efficiency goals.
- \* All students attending public schools who do not live within one mile of their chosen school, whether district-operated or charter schools, should be offered some form of free transportation from anywhere within the school corporation’s geographic boundaries.
- \* School choice policies should ensure students have sufficient opportunity to attend high-quality schools, with transportation serving as the means to realize that access.
- \* The transport time for any student to a public school should not exceed one hour and should ideally be shorter for younger students.<sup>2</sup> Research has shown that students with longer commutes experience higher absentee rates.<sup>3</sup>
- \* Schools should have autonomy to establish start and end times for the school day based on the needs of their students and communities, however this report recommends collaboration across schools for maximum effect on routing efficiency.
- \* Collaboration and partnership among all school types, including traditional school corporations, independent charter schools, Innovation Network Schools, and nonpublic schools is critical to improve service delivery, reduce costs, and enhance transportation infrastructure more broadly.

## Issue Overview

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In Indiana, approximately 650,000 public school students ride 13,365 yellow school buses to and from school every day. This represents about 60% of the total student population in the state—well above the national average of 47%. With 119 charter schools, 38 virtual school programs<sup>4</sup>, 28 magnet schools<sup>5</sup>, 30 Innovation Network Schools<sup>6</sup>, 10 special populations schools, and 17 adult education schools<sup>7</sup>, as well as the nation’s largest voucher program, Indiana has a nationally unique choice landscape with a diverse portfolio of high quality options for these 650,000 students.

Yet, contrary to research that has demonstrated the impact transportation can have in empowering real parent choice<sup>8</sup>, Indiana has generally not offered or provided legislative support for transportation solutions for its school choice

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### Indiana Schools by the Numbers as of 2021-2022

**119**

charter schools

**38**

virtual school programs

**28**

magnet schools

**30**

Innovation Network Schools

**10**

special population schools

**17**

adult education schools

**36,700**

students attended private schools using a Choice Scholarship in 2019-2020

**64,685**

students transferred to a public school outside their home district boundaries

programs. School voucher, and inter-district choice programs do not generally offer free transportation to students attending these programs. Many public charter schools offer transportation, but do not have access to the local tax dollars school corporations use to pay for transportation expenses.

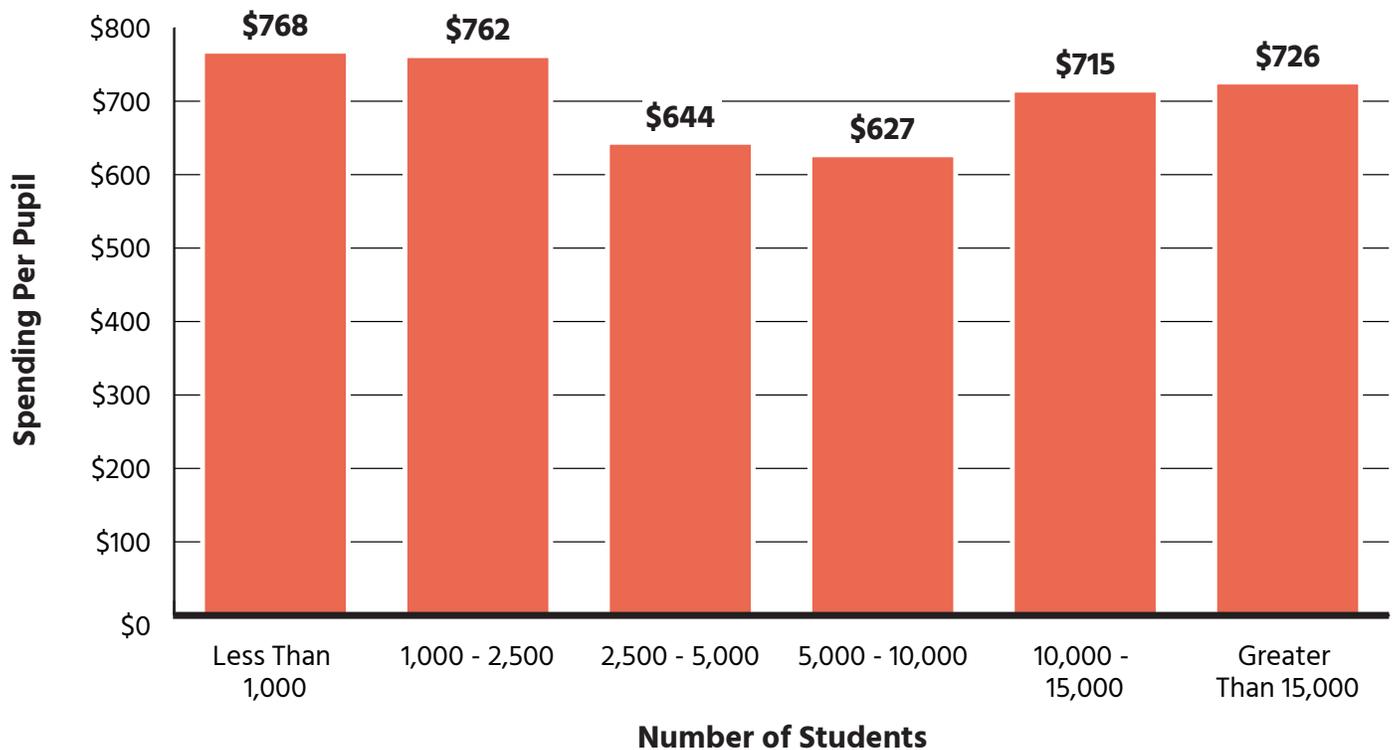
The average statewide spending per pupil by school corporations on transportation increased by 5% between 2008-2009 and 2017-2018, while the national average spending per pupil increased by 8% over that same time period.<sup>9</sup> However, the rates of cost increases over time have also varied substantially between school corporations. About 30% of Indiana school corporations, including Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS), experienced increases in inflation-adjusted spending per pupil by more than 20% between 2008-2009 and 2018-2019. Approximately 7% of school corporations or charter schools in Indiana spend more than the national average per pupil on school transportation.

While economies of scale might work for some regions of Indiana, the size of the LEA does not guarantee lower transportation spending per pupil. For example, school systems with substantial ridership demand, driven by more open school choice policies, often experience significant challenges in maximizing yellow bus utilization, especially given Indiana’s current restrictions on allowable school transportation vehicle types and sizes.

Counties with robust choice landscapes require transportation solutions that properly balance efficiency gains, but not at the expense of choice, autonomy, and maximizing student access to quality schools.

**Figure 3**

**2018-2019 Average Transportation Spending per Pupil (Excluding IPS)**



Source: Author calculations based on Form 9 expenditures; IDOE public records request. Enrollment from IDOE data reports. <https://www.in.gov/doi/it/data-center-and-reports/>

# Recommendations

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The following summary of recommendations represents a comprehensive playbook for both Indiana schools and policy makers to enable substantial improvements to the quality and efficiency of school transportation systems in Indiana.

## Policymakers



### Vehicles

1. Eliminate the requirement that public elementary and secondary schools may only use a “school bus” to transport children from home to school.
2. Allow “appropriate vehicles” and “special purpose buses” to be used by school corporations, charter schools, private contractors, and TNCs to provide regular home-to-school transportation.
3. Modify the definition of an “appropriate vehicle” from having a capacity of eight or fewer passengers to a capacity of 15 or fewer passengers.
4. Eliminate the requirement that special purpose buses, when owned by a school corporation, have capacity for at least 30 passengers.
5. Maintain and expand government financial incentives to encourage LEAs throughout the state to acquire alternatively fueled buses, including propane, CNG, and electric buses.



### Safety

6. Establish more robust recordkeeping and reporting related to accidents involving school transportation vehicles and drivers.
7. Require all vehicles, including those with capacity of less than 11 passengers, to comply with reasonable safety standards and be routinely inspected both on a scheduled and random basis.
8. Require anyone hired to drive children to and from school on any type of vehicle, regardless of passenger capacity, to undergo criminal background checks and pass periodic drug tests.



### Management

9. Invest in public transit infrastructure to encourage and accommodate integration of school transportation services with public transit solutions.
10. Incentivize centralized, multi-agency coordination of school transportation resulting in added value through improved efficiency and reduced costs.

## Indiana Schools



### Vehicles

1. Limit the use of yellow school buses to routes that are heavily populated with riders within close proximity to each other.
2. Deploy smaller vehicles to “right size” the vehicle solution best aligned with minimizing costs, maximizing efficiency, and reducing ride times for children.
3. Acquire alternatively-fueled buses, including propane, CNG and/or electric buses, and apply for government subsidies to help finance the purchase of these vehicles.



### Drivers

4. Raise school bus driver hourly wages to a minimum of \$18 per hour or higher to be more competitive with other professions requiring a CDL.
5. Offer additional recruitment incentives, including signing bonuses and expanded paid-for training.
6. Offer additional part-time and summer-time work within schools to bolster recruitment and retention of drivers and better integrate them in the daily life and culture of schools.
7. Expand the number of CDL testing sites to ensure availability and ease of access throughout the state.
8. Subsidize the cost of CDL exams to encourage more applicants to take and pass the test, or to retest if they are unable to pass it the first time.
9. Expand access to CDL training through online course offerings and frequent in-person training opportunities targeted to locations experiencing school bus driver shortages.
10. Make the mandatory IDOE pre-service class available “on demand” via an online platform.
11. Establish “one stop shops” throughout the state for all school bus driver requirements.



### Management

12. Benchmark other public school transportation contracts throughout the state to better inform contract and pricing negotiations.
13. Consider outsourcing management to centralized providers with advanced technology platforms and specialized expertise in developing efficient routing strategies.
14. When contracting for transportation, LEAs should consider the engagement of multiple vendors rather than a single vendor for all routes.
15. Support the expansion of carpool coordination services via public funding and communications campaigns to raise both the awareness and availability of these programs.
16. Incorporate targeted “opt-out” subsidies to parents as part of a comprehensive school transportation strategy.



## Routing & Scheduling

17. Supplement demand-response routes with fixed route “circulator shuttles” to minimize the number of routes and reduce the total number of vehicles required overall.
18. Enforce “walk zones” of no more than 1–2 miles from school, requiring students who live within those boundaries to either walk or find another transportation alternative.
19. Implement tiered bell schedules to reduce the number of drivers and buses required, expand the daily hours per driver, reduce costs, and provide later start times for adolescents.
20. Whenever possible, utilize corner bus stops to help minimize route length and ride times and promote student safety.
21. Identify opportunities for yellow school buses to be shared by multiple schools and/or corporations to reduce the overall number of buses required by those LEAs.



## Data & Technology

22. Acquire GPS and RFID technology and implement the use of this technology across all school transportation vehicles and for all riders.
23. Review internal corporation safety reports to identify potential priorities for safety enhancements via technology investments.

## Endnotes

- 1 Innovation Network Schools are public schools that have more autonomy than traditional school corporations and their own nonprofit boards. These schools are exempt from some regulations that restrict the practices of traditional public schools and have “full operational autonomy” under Indiana state law.
- 2 The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends middle and high schools do not start before 8:30 a.m. Adolescents require sufficient sleep to improve physical and mental health, as well as academic achievement.
- 3 <https://education.jhu.edu/2019/05/mapping-the-connection-between-public-transportation-and-school-absenteeism/>
- 4 [https://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/news/virtual-program-reportfinal-december-21-final.pdf?utm\\_content=&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_name=&utm\\_source=govdelivery&utm\\_term=](https://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/news/virtual-program-reportfinal-december-21-final.pdf?utm_content=&utm_medium=email&utm_name=&utm_source=govdelivery&utm_term=)
- 5 <https://www.publicschoolreview.com/indiana/magnet-public-schools>
- 6 <https://myips.org/central-services/portfolio-management/>
- 7 <https://www.in.gov/doe/files/2021-2022-school-directory-2021-09-29.xlsx>
- 8 <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Transporting-School-Choice-Students-by-Michael-Q-McShane-and-Michael-Shaw.pdf>
- 9 <https://www.bls.gov/cpi/tables/supplemental-files/historical-cpi-u-202107.pdf>



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