



VIEWPOINT

ON PUBLIC ISSUES

August 8, 2006 • No. 2006 – 35

The Bus Stops Here

By: Matthew Carr

Summary

The Columbus Public Schools have decided that at least 1,384 charter and private school students won't be riding a C.P.S. bus next year. That a school district would tell some students that they can't have a ride to school because of where they choose to take classes reveals the mindset of many school districts in Ohio; education is about schools and rules, not about children.

Main text word count: 636

The Columbus Public Schools (C.P.S.) have decided that at least 1,384 charter and private school students won't be riding a C.P.S. bus next year. Declaring the transportation of these students to be "impractical" the district will give each student a check for \$172 to find their own way to school.

This decision highlights one of the many failings of our current school-centric way of thinking, and the consequences that continue to stand in the way of real education reform.

If every student is entitled to a quality education, why are they not also entitled to the means of getting there? C.P.S. has revealed the mindset of many school districts in Ohio; education is about schools and rules, not about children.

It is well past time to discard this tradition and replace it with an education system that places students at the center of policymaking. Such a view would show us the folly of telling some students that they can't have a ride to school because of where they choose to take classes.

The transportation kerfuffle has also shown us the ways in which our school-centric thinking has limited the potential of our charter school system. State law may not dictate how long a charter school day is, but apparently the district bus schedule does. It's hard to be innovative when your competitors control your schedule.

Even when the traditional public schools try new programs and ideas they are hampered by the anachronistic transportation system. If the new Metro High School in Columbus, a partnership between C.P.S., Ohio State University, and the Education Council, wanted to try an extended schedule they would need the permission of the central office transportation department.

Ohio law declares that students in charter schools and private schools *may* be entitled to transportation services from their local school district. This is because transportation funding flows to school districts, who are then given wide discretion in deciding who they will allow on their buses.



The Columbus Public Schools are denying a ride to 1,384 charter and private school students.

Source: Corbis

If a district deems a student's transportation needs to be "impractical," they merely have to "offer payment, in lieu of providing such transportation." There is reason to believe that the \$172 offer from C.P.S. is far too low.

According to the Ohio Department of Education, the state reimbursed C.P.S. \$400.68 per pupil for transportation costs in the 2004-05 school year. Last year the state also provided C.P.S. with over \$464,000 for bus purchasing. And these are just the state subsidies, which, according to the Ohio Legislative Office of Education Oversight, provide about half of all transportation funds for local school districts.

Offering charter and private school students a check for \$172 is just another example of districts' misplaced priorities.

There is a far more efficient, effective, and reasonable solution for guaranteeing transportation for every student who wants it, regardless of their school.

The Altoona Area School District in Pennsylvania recently contracted out their transportation services to a private company, Student Transportation of America.

According to the *Altoona Mirror*: "The company will pay Altoona \$1.4 million for its fleet of buses and vans and will rent the district's bus garage for \$96,000 per year, school board President David Ellis said. The company also will pay the cost of the district transportation coordinator and mechanics."

As an added bonus, the district expects to save about \$100,000 a year in transportation costs.

The state of Ohio could implement a similar program in each of Ohio's major urban areas, with one critical improvement; rather than sending transportation funds through school districts, who have every incentive to frustrate their competitors, the state should contract directly with the private provider for each city.

Because the funding would come from the state, and the contracted school transportation provider would service the entire city rather than the school district, Ohio could guarantee a bus ride to every student that wanted one.

#####

(Matthew Carr is the Education Policy Director at the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions, a research and educational institute located in Columbus, Ohio. More information on educational issues is available at www.buckeyeinstitute.org. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliation are cited.)

State law may not dictate how long a charter school day is, but apparently the district bus schedule does

Attention Editors and Producers

Viewpoint commentaries are provided for reprint in newspapers and other publications. Authors are available for print or broadcast interviews. Electronic text is available at www.buckeyeinstitute.org. Please contact:

Dorothea Prouty
88 East Broad Street, Suite 1120
Columbus, Ohio 43215

Phone: (614) 224-4422
Fax: (614) 224-4644

www.buckeyeinstitute.org
prouty@buckeyeinstitute.org

