

Combating Chronic Absenteeism By Improving Public Transportation

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Approximately 39% of Baltimore City Public School (BCPS) students qualify for free transportation through the Maryland Transit Administration (MTA). Many of these students must transfer to several buses to get to school. Public transportation is not always reliable, due to overcrowding, inclement weather, and accidents, among other reasons. As a result, students arrive late to school or may decide simply to skip school.

Baltimore City Public Schools Policy¹

For students who attend neighborhood or citywide non-charter schools, BCPS provides transportation based on the distance from home to school:

- **Elementary school** students who live more than 1 mile from their neighborhood school receive yellow bus service.
- **Middle school** students who live more than 1.5 miles from their neighborhood or citywide school selected through middle school choice receive a monthly S-Pass for use on the MTA.
- **High school** students who live more than 1.5 miles from their citywide school selected through high school choice receive a monthly S-Pass for use on the MTA.

In addition, students who live closer to their schools than the distances noted above *may* be eligible for transportation services if they:

- Do not have a safe route to walk
- Have an Individualized Education Program (IEP)
- Are homeless
- Receive English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) services
- Are in pre-K
- Have 504 Plans

School bus service may also transport students and staff to and from extracurricular activities. Transportation is not provided by the district for students who attend charter schools. If your child attends a charter school, check with the school to find out if any transportation services are available.

Taxicab transportation will be provided on a temporary basis where BCPS deems appropriate.

BCPS Students and Public Transportation

Out of 87,611 BCPS students:²

- 3,127 students were in the **Curb-to-Curb Student Count** (students transported door-to-door to and/or from BCPS or non-public schools daily by yellow bus transportation),
- 808 were in the **Cab Student Count** (students transported door-to-door to and/or from BCPS or non-public schools daily by cab)
- 34,322 were in the **MTA Student Count** (students who were eligible for free transportation to and/or from BCPS or non-public schools daily by the MTA).
- 49,354 were designated as Non-Riders.

Problems with Public Transportation Hinder Students' Abilities to Get to School on Time

At the four Baltimore City Public Schools where the Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC) currently operates its Truancy Court Program (TCP), students report:

- ◆ Buses are consistently late.
- ◆ Some students must transfer to different buses in order to get to their school.
- ◆ Buses are often overcrowded and do not stop for students waiting at the bus stop.
- ◆ Students feel unsafe, especially those who must wait at bus stops early in the morning to begin a 2 to 3 hour commute to school (particularly in the winter months).
- ◆ Some students wake up as early as 5:00 am in order to arrive at their school on time.

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¹ Description of Transportation at Baltimore City Public Schools, available at: <http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/Page/24469>.

² Baltimore City Public Schools, Comprehensive Educational Facilities Master Plan, 68, 516, Appendix K (2015). Available at: <http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/cms/lib/MD01001351/Centricity/Domain/8784/PDF/2015CEFMP/20150721-CEFMP-complete.pdf>.



Public Transportation's Effect on Chronic Absenteeism

It is widely recognized that a lack of reliable public transportation system can contribute to high student absenteeism.³

- In a report on the barriers to school attendance and why students are not attending school, Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes note that “[i]n some cases, poor planning, family needs, or **unpredictable transportation lead to students being late, and they stay away from school altogether to avoid the hassle and sometimes the sanctions associated with tardiness**” (emphasis supplied).⁴
- According to the Baltimore Metropolitan Council, approximately 32% (27,000) of approximately 84,000 Baltimore City public and charter school students rely on MTA transit services to get to school. This number represents approximately 22% of MTA’s total ridership.⁵
- In 2015, John Land, then-Deputy Chief Operating Officer for BCPS, acknowledged that “inefficient transit contributes to absenteeism.”⁶ Moreover, even though the agency has a \$34 million transportation budget, it is spending \$43 million on transportation.
- Baltimore City has extremely high absenteeism rates. According to the 2015 Maryland Report Card, nearly 42% of BCPS high school students and approximately 20% of middle school students missed more than 20 days of school during the 2014-2015 school year.⁷

² Tia Henderson et al., *The Connection Between Missing School and Health: A Review of Chronic Absenteeism and Student Health in Oregon*, *Upstream Public Health*, 36 (October, 2014) (reporting that Baltimore City social workers are trying to identify families that may need more support related to transportation, recognizing that communities may need more than “typical” education efforts, including transportation access). Available at: <https://www.upstreampublichealth.org/sites/default/files/Chronic%20Absence%20and%20Health%20Review%20FINAL%2010.10.2014.pdf>.

⁴ Robert Balfanz & Vaughn Byrnes, *The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation’s Public Schools*, (May 2012). Available at: http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf

⁵ <http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/cms/lib/MD01001351/Centricity/Domain/8784/PDF/2015CEFMP/20150721-CEFMP-complete.pdf> (appendix B).

⁶ Danielle Sweeney, *Hackers drill down on Baltimore schools’ transportation troubles: Absenteeism, inefficiencies, budget woes-what Baltimore’s tech community found when they gathered to tackle the problem*. *Baltimore Brew*, Jan 12, 2015. Available at: <https://www.baltimorebrew.com/2015/01/12/hackers-drill-down-on-schools-transportation-troubles/>.

⁷ 2015 Maryland Report Card, available at: <http://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov/Entity.aspx?K=30AAAA>.



Promising Practices

- ♦ The Maryland Transit Administration (MTA), in collaboration with the Transportation Alliance, has implemented the Rate Your Ride program, which allows riders to provide real time feedback on particular routes, bus drivers, and transit conditions.⁸
- ♦ The MTA has rolled out “MY MTA TRACKER,” an internet-based tracking system that provides riders with expected arrival times of their buses via computer, tablet, smartphone, or standard phone.⁹
- ♦ The **Wide Angle Youth Media** has developed media projects, advertising campaigns for Rate Your Ride, and a bus driver toolkit to assist bus drivers to improve interactions with students.¹⁰

Looking Forward—Where Do We Go from Here?

Baltimore City has unique challenges that make it difficult for many students to get to school. Unlike cities such as New York and Boston, Baltimore lacks a comprehensive subway, light rail, or bus system. In addition, BCPS allows students to select their schools, which forces many students to travel long distances to reach their schools. The following suggestions can provide a springboard for a discussion about effective solutions to the transportation dilemma that affects students throughout Baltimore:

- Create a transportation task force comprised of students, parents, MTA representatives, and BCPS representatives to identify key obstacles and solutions for getting students to school on time.
- Conduct a comprehensive survey of middle and high school students regarding their use of public transportation to get to school.
- Implement a policy that would ensure each middle school student is assisted by a guidance counselor to determine his/her “School Choice” options, so that transportation is considered when making these decisions.
- Build partnerships with civic developers and technology organizations to develop a GPS-based app, so students will know when buses are running late and can identify alternative modes of transportation from their phones.
- Panelist Robert Nixon, a community organizer for Youth As Resources and a former BCPS student, urges Baltimore City Public Schools to dedicate bus stops and routes for students in the morning and in the afternoon, to get students to and from school on time. He emphasizes that the school system must prioritize its efforts to transport children to school to reduce truancy and absenteeism.
- Panelist Monisha Cherayil, an Attorney for the Public Justice Center, recommends that BCPS utilize alternative resources to transport children to school and back, particularly for 6th graders. She suggests partnering with other agencies, such as the Department of Social Services, to combine resources and help secure reliable and safe transportation for Baltimore City Public School students.

⁸ Available at, <http://rateyourride.org/>

⁹ Available at, <http://mta.maryland.gov/my-mta-tracker>

¹⁰ Available at, <http://wideanglemedia.org/wide-angle-youth-media-design-team-working-with-the-mta-improving-transportation-for-baltimore-city-school-students/>

¹¹ Available at, <https://www.baltimorebrew.com/2015/01/12/hackers-drill-down-on-schools-transportation-troubles/>