



Supporting Every Student with

Supplemental School Transportation



HopSkipDrive

Getting students to school shouldn't be the hardest part of education, but for many districts, transportation has become exactly that. With 91% of schools reporting driver shortages and transportation gaps directly linked to chronic absenteeism — when students miss 10% or more of the school year — the traditional yellow bus model alone can no longer meet every need. The reality today is that school administrators and transportation directors are facing mounting pressure to do more with less while ensuring no student is left behind.

To address these limitations and build a more robust and resilient system, supplemental school transportation offers a crucial complement to traditional busing. Smaller vehicles and specialized services help districts get the right transportation to the right students at the right time. This approach cuts costs, improves service reliability, and adapts more easily when needs change.

In this report, we'll discuss the transportation challenges school districts face, why supplemental options strengthen the currently fractured system, and how districts are already bridging these gaps with smarter, more flexible approaches.



Today's School Transportation Landscape

School transportation stands at a critical crossroads. The yellow bus system that has served American education for nearly a century now faces serious challenges that require fundamental rethinking. As student needs evolve and districts contend with staffing shortages, sustainability goals, budget constraints, safety concerns, parent expectations, complex routing and scheduling, and more, the conventional methods of transporting students to school are no longer sufficient.



Bus driver shortages continue to disrupt service

The shortage of qualified school bus drivers has reached crisis levels nationwide. When drivers aren't available, districts face tough choices. In Louisville, Kentucky, Jefferson County Public Schools had to cancel classes for several days in 2023 when route changes left thousands of students without transportation — and some buses arriving after dark. In Oklahoma, Union Public Schools was forced to cut multiple bus routes due to severe driver shortages even after enlisting help from staff. In Ohio, Springfield City School District — where bus routes have been consolidated and office staff have stepped in to help drive students — schools closed for the second time in two months due to the persistent bus driver shortage.

These disruptions directly affect education. A report from the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement found that transportation barriers are major contributors to chronic absenteeism cases. When buses don't arrive or routes get cut, many students simply miss school — especially those who come from families that don't have access to alternative transportation options. Bureau of Transportation Statistics data indicates that 30% of households within the lowest income bracket do not own or lease a vehicle, highlighting the disproportionate impact on this demographic.



Districts face mounting pressure to meet sustainability goals

Environmental mandates add another layer to transportation challenges, though fewer districts prioritize them while dealing with more immediate issues. The Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) Clean School Bus Program provides \$5 billion to help districts replace diesel buses with cleaner alternatives, but the transition is costly and there is uncertainty about sustained federal funding. Electric school buses can cost three times more than diesel buses, with additional expenses for charging infrastructure. Many districts want greener fleets but struggle to justify the investment when already cutting routes due to operational constraints.



Students have increasingly diverse transportation needs

Today's school districts face intricate student transportation needs that extend far beyond the conventional home-to-school paradigm.

- **Special education transportation demands have grown substantially.**

The [National Center for Education Statistics](#) reports that 7.5 million students — about 15% of all public school students — received special education services in the 2022–2023 school year. Many of these students required specific transportation accommodations as part of their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). [Minneapolis Public Schools](#) data shows how costly these crucial services can be: While special education students make up only 8% of transported students, they account for 45% of the district's transportation budget.

- **Highly mobile students need transportation that moves with them.**

A 2023 report from the [National Center for Homeless Education](#) reports that schools served over 1.1 million students facing housing instability during the 2020–2021 school year. These students, along with approximately [400,000 school-aged children in foster care](#), have transportation rights under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and Every Student Succeeds Act, which require districts to maintain school stability even when students move across district lines. If transportation is a barrier for these students, districts must find a way to overcome it — and many don't have the resources to do so with bus service alone.

- **School choice and specialized education programs have expanded dramatically.**

The National Center for Education Statistics reports that about [19% of public school students attend schools of choice](#) rather than their assigned schools, with another 12% enrolled in private schools or homeschooling. This dispersed attendance pattern fundamentally conflicts with traditional neighborhood-based bus routes, creating transportation challenges for districts. Off-campus educational programs also complicate transportation planning for school districts. [Minneapolis Public Schools](#), for instance, instituted shuttle bus service to ensure access for high school students to career and technical education programs.



Strengthening School Transportation with Supplemental Solutions

Yellow buses can't solve today's transportation crisis alone. Districts need plans that account for drivers calling in sick, routes getting cut, or special student needs not being able to be met with standard buses. Supplemental transportation doesn't replace traditional bus service; it creates a safety net that ensures every student can get to school, even when systems are strained.



Small vehicles can efficiently serve hard-to-reach areas

Students who live in rural or remote areas present unique transportation challenges that standard buses often can't address cost-effectively or without creating long commutes and early mornings for students. **Running a full-sized bus for just a handful of students on long, isolated routes quickly becomes financially unsustainable — and contributes to a negative school commute experience for students.** According to the [Urban Institute](#), rural schools struggle with higher per-student transportation costs because they can't achieve the same economies of scale as larger districts. In fact, HopSkipDrive data shows that supplemental transportation is 40% more affordable for districts than underutilized bus routes.

Flexibility is key when serving areas with challenging terrain or limited access. In some districts, transportation directors specifically look for ways to eliminate wasteful “deadhead” miles where buses travel empty. For students living in remote locations, smaller vehicle options often mean the difference between consistent attendance and chronic absenteeism.



Special education transportation can be more personalized

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates transportation as a necessary “related service” when required for students with disabilities. This legal requirement often exceeds the capabilities of standard school bus routes.

For students with special needs, smaller vehicles create environments where they can succeed. Guidance from the U.S. Department of Education [on implementing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) specifically notes that transportation accommodations must be individualized based on each child's unique situation. Small vehicles offer several key advantages:

- Reduced sensory overload for students
- Shorter ride times due to more direct routing
- Ability to provide individualized support during transport
- Easier accommodation of specialized equipment

Smaller vehicles address these specialized needs while offering operational benefits. They require less fuel, cost less to maintain, and do not require commercial driver's licenses — which can help to address the driver shortages while improving service quality.



Students in foster care and experiencing homelessness can gain stability

School frequently serves as the sole consistent element in the lives of students transitioning between homes or foster placements. Recognizing this, federal legislation requires ongoing transportation to their original schools, even if they move across district lines.

Traditional bus routes can't adapt quickly to these situations, and new solutions are needed. The U.S. Department of Education now allows districts to use emergency relief funds for transportation innovations that help vulnerable students. This policy acknowledges what school transportation directors already know — maintaining educational stability requires going beyond traditional models.



Choice schools and after-school programs become accessible to more students

Transportation barriers disproportionately affect disadvantaged students. EdChoice has identified transportation as being “among the top challenges families face when exercising school choice,” with the impact falling hardest on lower-income households.

For after-school programs, the pattern repeats. According to the Afterschool Alliance’s “America After 3PM” report, 58% of low-income families say their children don’t have a safe way to get home from after-school programs.

Supplemental transportation makes these opportunities accessible to all students, regardless of family resources. **When districts implement flexible transportation systems targeting specialized programs, participation gaps between socioeconomic groups narrow.**



How Supplemental Transportation Drives Cost Savings

Beyond expanding access and improving reliability, supplemental transportation creates financial benefits for budget-conscious districts. When transportation directors analyze their operations, they often discover significant cost-saving opportunities by diversifying their vehicle options.



Right-sizing vehicles for each route saves money

Transportation cost efficiency begins with matching vehicle capacity to actual ridership needs. **Full-size buses excel at high-volume routes but become financially inefficient when serving just a handful of students.**

Denver Public Schools demonstrated this principle when they implemented a multimodal transportation approach. By optimizing their small vehicle routes and assigning new riders to existing routes, the district saved over \$500,000 in a single school year while maintaining service quality.



Smaller vehicles reduce emissions and fuel consumption

While full-fleet electrification remains a long-term goal, right-sized transportation offers immediate environmental benefits. Standard diesel buses typically achieve fewer than 10 miles per gallon, while smaller transportation vehicles often reach 25–30 miles per gallon or more — creating financial and environmental advantages when buses aren't at full capacity.

The EPA's Clean School Bus Program documentation specifically acknowledges that “right-sizing transportation fleets” offers an immediate path to emissions reduction alongside other electrification initiatives.

Colorado Springs School District 11 has experienced a number of benefits after embracing a supplemental transportation approach, including a decreased carbon footprint thanks to route consolidation and substituting more efficient sedans for some under-utilized buses.



Budget analysis reveals hidden transportation cost savings

When transportation directors examine their spending patterns, they often discover inefficiencies that supplemental options can address.

Detroit Public Schools Community District found that despite a 21% decrease in bus drivers over five years, their overall transportation costs increased by 15%. This unsustainable trend led them to implement a multimodal approach incorporating smaller vehicles for specialized needs.

The results speak for themselves: The district's chronic absenteeism rates dropped 14 percentage points after implementing more flexible transportation options. This improvement delivered both educational benefits and financial savings by reducing the resources spent addressing attendance problems.



Advanced Technology Makes Transportation Safer and More Efficient

Today's transportation challenges require modern solutions. Advanced technology and digital tools now help districts manage their fleets more effectively while maintaining rigorous safety standards — all with fewer resources.



Smart routing finds the most efficient path for every student

Gone are the days of plotting bus routes with pins on paper maps. **Today, AI-powered machine learning can analyze all aspects of a district's existing transportation plan — including student locations, traffic patterns, and vehicle capacity — to find the most efficient paths possible.** The potential impact of policy and other operational changes can also be proactively assessed, allowing for effective planning.

Littleton Public Schools experienced this evolution firsthand. Facing budget constraints and a staff stretched thin by a bus driver shortage, the district was able to reduce 21% of their bus stops to match their bus driver staff, while also decreasing student commute time.

Dynamic transportation planning technology can be particularly beneficial for students with specialized needs. When a new foster student enrolls mid-year or a family experiencing homelessness relocates, the system can quickly adapt without disrupting existing routes.



Real-time ride tracking creates accountability at every step

Telematics has become an essential tool in modern student transportation. When coordinators can see all vehicles in real time, they can verify student pickups, monitor on-time performance, and quickly address any issues that arise during transit.

This visibility benefits all students but those with complex transportation needs benefit the most. For a student with disabilities or one experiencing housing instability, knowing exactly where their ride is provides security and consistency.



Digital platforms connect schools, families, and transportation providers

Breakdowns in school transportation can occur when parents are uninformed about schedule adjustments or when drivers are not properly equipped with necessary details regarding student requirements. Digital platforms solve this by connecting all transportation stakeholders. Parents receive updates about pickup times or delays directly on their phones. Schools know which students are en route and when they'll arrive. Drivers get clear information about each student and any special requirements.

For students with complex needs or changing home situations, consistent communication becomes even more vital. **Digital communication tools can help ensure that vulnerable students maintain stable school attendance despite other challenges they may face.** Students who know their transportation will arrive reliably are more likely to maintain consistent attendance — a critical factor in academic success, particularly for already disadvantaged populations.



A Comprehensive Transportation System Benefits Schools and Students

Supplemental transportation works alongside traditional busing to get every student to school, no matter their circumstances. It's not about replacing the school bus — it's about a variety of complementary options working together to create a stronger, more adaptive system.

Smaller vehicles efficiently serve students with disabilities, those experiencing homelessness or in foster care, and kids in specialized programs. They provide nimble solutions in situations where a big yellow bus just doesn't make operational or financial sense.

Technology powers this approach. Smart transportation planning and routing software optimizes every mile; telematics promotes accountability and safety; and easy-to-use apps keep everyone involved in a student's journey in the loop — schools, families, drivers, and students themselves. Enhanced communication practices are an essential part of safe school transportation today, especially for our most vulnerable students.

Implementing supplemental transportation requires strategic analysis. Districts must examine current system struggles; stay informed on what other districts are doing — and what is, and isn't, working; and be willing to boldly step into the future of school transportation. **Drawing upon both established and innovative methods will allow for a school transportation system that can adapt to changing needs while effectively serving diverse student populations and ensuring equitable access to education.**

The stakes couldn't be higher. Every day of missed instruction is an educational setback. Supplemental transportation offers a powerful tool to keep all students on track. With focus and resolve, districts can ensure reliable school transportation becomes a promise kept for every student, every day.