

The Potential Costs and Benefits of Providing Free Public Transportation Passes to Students in Los Angeles County

Background

There has been increasing interest in Los Angeles County to identify reliable, safe, and affordable ways for students to get to school. In April 2013, the Los Angeles County Education Coordinating Council adopted a resolution to secure free transit passes for all students from preschool to college, regardless of income. The pass would give students access to public transportation 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Because there is an established link between school attendance, academic success and short and long-term health outcomes¹, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (DPH) conducted a rapid assessment of the costs and benefits of the proposed transit program. To inform decision-making, DPH focused its assessment on the program's costs and benefits, identified as priorities by key stakeholders and decision-makers in the community.

Potential Costs

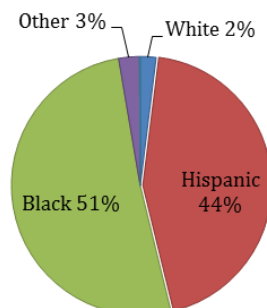
Decrease in Transit Fare Revenues

- Fare revenues contribute just over a quarter of Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority's (MTA) operational budget.²
- In fiscal year 2013, MTA received \$20.5 million in fare revenues from students participating in its student discount programs.³
- Providing free transit passes to students could lead to a cumulative loss of 37% of the total fare revenues for Los Angeles County's transit agencies.³

Increase in Transit Ridership

- Providing free transit passes may lead to short-term increases in student ridership, between 26,000 and 65,000.³
- During the past 20 years, MTA services have outpaced demand by a factor of 3:1.⁴
- Because youth ridership represents less than 7% of the current total ridership, an increase in overcrowding is likely to be minimal.³

Black youth represent 24% of MTA riders under age 18 years, but receive more than half of all youth citations for fare evasion.



Total fare evasion citations (in 2012) = 9,966

Potential Benefits

Increase in School Attendance

- Lack of affordable transportation is a frequently cited barrier to regular school attendance.^{5,6}
- Students who attend school regularly are more likely to graduate, and have lower rates of incarceration, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, and chronic disease.^{5,7}
- 27% of students in Los Angeles County live more than 2 miles from their schools.⁸
- Nearly 100,000 students in Los Angeles County (3.0% of all students) regularly use public transportation to get to school.⁹
- Students from low-income households are more likely than students from higher income households to rely on public transportation to get to school.⁹

Decrease in Contact with Juvenile Justice System

- The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department issued 9,966 citations to youth (age <18 years) for fare evasion in 2012.³
- Fare evasion citations can result in heavy fines (up to \$250) or court appearances, which can lead to absences, missed work, and increased stress for youth and their parents.³
- A first-time court appearance during high school quadruples a student's odds of dropping out.⁶

Increase in Available Funds for Schools

- Schools lose \$32 dollars in available funding each day for every student who is absent.¹⁰ Increasing attendance can increase funding for schools.
- Schools could redirect funds currently spent on transportation to enhance the educational experience of students and their families.

Healthier Families and Communities

- More students using public transportation could lead to fewer school-travel related injuries, including car fatalities and injuries related to unsafe neighborhood conditions.¹¹
- More disposable income could lead to less stress for families as well as increase in access to important resources such as healthy food, healthcare services, and opportunities for physical activity.⁷
- More freedom and mobility could lead to youth accessing after-school activities, work, health care, and civic and religious events without being limited to their own neighborhoods.¹²
- Fewer cars on the road could lead to less traffic volume and congestion, and a cleaner environment.¹³

Conclusions and Recommendations

Providing free transit passes to all students in Los Angeles County could:

- Result in significant costs to public transit agencies.
- Benefit a wide variety of stakeholders, including students and families; educators and school districts; law enforcement; and environmental, community and public health advocates.

Based on these findings:

- Explore program and sustainability options, including identifying possible sources of funding, potentially from stakeholders that might benefit directly from the provision of public transit to students in Los Angeles County (e.g., school districts, state or local emission reduction programs);
- Explore tradeoffs in ways to operationalize the program (e.g., eligibility criteria such as age or income) in order to maximize positive impacts, while minimizing costs and meeting fare box recovery requirements;
- Collect more program specific data to estimate the potential impacts of the program, particularly as they relate to school attendance; and
- Ensure participation by relevant transit agencies in discussions about program feasibility and costs.

Free Transit Passes Could Lead to...



- At least \$20.5 million less in transit fare revenues.
- An additional 26,000 to 56,000 transit riders in the first two years of the program.



- Families saving \$750,000 per year in fines for fare evasion and \$2.5 million per year on student transit passes.
- Students receiving 29,000 more instructional hours per year (for each 1% decrease in unexcused absences).



- Schools saving funds currently spent on student transit.
- Schools receiving an additional \$125,000 each year (for every 1% decrease in unexcused absences).



- Fewer cars on the road.
- Improved physical and mental health for students and families.

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