AN ANALYSIS OF K-8 SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION: UNDERSTANDING THE NEED, GAUGING THE EFFECTIVENESS, AND DEFINING BEST PRACTICE

LeeAnn D. Taylor
Northern Illinois University, z973094@students.niu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/allgraduate-disspractice

Part of the Educational Leadership Commons, and the Elementary and Middle and Secondary Education Administration Commons

Recommended Citation

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Research & Artistry at Huskie Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations of Practice by an authorized administrator of Huskie Commons. For more information, please contact jschumacher@niu.edu.
ABSTRACT

AN ANALYSIS OF K-8 SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION: UNDERSTANDING THE NEED, GAUGING THE EFFECTIVENESS, AND DEFINING BEST PRACTICE

LeeAnn Taylor, Ed.D.
Department of Leadership, Educational Psychology and Foundations
Northern Illinois University, 2024
Patrick Roberts, Director

School transportation plays a critical role in schools, helping students gain access to their education and school sponsored extracurricular activities each day. This study examined the history, need, and future of school-provided transportation in efforts to establish the components of a tool by which districts can gauge the effectiveness of current transportation practices. To organize the research, data, and final framework in the most meaningful way, the final product was divided into three individual papers.

Paper 1 reviews the existing literature reviewed the history, significance, and anticipated developments in the field of school transportation. Paper 2 curates the results of a qualitative study, analyzing and interpreting feedback from transportation stakeholders. Paper 3 synthesizes information gathered from Papers 1 and 2 to develop a reflective planning tool for use by school districts and transportation leaders. Reflective questions for use by school transportation leaders are organized by Bolman and Deals’ four leadership frames, structural, human resources, political, and symbolic.
AN ANALYSIS OF K-8 SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION: UNDERSTANDING THE NEED,
GAUGING THE EFFECTIVENESS, AND DEFINING BEST PRACTICE

BY
LEEANN TAYLOR

©2024 LeeAnn Taylor

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP, EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY AND
FOUNDATIONS

Doctoral Director:
Patrick Roberts
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This journey would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of numerous teachers, professors, colleagues, friends, and family members. I would specifically like to recognize Dr. Patrick Roberts and Dr. Lynn Gibson. Dr. Roberts is the calm to my frequent storm. After a meeting with Dr. Roberts, I was always refocused and knew what I needed to do next. He complimented my work and kept me on course. Dr. Lynn Gibson is not only a mentor, but a true cheerleader and supporter of both my professional and personal endeavors. Her energetic spirit and love of learning are a constant reminder that the hard work pays off.

My heartfelt appreciation also goes out to my children, Jessica and Brian, my partner in life, Denny, and my mother, Diane. I began my graduate school journey when Brian and Jessica were in elementary school, missing school events, games and even bedtime stories. My children always understood how much learning meant to me and supported my commitment to self-improvement, becoming extremely independent at a young age to accommodate my coursework and graduate school commitments.

During the writing process, Denny’s unconditional support and quick wit kept me smiling and confident. His own work ethic and commitment to serving others has truly inspired me. My mother Diane has always reminded me to focus on slowing down and enjoying the process, sharing that it is always a mother’s job to “worry” about her child. Her care, concern, and genuine love for my well-being remains central to my existence. Completing this dissertation has
been a transformative experience. It would not have been possible without the unyielding support of these exceptional individuals.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my late father, Bruce E. Ebert. Without his unwavering love, encouragement, and guidance during the first forty-three years of my life, I am certain I would not have had the courage to complete this challenging process. Dad, as I reach this milestone, it is heart wrenching to think you will not be present for the celebration. My frequent reflections on the multiple times you shared my accomplishments with patrons in the local grocery store or restaurant will allow me to visualize your smile and feel your hug on graduation day.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES ........................................................................................................................ vii
LIST OF FIGURES ..................................................................................................................... viii

INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................... 1

Structure of the Dissertation ................................................................................................. 2
Purpose, Significance, and Intended Audience ...................................................................... 3
Positionality of Researcher ................................................................................................. 4

Paper


   The Evolution of Student Bus Transportation in U.S. Schools ........................................... 7

   The Rise of Compulsory Schooling ................................................................................. 8

   Early Methods of Transporting Students to School ....................................................... 9

   Formalizing Transportation Systems and Structures ................................................... 12

   Equity and Access ....................................................................................................... 19

   Current Trends and Future Transportation Consideration ........................................... 23

   Summary and Conclusion ............................................................................................... 26

   References ....................................................................................................................... 28

2. UTILIZING QUALITATIVE DATA TO INFORM SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION SERVICES ............................................................................................................ 33

   Research Setting ............................................................................................................. 34
SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION: DEFINING DISTRICT VALUES AND COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Student Demographic Data</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Focus Group Structure</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Participant Identifiers</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Parent Focus Group Responses Regarding Safety</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Athletic Charter Departure Statistics</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Parent Focus Group Responses Regarding Driver Experiences</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Illinois Public School Student Absence Trend</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

School districts have understood the connection between getting to school and going to school since the inception of compulsory school attendance. Massachusetts passed the first transportation laws in 1869 to encourage school attendance and assist with the consolidation of school districts (McDonald & Howlett, 2007). Although federal safety mandates exist, the operation of school transportation continues to be the responsibility of state and local governing bodies. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) requires schools to provide access to free bus service to students who reside more than 1.5 miles from school or cross paths with a safety hazard in route to school. According to 2018-2019 data published by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2022), 51.4% of public-school students across the country rely on bus service, equating to the need for 366,500 drivers.

My interest in completing a study regarding school transportation was prompted by local and national driver shortages that surfaced in 2020 after the interruption to in-person learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With schools temporarily closed, the demand for bus drivers was diminished, causing school districts and transportation companies to adapt by repurposing drivers or forcing layoffs. The situation was further complicated when the state of Illinois published reopening plans that allowed for each school district in Illinois to act autonomously, making local decisions about when and how to resume in-person classes. This decentralized approach to reopening created a logistical nightmare for transportation companies struggling to
predict when their services would once again be needed, making it challenging to retain and motivate their employees.

Although understanding the impact of the shortage of bus driver’s post-pandemic initially sparked my curiosity, this dissertation expanded across multiple facets of school transportation, including historical aspects, current practices, and future trends. Qualitative data was collected to inform the research and gain an understanding of how transportation services are perceived by parent and staff stakeholder groups.

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into three separate papers, each intended to assist school and district transportation leaders in their annual and ongoing transportation planning by providing historical context, synthesized and timely data, and a clear framework for the future.

Paper One is guided by these research questions: “How has school provided transportation historically evolved? How have formalized transportation systems and requirements contributed to educational access?” The literature review is organized into distinct sections that explore the history, significance, and anticipated developments in the field of school transportation. The historical context presented illustrates the influence of mandatory education on the necessity for structured school transportation systems. This paper also reviews studies focused on the value of attending school for non-academic purposes such as social interactions and extra-curricular activities. Paper One concludes by sharing future considerations and developments related to school transportation.

Paper Two shares the results of a qualitative study, focusing on this research question: “How do parent and school staff stakeholder groups perceive the operational aspects of school
provided transportation?” Qualitative data was collected and synthesized to help define the tool by which school districts can gauge the effectiveness of their transportation.

Paper Three uses Bolman and Deal’s Leadership Framework to synthesize the literature and data from papers one and two to create a best practices toolkit for leaders. The toolkit defines the components and feedback loops necessary to efficiently organize and sustain school transportation systems. The culmination of these materials will be presented to the Transportation Professional Development Committee (PDC) of the Illinois Association of School Business Officials (IASBO) organization in efforts to develop an administrator academy for the 2024-2025 school year.

Purpose, Significance, and Intended Audience

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the origin and evolving role of school transportation in public education, to explore stakeholder perspectives, and to provide practical tools to organize and sustain efficient bussing for districts. Although this dissertation is primarily written for school administrators who are responsible for the operation of school transportation operation, building leaders and support staff may benefit from the planning tools and framework provided in Paper 3. In addition, contractors who partner with school districts to provide bus service may find this work relevant to sustain or improve relationships with current customers and/or plan for new school partnerships.

The decision to pursue an in-depth research study on school transportation was prompted by a national bus driver shortage that was exacerbated upon the return to in-person learning post-pandemic. District and transportation leaders are still managing the transportation turbulence caused by so many drivers exiting the market. This study provides tools to assist evaluating
various components of a district’s overall regular education transportation program, including communication, routing procedures, and budget. Special education transportation was not included in this study for several reasons. First, special education transportation operates under different regulations and requirements than regular education transportation. In addition, logistics and considerations involved with special education transportation, such as individualized needs and specialized equipment, require a separate and distinct evaluation framework.

Positionality of Researcher

I am a white female who has a variety of experiences with school transportation as a student, teacher, mother and now district administrator. As a classroom teacher, my knowledge of school transportation was limited to an observational level of thinking, recognizing that on occasion a late bus would mean a student was late to class. As a student, my access to the bus changed throughout my school years, based on how far I lived from school and whether I qualified for school transportation. As a working mom, I was reliant on the neighbor to care for my children before school and get them promptly on the bus in the morning. As I transitioned to a district business and operations leadership role in 2016, my viewpoint on school transportation transitioned from a state of awareness to a position of planning. For the first time I was coordinating with the bus company, considering schedules, routes, safety, student behavior, and working through obstacles with parents and drivers. Transportation is only one of many areas that I lead in the school district, however management of this integral system starts and ends each school day and includes support from identified key partners within and outside of the district. My involvement in school transportation has not only motivated me to undertake a study on this subject but has also enabled me to leverage my prior experience and subject matter
expertise to assist in the development of planning and reflection tools intended for use by district leaders. Administrators who exhibit thoughtfulness and thoroughness in the planning and implementation of transportation services afford students the chance to arrive punctually and safely for instruction each day.
According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the simplest definition of school is an institution that provides instruction. Inside the walls of schools, educators are asked to address changes in society and the environment while preparing today’s youth for a future that is not yet determined (Feinberg, 2016). In addition to providing students with an education, Meira Levinson (2014), educational philosopher at Harvard University, notes “the most concrete and pervasive context in which most young people interact is in fact, school” (p. 57).

The intent of the first schools, ensuring students were literate to be educated on religion, has long since evolved into a societal norm considered essential to the cognitive, social, and moral development of children (Thomas et al., 2022). Once a venue for academics and literacy, school has transformed into the primary institution through which society continues to sustain itself (Caraveteanu, 2013). For students to participate actively in school they need to be physically present each day, which can be accomplished through a variety of transportation modes including school-provided transportation, public transportation, private vehicles, or walking. Ultimately the decision on how a child gets to and from school depends on multiple factors including proximity to school, safety considerations, available transportation options, parental work schedules, involvement in extracurricular activities, traffic congestion, and community and peer influences. Weighing these factors contributes to an ultimate choice, which
may include a combination of the above-mentioned modes of transportation. In 1969, 41% of students in the United States commuted to school by walking or biking. By 2001, this figure had decreased significantly to only 13%, with the percentage of students arriving to school by personal vehicle increasing from under 20% to 55% during the same timeframe (Ham et al., 2008).

From the one room schoolhouse to the complexities of today’s larger institutions, the modes of transporting students to these centers for learning must be considered. It is crucial that educational leaders have a solid understanding of any transportation obstacles preventing students from physically getting to the school building. Access to the school bus is crucial for many students, as it serves as a vital means to overcome potential transportation obstacles at home. Paper One was guided by the following questions: “How has school provided transportation historically evolved? How have formalized transportation systems and requirements contributed to educational access?” In addition, research was presented and synthesized that demonstrates the value of school attendance as it relates to relationships, socialization, and extracurricular activities. This paper also considers future developments and alternative approaches to ensure students are physically present for daily instruction and school activities.

The Evolution of Student Bus Transportation in U.S. Schools

In 1642, the Puritan elders met to plan formalized education of youth, fearing parents would neglect teaching their children to read and understand religion (Katz, 1976). These early settlers began forming systems and educational traditions that would impact formal school systems for generations. Post-civil war, formal policy and regulations were put into place by the
newly formed Federal Bureau of Education (Urban et al., 2019). By the year 1900, thirty-two of the forty-five United States had adopted compulsory school attendance laws for children (Hazlett, 2011). According to a document published by the United States Bureau of Education in 1914, the first compulsory attendance laws were enacted by Massachusetts in 1852 with the intent of declaring that all children should be educated and that the state may determine what is taught. The proponents of compulsory attendance concurred that formalizing the education system and mandating attendance was a necessary step to limit illiteracy, while those who were opposed to the school attendance requirement cited parent’s ability to determine what is best for the child (Scribner, 2016).

Although there continues to be a federal role in education, The 10th Amendment to the constitution delegated power to the states to address anything not dictated by the US Constitution itself, which includes education. This laid the groundwork for state control, forming fifty different departments of education resulting in various school funding models (Owings et al., 2015) and the need to organize public, tax-supported local school districts (Cyr, 1934). In addition to planning and funding the educational experiences, operational tasks such as ensuring students attended school became essential to the daily work of state and local agencies.

The Rise of Compulsory Schooling

Ensign (1921) authored a book documenting the history and rationale for formalized laws with the intent of protecting children by regulating labor and employment. Within his book, Ensign emphasizes findings from a loosely conducted census and a report by the surgeon general dating back to the early 1900s revealing that one in every seven individuals over the age of ten couldn't write their names, and one in every four enlisted in the United States Army lacked
proficiency in English reading and writing. By the time Ensign’s book was published, most states had compulsory school attendance laws. Schools became responsible for ensuring students were in attendance, necessitating the establishment of procedures and highly detailed protocols for parents to notify the school if/when a child will not be in attendance. State reporting agencies continue to host unique reporting systems for school attendance, with most states tying daily attendance statistics to funding. In the state of Illinois, nine-month average daily attendance is used to calculate per pupil expenditures. In addition to overall attendance calculations being submitted, truancies and other pertinent individual attendance records are reported to the state.

Favorable attendance rates are indicators of successful schools; therefore continuous, thoughtful attention to attendance taking must be a priority (Coutts, 1998). By closely monitoring and addressing absenteeism, schools can better support students and families. Proactive measures are needed to minimize lost instructional time caused by absences. As attendance rates drop, the number of lost instructional minutes increases (Roby, 2003). According to Roby, a noticeable decline in student learning time across all academic subjects becomes evident as attendance rates fall below 90%.

Early Methods of Transporting Students to School

Given the crucial role that schools play in shaping a child's success, it is of utmost importance to support families in their efforts to get children to and from school each day. Just as the pace at which each state adopted compulsory education laws and transitioned from one-room schoolhouses to larger school systems differed by county and state, so did the implementation of student bus transportation. In 1869, Massachusetts became the first state to authorize funding for
school transportation, calculating it was more cost-effective to support transporting students to school than support multiple separate country schools (Bedichek et al., 1907).

Scribner (2016) notes that in 1914 over 200,000 one room schoolhouses existed. By 1975, only sixty-one years later, 1,200 were still in operation. These closures meant the consolidated schools were further apart and the distance for children to travel to receive an education became the next problem to solve. As the population grew in the United States and compulsory attendance became the norm, more states followed the lead of Massachusetts and by 1900, eighteen states authorized funding for school transportation (Anthony & Inman, 1986). Each state was left with the responsibility of ensuring students attended and had access to the actual learning institution. Once funding was in place researchers surfaced, John Burns (1928) and Roe Johns (1927), both from the Teacher College at Columbia University, stressed the need for formalized systems to determine who was eligible for bus service and how buses would be routed, a model that is still utilized today. Johns (1928) called on individual states to put equitable access to schooling plans into action, noting the work and scientific research of Burns. Burn’s (1927) framework for transportation planning considers average daily attendance, number of pupils transported, number of school buildings, and the total number of square miles in the county.

**Evolution of the School Bus**

Although the size and shape of a school bus on the road today differs from the early vehicles utilized to get students to school, the concept is the same. Lenz (2022) notes that a variety of disparate solutions were put into place to get kids to school after compulsory attendance was enacted. One response was the horse-drawn wagon, referred to as a kid hack.
This solution was a better alternative than walking, however families expressed angst due to the length and distance of the daily journey to learn. Wayne Works, an automotive company owner in Indiana, is credited with developing a horse-drawn school car, while Albert Luce Sr., who owned two Ford dealerships in Georgia, made strides in the school transportation industry by developing the first bus. Luce's innovation began in 1925. This initial design proved to be fragile and unstable on rural, unpaved roads. Adding a steel frame underneath the wooden body enhanced stability, however safety remained a concern.

Setting the Standard for Safety

By 1935, manufacturing of a bus included the expanded use of steel, with the entire body constructed of this alloy-based material to address the safety concerns presented in the 1920’s. In addition, the National Conference for School Transportation (NCST) was held for the first time in 1939. This organization continues to guide efficiency and safety efforts of school transportation, with approximately 300 delegates from around the country meeting every five years to review and update operating procedures and guiding principles. The NCST met last in 2015, and due to the pandemic will not meet again until 2025. In 1967 and 1972 (as cited by McCray & Brewer, 2023) additional research was conducted at UCLA regarding bus safety. These studies concluded that the seating at the time did not provide adequate protection for the occupants. On April 1, 1977, The Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard No. 222 (FMVSS 222) was put into effect, outlining new safety requirements for school bus passenger seating and crash protection. Due to this new requirement, the concept of compartmentalization, high-backed, padded seats that are closely spaced to create compartments, became a widely used term in bus safety. Today, the specifications and safety standards are further supplemented by individual
state requirements as well as the National Congress on School Transportation (NCST) guidelines.

Formalizing Transportation Systems and Structures

Section 29-3 of the Illinois School Code defines which school districts are required to provide adequate transportation to students who reside 1.5 miles or more to school or come across a safety hazard on their way to school. Current language in the code states the following:

Any district which was previously required to provide transportation, and any newly created elementary or high school districts resulting from a high school - unit conversion, a unit to dual conversion, or a multi-unit conversion if the newly created district includes any area that was previously required to provide transportation shall provide free transportation for pupils residing at a distance of one and one-half miles or more from any school to which they are assigned.

Districts “previously required to provide transportation” represent those that opted into the new requirement at the time formalized busing originated in Illinois. Although the list demonstrates only 491 of the 865 districts are mandated to provide transportation, a review of all school district transportation claims for the 2021-22 school year indicates that 100% of the school districts on the list do provide transportation to those who are eligible. On an annual basis, each school district submits a transportation claim to the ISBE and is reimbursed for a portion of all expenditures. To be eligible for transportation funding, districts must adhere to the complex state and federal operational guidelines. Responsibilities for all agencies involved, including ISBE, the Illinois Secretary of State, the Illinois Department of Transportation, the U.S. Department of Transportation, local school boards, and school bus contractors are outlined in an annual administrative manual. The responsibility of the local school board is to ensure policies are in
place that reflect the regulations provided by all outside entities, including the training of drivers, the reporting of accidents, and the performing of annual safety drills.

An optional source of transportation revenue for school districts is the collection of fees from paid riders. Districts may choose to offer transportation to the students who do not meet the eligibility criteria. In accordance with school code, transportation fees must be approved annually by the board. Although some districts in Illinois provide this service to their students, it is not required and dependent on access to buses and drivers.

According to Stoller and Tanner (1978), $14 million was expended in 1900 to transport more than 356,000 children, equating to $40.73 per student. The most recent national public school transportation statistics published by the National Education for Statistics in 2019 included a total spend of $27.9 billion for 24,245,000 students equating to $1,152 per student in the school year. Utilizing an inflation calculator published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, $40.73 would equate to $1,218.17 in today’s dollars. This means that public school transportation expenses are growing at a rate that is 5.7% higher than average inflation. Statistics have not been published since 2019, as the 2019-2020 school year halted in person learning and the need for buses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is anticipated that transportation expenditures for the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school year will show greater than average increases to rising fuel, equipment, and driver compensation expenses.

The Bus Rider Experience

Henderson’s (2009) observation of the school bus as a “normative experience for millions of children” (p. 10) highlights how widespread this everyday practice is, serving as a fundamental component of the school experience. This routine journey to and from school gives
students an opportunity for social interactions and developmental experiences. It is during these rides that children engage with their peers, make friends, and navigate social dilemmas. Just as a teacher establishes the rules and norms within a classroom, a bus driver assumes a pivotal role in setting the tone and boundaries for student behavior on the bus. Galliger et al. (2009) describes the school bus as “an unstructured, non-elective, context where hierarchies, allegiances, biases, and reputations become established within a very confined space” (p. 47). The shared experience of riding a school bus not only influences a child's school life but can also leave a lasting impact, shaping their understanding of interpersonal relationships and social dynamics. In this sense, the school bus represents far more than a mere mode of transportation; it is a space where children learn important life lessons and cultivate both positive and negative memories that stay with them into adulthood.

Attendance Data and Bus Ridership

Considering school’s critical role in society, absenteeism has been a common concern in the modern education system. Illinois School Code defines chronic absenteeism as missing at least 10% of the academic year, regardless of reason. According to the annual school calendar guidelines published by ISBE, a school district must have 176 student attendance days on the calendar. National estimates indicate that one in every ten kindergarten and first grade students is absent each year for at least 18 days, which equates to approximately one month of the school year (Chang & Davis, 2015).

Studies conducted on chronic absences have focused on a variety of factors in efforts to demonstrate a correlation between the attendance of elementary students and the level to which a family financially functions (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Chronically absent students are also more
likely to come from a one-parent household, be a part of a racial/ethnic minority, and reside with a low-income family (Chang & Davis, 2015). Parental mental health can also be associated with student attendance. A 2015 study by Claessens et al. (2015) shares the correlation between a mother’s mental health and absenteeism, demonstrating that children of mothers who self-reported to be depressed missed an additional day of school per year.

Ehrlich et al. (2018) noted a lack of research on the impact of chronic absenteeism among preschool aged children and set-forth to track attendance data as students advanced from one grade level to the next. Findings showed that chronic absenteeism in pre-kindergarten students correlated with lower skill levels upon entering kindergarten compared to their non-chronically absent counterparts. In addition, chronic absenteeism in preschool increased the likelihood of chronic absenteeism in kindergarten and subsequent grades. In addition, the study encouraged schools to start tracking attendance as a percent of the school year as soon as the first month of school to predict year-long attendance challenges and successes (Olson, 2014).

According to the 2021-22 report card for all 852 public school districts in the state of Illinois, the percentage of students considered chronically absent has been on the rise (Figure 1). The executive order issued in March of 2020 insisting that all public and private schools in Illinois must close for educational purposes as a response to the COVID-19 is responsible for the statistical outlier of only 11% chronic absenteeism for that school year. After children returned to learning in person, the rising trends continued. Further review of the Illinois chronic absenteeism data for the 21-22 school year reveals one demographic subgroup, black students, nearing half of its population reported as chronically absent. With the trends in chronic absenteeism increasing so dramatically among the entire state and within each subgroup, the cause of this trend as well as the accuracy or inconsistencies in reporting must be considered.
In 2017, Gottfried published a study that considered whether bus ridership correlates with school attendance statistics for kindergarten students, those most reliant on adults to get to school. A second piece of the study considered if the volume of absenteeism varies based on family characteristics. The National Center for Education Statistics surveyed a sampling of kindergarten parents in the spring of 2011 to determine how their child(ren) was transported to school each morning. Twenty-four percent of parents relied on school transportation, while the other transportation modes reported included bicycle, car, or walking. The great majority (86%) of families not utilizing the school bus reported students were transported by car. All findings in the study indicated that children who took the bus to school had fewer absences and were less likely to be chronically absent. On average, students who took the bus were absent .39 days less over the course of the school year than students who depended on another mode of transportation to get to school. Reviewing the data demographically, it was determined that students who were identified as English Language Learners had an even larger discrepancy between the number of absent days, with those who rode the bus averaging 1.16 less absences per year. A connection
can be made that riding the bus aids children by providing a consistent mode of transportation, therefore increasing time in the classroom. Although the state of Illinois collects both attendance data and transportation data, there is no way to cross reference this data to understand the relationship between ridership and attendance. The ability to tie mode of transportation and daily attendance together would be an important piece of data to consider when addressing barriers and inequities.

Data from the state of Michigan between the years of 2012 and 2019 reinforced the connection between absenteeism and school provided transportation. If an economically disadvantaged student is eligible for bus service, their attendance rate increases by .63%, equating to approximately one full day of school (Edwards, 2020). In addition, school bus eligibility reduces the likelihood of chronic absenteeism, defined as 10% or more of school days in Michigan, among economically disadvantaged students by 3.8% (Hamm et al., 2008).

Opportunities for Social Interactions and Relationships

Research consistently demonstrates the correlation between strong interpersonal connections and academic motivation (Adalbjarnardottir, 1993; Aronson, 2002; Davis, 2001). Students who view teachers as establishing a nurturing environment with high, transparent, and equitable expectations are inclined to express greater school engagement. Young people are engaged and involved in school when healthy relationships are present. Consequently, increased levels of engagement are linked to improved attendance (Klem & Connell, 2004; Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997). Thomas et al. (2022) finds a correlation between character strength and teacher-student strong relationships, however individual belief systems and differing perceptions of the student-teacher relationship must be considered (Spilt et al., 2011). For example, students
who struggle with relationship skills, such as struggling to read or understand verbal or non-verbal cues, might place great value on the student/teacher bond while students who excel in social interactions may not view student/teacher interactions as crucial to their academic achievements.

In addition to the relationships formed with school staff, students have countless formal and informal interactions with peers daily. Opportunities to engage with other school aged children provides individuals with valuable insights into their own identities and the necessary requirements to integrate into social circles (Martin & Dowson, 2009). In addition, school forces children to consider others and their access to materials, ultimately applying the concept of sharing when they notice inequity, but not always giving up their own resources. Overall, children are witnessing assertiveness, demonstrating care for others, and learning the value of participation (Grocke et al., 2015).

Just as the Puritan leaders considered the inability of parents to educate their children, current educational leaders are called to account for gaps in social emotional support at home. Social emotional learning (SEL) techniques work to build social skills, handle emotions, and see the perspective of others (Bear et al., 2014). Over the past two decades, a growing value has been placed on school connectedness (SC), a sense of belonging and the feeling of support and care at school. The definition of SC has evolved since it was first considered in the 1990s, transitioning from the idea that it was a single attribute, to the idea that a student shapes their own and the degree to which others feel connected to school (Gowing, 2019). Studies link higher degrees of school connectedness to less risky behaviors and lower dropout rates, putting educational personnel in the position to be proactive and focus on school-wide programs to encourage children to attend and feel connected to school (Chapman et al., 2014).
School attendance is often accompanied by opportunities for children to get involved in activities outside of the regular school day. Many of a child’s social experiences and interactions take place due to their involvement in extracurricular activities such as sports, music, theater, and clubs. Mahoney (2000) summarizes the results of a 695-person longitudinal study, ranging grade levels 6 through 10, focused on extra-curricular participation and its ability to moderate antisocial behaviors. For the purposes of Mahoney’s study, extracurricular activities were defined as one or more years of involvement. The study segmented students into distinct groups, considering academic competence, age, and physical maturation, in efforts to identify commonalities for data analysis. Regardless of the defined distinction, results of the study indicate persons who did not participate in extracurriculars were arrested more frequently and had a higher high school drop-out rate (Mahoney, 2000).

Equity and Access

In 2020, several entities, including the Committee on National Statistics and the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, contributed to a publication outlining educational equity indicators for states to utilize. Within that guidebook, equity was defined as follows: the work towards strong educational outcomes for all, balancing the fit between student need and resource, and minimizing the impact of disadvantage among student subgroups (Nielsen, 2020). At the same time national leaders were calling state and local leaders to review priorities, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) launched a professional development series for school officials focusing on equity. Sub-group data on the 2018-2019 Illinois report card prompted state leaders to develop the ISBE 2020-23 Strategic Plan, which placed a heavy
emphasis on equity. The ISBE Equity Journey Continuum tool was piloted during the 2021-22 school year and will appear on each district’s 2022-23 Report Card.

School Busing as a Remedy for Racial Segregation

Busing was a significant strategy employed during the 1960s and 1970s to desegregate schools. Multiple legal decisions, with the most famous being Brown v. Board of Education (1954) overturned the legality of separate but equal facilities based on race (Plessy vs. Ferguson, 1896). In 1951, Oliver Brown filed a class-action lawsuit after his daughter was denied entrance to an all-white school in Topeka, Kansas. Although The Supreme Court famously called for the integration of students based on race, the ruling did not plan or provide next steps on how to desegregate. Without guidance, some states were slow to desegregate, leading to subsequent court involvement. What is often referred to as Brown II (Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 1955), ruled that school districts must be deliberate in their actions to desegregate, emphasizing efforts should be prompt and in good faith. To promote and expedite integration in Boston, the Racial Imbalance Act (RIBA) was approved by the Massachusetts legislature in 1965. This law, enacted more than a decade after Brown, addressed the slow progress in the city of Boston towards desegregation. This ruling allowed for the state to withhold funding from districts that failed to develop a formalized plan (Winbaum, 2004).

Another pivotal legal decision in efforts to provide equal educational opportunity was Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education (1971). The plaintiff filed a lawsuit challenging the school district’s free choice plan policy, arguing that it violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, mandating that states must treat all citizens equally, without discriminating based on race, ethnicity, or other protected characteristics. The
court ruled in favor of Swann, requiring school districts to act towards eliminating racial imbalances in public schools, including the implementation of busing as a solution towards fully integrated schools. The plaintiff in a case (Milliken v. Bradley, 1974) involving a dispute over the desegregation plan for the Detroit public schools grieved that district boundaries were drawn in such a way that led to segregation, forming predominantly white suburban school districts and predominantly black inner-city school districts. The ruling in favor of the defendant in this case clarified the courts’ scope of authority, stating that districts are only responsible for segregation within their own boundaries. By not requiring cooperation among districts, city-wide, multi-district desegregation remains challenging.

A 1972-1973 study published by the Commission on Civil Rights focused on gathering data on ten communities during the time of desegregation. The study synthesized six major findings, including the need for governmental regulation of funding sources for school transportation to be consistent, calling for officials to engage in dialogue that would consider equitable funding, removing the obstacle of paying for how children would be transported to the non-segregated schools (Sloane, 1973). In more global support of school finances, the Civil Rights Movement served as a springboard to other legislation, such as the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) signed into law in 1965 by President Lyndon Baines Johnson. ESEA brought forward an increased level of federal governmental support of education, making grants available to school districts to support low-income students and special education (Swain, 2019). In 2015, President Barack Obama reauthorized the 50-year-old piece of legislation with a new title, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), while reminding local education agencies (LEAs) of their obligation to minimize educational obstacles for all learners and giving states the autonomy to focus on local priorities (Portz & Beauchamp, 2022).
The Impact of Busing and Desegregation Mandates

The laws and regulations put into place to guide segregation were faced with challenges, protests, and confusion. Following RIBA’s mandate to implement forced busing to address racial imbalances in schools, numerous white parents and communities in Boston expressed opposition. They were concerned busing would disrupt their neighborhoods and negatively impact children's education. Protests often led to violence between pro-integration advocates and anti-busing protesters. One such protester was Louise Day Hicks, longtime member of the Boston School Committee and lawyer. Critics were opposed to Hicks for perpetuating segregation in education, while her supporters defended her actions to preserve their neighborhoods and communities (Winbaum, 2004). Due to the power and influence of Hicks and her family, Boston Schools resisted the Racial Imbalance Act and avoided implementing any of the required provisions for a period of seven years following its approval (Hornburger, 1976). In October of 1973, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court grew tired of the desegregation battle that had spanned two decades since the Brown decision and ordered the Boston School Committee to act in a prompt manner. Part of the plan to act quickly involved busing. After all those years of resistance, student busing began in 1974, causing white flight from Boston and many leaders openly expressing regret over the combative tone and lack of progress. By 1976, white enrollment in Boston schools had decreased 16.5%, making integration increasingly difficult. These years in Boston and the resistance to desegregation make it clear that although mandates and laws are in place, local leadership is responsible for how those mandates are carried out (Winbaum, 2004).
Current Trends and Future Transportation Considerations

With the availability of sophisticated transportation management and tracking systems, schools are leveraging data to make informed decisions about bus routes, scheduling, and resource allocation (Giusti et al., 2019) An essential aspect of managing education at the local level involves planning efficient transportation systems that ensure safe and timely school arrival and dismissal procedures. With technological advances such as sophisticated bus tracking systems and electric school buses, districts are leveraging data to make informed decisions about bus routes, scheduling, and resource allocation (Giusti et al., 2019)

Location Technology

The use of global positioning systems (GPS) to track the physical location of the school bus has been utilized by most school transportation providers for the better part of the last decade. In some instances, the district or transportation company shares a mobile device application for the parents to be able to utilize to track the bus. In other instances, it is determined not to externally share bus location information with parents as the system is not yet sophisticated enough and relies on manual input for accuracy. These manual steps are prone to human error, many times causing undue worry and stress for the parents of children when a location is incorrectly represented. To that end, an updated approach to location tracking includes the use of radio frequency identification (RFID) technology. Research (Shaaban et al., 2013) shows RFID to be a practical option for tracking not only the bus, but the student when the child is on the bus. RFID technology can be categorized in one of three ways, active, semi-active, and passive (Shariq et al., 2020). Because of the price point and ease of implementation,
most schools have a bus pass or student ID printed, districts are employing the passive approach which requires the rider to scan an RFID card on a card reader inside the bus door. Although the prevalence of this technology is still limited, future technology trends and implementation strategies continued to be improved and studied.

Active Transportation

The walking school bus (WSB) is a concept that promotes a safe and active way for children to commute to school. In this form of transportation, the bus is not a vehicle, but an organized group of students that travel to designated pick-up points where children can join the group, like a traditional school bus route. The concept originated in the 1990s when conversations regarding school transportation funding cuts were simultaneous to the rise in childhood obesity (Smith et al., 2015). Kong et al.’s (2009) study of parents and students utilizing this form of transportation indicated that WSBs provided a supportive and safe environment while allowing for physical activity. The study points out that although the social and physical aspects of WSBs are highly regarded, further research would be necessary to determine the logistical challenges of larger scale implementation (Kong et al., 2009).

A nationwide initiative, the Safe Routes Partnership, was formed in 2005 and is dedicated to ensuring the safety, enjoyment, and ease of walking and biking to and from school and as part of daily routines. Part of the initiative is to publish a bi-annual document that reports on how supportive each state is of walking, bicycling, and physical activity for children and adults. Four categories are a part of the scoring key: Policy and Planning, Active Transportation Funding, Safe Routes Funding, and Active Neighborhoods. In the most recent report card published in 2022, the state of Illinois was awarded a score of 98/200. Recently, the Illinois Department of
Transportation is in partnership with the Active Transportation Alliance and the Illinois Public Health Institute to fund infrastructure projects that enhance walking and biking conditions within a 2-mile radius of elementary, middle, or high schools. The Safe Routes to School (SRTS) grant program which is administered bi-annually and in 2022 funded over $5 million in projects that impacted 38 different schools. Although solving bus driver shortages was not the original intent of the active transportation initiatives, initiatives that encourage alternative school transportation methods can work may reduce the demand on bus transportation services.

The Shift to Electric School Buses

With environmental and health concerns mounting over the air pollutants that result from the operation of diesel-powered buses, the pace at which bus companies and school districts are adopting electric buses is increasing. The Blue Bird Corporation was one of the first to research and produce electric school buses in the mid-1990s (Bogren, 1994). Although this work started almost thirty years ago, with the first electric bus produced in California in 1994, most buses on the road continue to be fueled by diesel. There are currently 937 electric buses in 37 states, with California continuing to lead the way with 35% of its school bus fleet powered by electric.

In December of 2022, the World Resource Institute (WRI) announced that all 50 states had commitments to work toward increasing the number of electric buses on the road. To track the progress, Lazer and Freehafer (2023) maintain a regularly updated dataset with relevant statistics, adoption timelines, and information about LEAs choosing to adopt electric buses. The Illinois Legislature introduced House Bill 2287 in March of 2023. The bill includes three benchmark dates regarding the implementation of electric school buses: 1) After January 1, 2028, all newly purchased, leased, or contracted buses shall be an electric vehicle; 2) After
January 1, 2030, buses that serve any community that has been denoted as equity investment eligible must be served by electric buses; and 3) After January 1, 2035, all buses that provide transportation for enrolled students shall be electric vehicles. As of September 1, 2023, this bill was approved by the house committee, but it has not received a vote on the house floor.

In a paper published after the 36th International Electric Vehicle Symposium and Exhibition in Sacramento, California, Gander et al. (2023), outline several barriers that continue to hinder the expansion of electric school buses including cost, infrastructure, and workforce training. Although the long-term costs of electric buses demonstrate overall savings, the upfront cost of an electric bus is approximately three times more expensive than a diesel-powered bus. The preparation and actual installation of the charging equipment and infrastructure to prepare for electric buses requires the use of additional human and capital resources, while continuing to manage the existing gas- or diesel-powered fleet (Gander et al., 2023). The WRI, the organization leading the ESB Initiative, has a multitude of resources, timelines, and templates available to help school districts and bus companies towards this transition.

Summary and Conclusion

School transportation has traditionally played a key role in the public school system as the provider of a safe and efficient method for students to get to school. Since the first compulsory attendance laws were put into place, families began relying on school districts to help transport their children. During times of mandated desegregation efforts in the 1960s and 1970s, students were bused from one neighborhood or community to schools in different areas with the aim of achieving racial integration in the education system. School has evolved over time to encompass a broader focus beyond academics, with modern schools recognizing the
importance of peer relationships, school connectedness, and participation in extracurricular activities. While the studies presented in this paper demonstrate a positive correlation between student attendance and bus ridership, further research is needed to understand how mode of school transportation impacts the daily experiences of students. Gaining insight from key stakeholder groups is essential. By gathering qualitative data from parents and school employees, transportation practices can be better informed to meet the needs of today’s learners and their families.


Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 349 U.S. 294 (1955)


Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).


Given the crucial role that schools play in shaping a child's success (Edwards, 2022; Gottfried, 2017; Roby, 2003), it is of utmost importance to support families in their efforts to get children to and from school each day by providing transportation. With the COVID 19 pandemic in the rearview mirror and the public health emergency (PHE) formally expired, today’s school must adapt to a new normal, which includes shortages and unfilled job vacancies in many key areas. Bus companies and school districts find themselves struggling with unprecedented operational challenges including the low number of driver applicants, unfilled routes, supply chain shortages for repairs and maintenance, large dollar increases for liability coverage, and high fuel prices. For decades, formal organizations such as the National Association for Pupil Transportation (NAPT), the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services (NASDPTS) and the National School Transportation Association (NSTA) have joined efforts to guide and regulate school transportation services. In addition to the formal guidance provided by these organizations, state agencies mandate safety and eligibility standards that schools must follow to receive funding.

School districts typically operate transportation services under one of three service models: self-operated, contracted services, or entering into an intergovernmental agreement with another school district. Leadership capacity and local circumstances influence the decision of
which of these three models is implemented. Under each of these operating circumstances, districts and contractors must adhere to the guidance provided by Illinois school code regarding transportation. Although this research was conducted in a district that outsources all transportation services, most of the data collected and analyzed in this study is relevant to all three models and demonstrates the need for a formal framework by which districts can gauge community values on transportation, reflect on current practices, and plan for the future. This study will employ data gathering techniques that emphasize variation in order to capture a range of viewpoints and experiences from parents and district staff, guided by this research question: How do parent and staff stakeholder groups perceive the operational aspects of school provided transportation within the school district?

Research Setting

The research setting, a preK-8 school district in suburban Illinois, spans nine square miles and serves approximately 3,500 students. Approximately 2,500 of those students are routed on a bus. In addition to riding the bus, students arrive by car, by foot or by bicycle. The bus company contracted by this school district is part of a larger cooperative of eighteen bus companies, with a total fleet of 2,200 vehicles.

The district consists of multiple schools organized into the following grade level buildings: PreK, Kindergarten, first to fifth, and sixth to eighth. The PreK building will not be included in this study, as the ridership and enrollment at this facility varies due to flexible eligibility and start dates throughout the school year. According to the FY24 evidence-based funding (EBF) calculation, this district is categorized as a Tier 3 district, which means the state calculation finds them to be in the range between 90-100% of adequate funding. This funding
level has steadily grown over the past few years, as the district was less than 80% funded when the EBF model was first introduced. Data is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Student Demographic Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% of total enrollment</th>
<th>Hispanic/Latino</th>
<th>Native American/Alaskan Native</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Multirace</th>
<th>IEP</th>
<th>Free or Reduced</th>
<th>EL</th>
<th>Bus Rider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PreK/Early childhood</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-5th grade</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th–8th grade</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

Although districts have easy access to transportation data sets such as route length, ridership, unfilled routes, and late pickups, what is more difficult to collect is stakeholder perspective. To obtain a comprehensive understanding of school transportation, it is vital to collect qualitative data from those who are directly involved. Engaging stakeholders will lead to informed decision-making for the school transportation system. The data collected and those who participated in the study were limited to those who had experiences with regular education transportation services within the research setting. ISBE purposefully separates funding and regulations for special education and regular education transportation due to the level of intricacy and service needed for students who have transportation needs specified in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP).
To be informed on the best practices of facilitating qualitative data collection, I researched and referenced several publications (Onwuegbuzie, 2009; Roberts, 2020; Stahl & King, 2020, United States Agency for International Development 2016). By studying these references, I determined stakeholder feedback would be collected via qualitative methods, specifically focus groups and one interview. Qualitative data offers researchers narrative-based and process-oriented data that is reflective of the human experience (Roberts, 2020). To gather meaningful, reliable data, both preplanning and continuous reflection re crucial, given the challenge of managing these data collection methods.

**Focus Groups**

By engaging parents and staff members in focus groups, participants were provided a venue to share their perspectives, without any preconceived notions or predetermined categories (Yilmaz, 2013). Hennink (2014) notes that focus group methods are not intended to seek consensus or work towards convergence, but to value diverse views perceptions. Hennink further explains focus groups allow for conversations between participants who have information to share on a common topic. The facilitated discussion taking place during the session allows for agreement, disagreement, and a deeper dive into complex transportation circumstances that would be difficult to account for with other qualitative forms of collection such as interviews or surveys (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

I consulted the work of Ellis (2023), Creswell and Creswell (2018), and Pope and Mays (2020) to determine the ideal size of each focus group. Although Ellis (2023) generally agrees with the sizes defined by the other two research teams, Creswell and Creswell recommend a focus group of 6-8 participants, and Pope and Mays recommend 6-10 participants. Ellis
ultimately concludes that the size is subjective and determined by personal preference and judgment of the person conducting the study. Ellis also mentions it is important to consider various factors such as the topic of discussion, the diversity of participants, the skill set of the research facilitator, and the setting of the focus group.

Onwuegbuzie (2009) served as a roadmap for conducting focus groups, providing guidance on size and structure, matrices to code the data, and specific analysis techniques and key vocabulary to consider: conversation analysis (CA), transcripts, coding, moderator, discourse, and group interactions. The importance of preparing a document with questions and notes to guide the focus group session was stressed, along with the strong suggestion to build rapport with the participants. By building a strong rapport with the participants the researcher is laying a solid foundation for the session, encouraging, and allowing for all to individualize their story and contribute to the discussion (United States Agency for International Development, 1996). As warned by the multiple resources consulted (Duggleby, 2005; Myers, 1998; Sagoe, 2015), focus groups may provide a venue for some participants to overshare or dominate the conversation while others are less comfortable sharing. To prepare, I set clear guidelines and data collection norms to frame the purpose of the focus group to share with all constituents at the start of each session. I also was prepared to utilize techniques to ask quieter participants if they had something to add or had another opinion to share.

Participants in the study were all connected to the school district as office staff, teaching staff, school administrator or the parent of a child(ren) who utilizes school transportation. To gain a diverse group of parent participants, my original intent was to seek permission from the school district to contact possible parent participants by utilizing a list generated from the student database of all bus riders. After initial communication with the district and their legal counsel,
this method was not permitted. Instead, I provided the building principals a statement regarding the study that was included in the school weekly newsletter with directions on how parents could voluntarily respond with interest. Nine total parents inquired about the study. Like the style in which I collected study participation interest from parents, building principals included the opportunity for staff to participate in a study regarding student transportation in their weekly staff newsletter. Twelve staff members responded.

Parents

I reviewed nine responses received from parent participants and contacted them all via email attaching the required consent form, which provided details of the study (Table 2). The email communication included an electronic poll to find a common time to hold the focus group. The results of the poll proved it would be difficult to find one common time for the parent focus group to meet. In addition, the original intent was to meet in person with all participants, however, two parents reached out to me and asked if there was an online option. This led to the formation of two separate focus groups, one that included five parents (Focus Group A) and one that included four parents (Focus Group B). Due to this restructuring, I consulted additional research on focus group data analysis and compilation, specifically on how to utilize data from stakeholders that was not collected at the same time (Hennink, 2014; Onwuegbuzie, 2009). A draft of the questions used is included in Appendix A.

School Staff

I reviewed the staff list, which included twelve responses, and I once again provided an electronic poll to coordinate the time the focus group would meet. I was able to successfully find
a time that eight staff members could meet in person. The staff members that responded included two elementary principals, one elementary assistant principal, one elementary teacher, one middle school teacher, one athletic director, one middle school principal secretary, and one elementary principal secretary (see Table 2). A draft of the questions to be used with this focus group can be found in Appendix B. As required, each participant in the study completed the consent form prior to the session.

Table 2
Focus Group Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th>Defined Group Characteristics</th>
<th>Structure of Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Parents of students who school utilize school transportation services.</td>
<td>9 total participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Parent Focus Group A (5 participants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Focus Group B (4 participants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Both sessions hosted in Google Meet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District employees</td>
<td>District members (mix of teachers, athletic coaches, and individuals who perform daily bus duty and/or interact with bus company)</td>
<td>8 participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>One Focus Group Session</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Transportation Liaison Interview

For the second data collection method, I conducted an interview with the district transportation liaison. This individual coordinates with building office staff, parents/guardians, and the contracted transportation company on all bus logistics. On an annual basis, the district allocates 20% of this salary to the transportation fund in the budget, estimating that 20% of this
employee’s workload is spent on bus related tasks. A recent analysis of the employee’s calendar and daily routine demonstrated the role has evolved over the last three years. An overall estimate of 3.25 hours per day is spent on transportation, equating to approximately 40% of her schedule. The district adjusted the budget accordingly for the 2023-2024 school year.

The transportation liaison has frequent interactions and experiences with the transportation company and the different stakeholder groups participating in the focus group. Seidman (2006) reminds the interviewer of their fundamental task, to engage in active listening and propel the interview forward by expanding upon the information the participant has already provided. Although I drafted questions for the interview that can be found in Appendix C, Seidman warns of the use of question guides, stating that the interviewer “must avoid manipulating their participants to respond to it” (p. 92). Ultimately, I did use the questions to frame the interview, however her responses led to additional inquiry, ensuring I collected the most relevant data. When considering the reliability and validity of an interview as a qualitative method, I once again turned to the work of Seidman. Seidman recognizes the complexity of the interview process, as it not only relies on answers from the interviewee but requires successfully transferring the meaning of what has been said. Other important considerations include both the depth of knowledge and the authenticity of the person being interviewed.

Role of the Researcher

Given my current role as the administrator of transportation services in the school district and my own experiences as a student and parent related to the school bus, it was necessary for me to employ an intentional data collection and analysis strategy to minimize the impact of preconceived ideas. I may have formed assumptions and biases based on conversations and
statements from building stakeholders, as well as my own experiences with the transportation company, parents, and staff members. In addition, I am the direct supervisor of the transportation liaison interviewed for this study. It was crucial I remained aware of how my daily experiences and interactions may have influenced my questioning, her responses, and the way I reported out the data.

One method to combat my own biases is described as bracketing. Tufford and Newman (2012) share multiple definitions of bracketing, however for the purposes of this study I followed the definition provided by Creswell and Miller (2000), centering on the acknowledgement of my own beliefs and biases. Bracketing methods available to be utilized in a qualitative research process include memo writing, outside interviews, and reflexive journaling (Tufford & Newman, 2012). I remained diligent about journaling and notetaking throughout the data collection process with the intent of bringing to the surface my preconceptions around school transportation.

Upon reviewing the journal entries post data collection, I found two journal entries that were concerned with study interference. Notes in my journal entry post interview with the transportation liaison included this reflective question: “Why did none of the questions I drafted lead to a response that mentioned parent access to bus tracking?” Because of my prior knowledge and experiences with parents requesting this feature, I knew the liaison would be able to share qualitative data on this topic. I included an unscripted question at the end of the interview to ensure this data was collected. My journal entry considered how the study would have been impacted if this participant did not mention the parent’s desire to locate their child’s bus.

The second journal entry reflected on the inability to conduct the parent focus group as intended due to scheduling constraints. How did the digital meetings impact the flow of what
was meant to be an in-person session leading to conversation among participants. I also reflected on my additional obstacle, the inability to schedule all participants at one time and ultimately holding two separate focus groups sessions. My notes reflect subtle disappointment on the length and depth of each conversation relative to the sizes of the groups, limiting the perspectives shared.

Approach to Data Analysis

By utilizing a grounded theory approach to this study, I recognize that the analytic focus will emerge during the research process (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). Hennink (2014) encourages a deliberate, systemic approach to analyzing qualitative data and mindfully adhering to accepted scientific protocols by carefully coding, categorizing, and interpreting the session transcription. Upon the conclusion of each focus group session, I transcribed the recordings with Google Meet Transcript for a full verbatim report and followed the steps as outlined by Henninx to code and categorize. With the addition of a second parent focus group, it was necessary for me to consider the feedback from each group separately, referencing each in this study as Focus Group A and Focus Group B. The interview with the district transportation liaison was coded and synthesized with a similar process. For reporting purposes, study participants are referenced throughout this paper as shown in Table 3.

Results

To prepare for synthesizing and reporting out the data collected, I reviewed options for narrative styles and decided to share the data collected by identifying key concepts (Hennink, 2014). The four key concepts identified to help me organize the data collected are safety,
### Table 3

**Participant Identifiers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder Group</th>
<th>Identifier in Results</th>
<th>Description of Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent Focus</strong>&lt;br&gt;Group A</td>
<td>PFGA Participant 1</td>
<td>Mother of 5th grader and 7th grader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PFGA Participant 2</td>
<td>Mother of 5th grade and 9th grader (former student)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PFGA Participant 3</td>
<td>Father of Kindergarten and 1st grader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PFGA Participant 4</td>
<td>Mother of 6th grader and 8th grader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PFGA Participant 5</td>
<td>Father of 4th and 5th grader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent Focus</strong>&lt;br&gt;Group B</td>
<td>PFGB Participant 1</td>
<td>Mother of Kindergartner and 3rd grader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PFGB Participant 2</td>
<td>Mother of 3rd grader, 6th grader, and 8th grader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PFGB Participant 3</td>
<td>Mother of Kindergartner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PFGB Participant 4</td>
<td>Mother of 3rd grader and 7th grader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Staff Focus</strong>&lt;br&gt;Group</td>
<td>SFG Participant 1</td>
<td>Office Staff Middle School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SFG Participant 2</td>
<td>Teacher Elementary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SFG Participant 3</td>
<td>Middle School Athletic Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SFG Participant 4</td>
<td>Teacher Middle School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SFG Participant 5</td>
<td>Office Staff Elementary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SFG Participant 6</td>
<td>Principal Elementary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SFG Participant 7</td>
<td>Assistant Principal Elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SFG Participant 8</td>
<td>Assistant Principal Elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SFG Participant 9</td>
<td>Principal Middle School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transportation Liaison</strong></td>
<td>Transportation Liaison</td>
<td>District employee that serves as the conduit between the buildings and the transportation company for all transportation planning and related inquiries.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
communication, driver experiences, and social dynamics. Each of these key concepts will consider the parent and staff data, while outlining subcategories as necessary to represent each dimension of the data collected.

Safety

It is imperative to consider the various dimensions of safety to ensure a comprehensive approach to school transportation has been considered. When considering bus safety alongside vehicular accident data, the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL; 2022) reports that children who take a yellow school bus are 70 times more likely to arrive at school safely than students who arrive by car or walk to school. While the NCSL report designates the school bus as the least accident-prone mode of transportation, it is vital to recognize that low accident risk represents just one aspect of this bus safety. For the purposes of this study safety was defined as the condition of being protected from or unlikely to cause danger, risk, or injury (Merriam-Webster, 2020). Overall, the parents expressed confidence in the partnership between the district and the bus company to get children to school. Only two concerns were noted: the potential for disorderly behavior that would pose safety risks and the wish to track their child's location using a mobile app or other tracking tool. PFGA Participant 2 shared this overarching reminder. “We (parents) are putting our children on the bus and trusting the driver to get them safely to school each day.... I mean this is my baby.” Table 4 summarizes the parent focus group responses to the question, “Do you think that the current transportation system adequately addresses the unique needs and safety considerations of your children?” Distinct and relevant subtopics to bus safety naturally emerged during the data analysis process including student behavior, mechanical issues, and accident protocols.
Table 4
Parent Focus Group Responses Regarding Safety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>For me. Yes. I think you guys do a bang-up job.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I don't know how to answer that probably, I guess. I mean, it is probably chaotic on the bus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Agreed.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>I mean I feel like an example is on our street. We have a little boy that is in a wheelchair. And I see him getting on and off with the assistance of an adult every day. The teacher’s aide, I think.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Me, too.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>No response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>No real concerns</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>No response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I just wish I could get more real-time location of the bus so I know where my kids are.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student Behavior

I reviewed multiple studies and publications addressing safety and student behavior (Bronaugh, 2008; Collins & Ryan, 2016; Hirsch et al., 2004; King et al., 2019). SFG Participant 2 linked student conduct to safety concerns with this statement:

Other safety considerations would have to do with student behavior on the bus. Our drivers are handling that and being able to make those real-time decisions. Is this a behavior that we can address once we get to the school and it’s safe for me to continue driving? Or is this a situation where I need to pull over and call in because at this point the behavior is making it so that the safety of the children on the bus and the other driver on the road is compromised.
Despite my comprehensive research and the data collected from study participants, solutions to address challenging behaviors on buses remain elusive. SFG Participant 4 shared that she has observed various tolerance levels among drivers and inquired about how the bus company trains the drivers to respond. SFG Participant 7 mentioned that the bus driver plays a role like that of a teacher in a classroom, possessing the power to establish the atmosphere for student behavior.

This excerpt shared by PFGB Participant 1 details a recent experience interaction on the bus with another student:

My son just had a problem this week on the bus. He had a kid that was pulling on his ears and getting physical with him, so I was able to talk to the bus company and also the school and they completely came to a good solution. He was so happy, and no one was crying after that, and apologies were said.

The remarks from this parent serve as a reminder that drivers are not always aware of the behaviors taking place on a bus. This awareness may only come into play if a child reports what is taking place.

PFGA Participant 2 admitted that her son “unfortunately has had quite a few situations, some of his own doing, some of others where we've had to get the school involved, just because there's been different behaviors that were not good. It's hard because the bus is unstructured and in general my son needs structure.” PFGA Participant 3 took the opportunity to expand on PFGA Participant 2 comments: “Sometimes the hardest part of a kid's day can be the bus and the lunchroom because of the freedom they are allowed. In an ideal world the driver is only driving the bus and another adult is on the bus handling the kids, so the driver’s eyes can stay on the road.” PFGA Participant 3 went on to state that although it was ideal to have an additional person on the bus, this solution would most likely be at the expense of other programming in the district.
Mechanical Issues

The transportation liaison made mention of the mechanical issues that were prevalent to start the year. Three instances of bus breakdowns were shared and two instances of the driver being unsuccessful at starting the bus. SFG Participant 7 mentioned concerns with the physical condition of a bus including rusted stairs to enter the bus and faulty doors. The liaison reported the inability of the bus company to purchase new buses due to a chassis supply shortage. In October of 2022, the National School Transportation Association (NSTA) addressed the Department of Transportation with concerns regarding the shortage and the inability for production to meet demand (Gray, 2022). In addition, Gray reports that the shortage forces districts to utilize smaller vehicles to transport students, translating into more vehicles on the road. Although the physical condition of the bus was only noted in one of the focus group sessions and the mechanical issues mentioned by the transportation liaison, the liaison stressed the burden of these breakdowns and the added confusion and safety risk it causes. “When kids are sitting on buses on the side of the road waiting for a new bus, we are open to all kinds of confusion. Sometimes parents insist on taking their child off the bus and the paperwork (on who the child can be released to) is not handy.”

Accident Protocols

The question sets utilized for the focus groups and interview did not specifically address bus accidents. Without a direct question on the topic, parent focus group participants did not mention bus accidents, however two individuals from the staff focus group and the transportation liaison gave feedback on accident protocols. This question, “what strategies or systems does the
district have in place to ensure the safety and well-being of students” prompted the transportation liaison’s response:

More impactful situations like an accident or bus breakdown, we try to gather as much information as we can. We have procedures in place for both incidents. If a bus were to break down or get into an accident, there is a protocol that the buildings follow. We try to keep that communication and references available to our buildings, so they have always had it. We've created a centralized location on our Google Drive where they can have that accessible and obviously (we) reiterate as things come up to the building administrators. Keeping them very well informed as we learn things throughout the district because there are constantly moving parts to transportation all the time.

Although the transportation liaison confidently expressed that accident protocols are in place, participants in the staff focus group shared their concerns. SFG Participant 8 wondered what causes the confusion regarding accident protocols that she has experienced as an assistant principal:

A couple of times I have arrived at the scene of an accident to find kids transferred to a new bus. I wouldn’t imagine it would be a challenge for them (the driver) to hold the kids till I get there. But do individual districts have different protocols? So we don’t let kids off the bus until the administrator gets there, but maybe a different district does that and this is part of what causes challenges.

SFG Participant 7 reported her frustration with the number of phone calls and text messages that take place when an accident is reported: “The communication needs to be better from the company. They need to give us all the details and not piecemeal it because that's what has happened in the past. Then we're constantly trying to get back to them, trying to figure out what's going on.”
Communication

Although the bus company contact information is posted on the website of this school district, the transportation liaison reported during her interview that in most cases information shared with parents is through the school district.

Late Buses and Changes to Routes

The transportation liaison shared her inability to get consistent, accurate information from the bus company when things don’t go as planned: “We can only communicate what has been shared by our bus company regarding a delay or change and sometimes it just isn’t enough information.” SFG Participant 1 shared this:

The communication needs to be better from the company. I mean they need to give us all the details and not piecemeal because that's what has happened in the past. When they call with some kind of change we're constantly trying to get back to them, trying to figure out what's going on, what kids are still on the bus, what kids have gotten off the bus. We need this information to contact parents and give them accurate information.

SFG Participant 5 provided a specific example:

Just yesterday I got word that Bus 7 would be 15 minutes late. We notified the parents with a text message. Next thing I know the phone is ringing again, parents are telling us the bus never showed up. It took a couple more calls, but I figured out the bus really wasn’t fifteen minutes late. It was close to on time and those kids missed the bus because they took their time (getting to the bus).

Because the district was experiencing challenges keeping parents informed on the bus pick-up and drop-off times, the district attempted to pilot a program at the kindergarten building during the 22-23 school year that would allow the parent to track the bus. The liaison blamed inefficiencies at the bus company with the inability to expand the program and move beyond the pilot status. “It was honestly causing a lot of confusion. How the system works is based on the
data being right. If a driver calls off and a sub driver comes in and grabs that route, the person driving the route for the day may not be accurate in the system.” She expressed that some parents were disappointed when they noticed the tracking system turned off: “I mean it was working for some families.” She speculated that the families who had drivers with consistent attendance were able to rely on the tracking app.

The frequency of substitute drivers and their unfamiliarity with the routes leads to other potential gaps in information. Comments from SFG Participant 6 pointed out the reliance of the bus company on paper to manage their routes and was frustrated by outdated route sheets she had witnessed in the hands of substitute drivers. SFG Participant 9 echoed those thoughts and “couldn’t understand why in this day and age things were done on a legal pad.”

In his comments regarding communication, PFGA Participant 3 complimented the district in their ability to accurately share route information in the parent portal prior to the start of the year. However, he did acknowledge that it is just as important to be communicating throughout the year when routes change, or the bus is delayed.

**Athletic Charters**

Although only the Director of Athletics, SFG Participant 3, mentioned athletic charters during the data collection process, she represents all coaches, athletes, and their families across the district. The magnitude of the communication challenges shared is worthy of highlighting in the results. SFG Participant 3 acknowledged a good working relationship with the individual at the bus company in charge of athletic charters, however she has discovered that conversations that take place between the management at the bus company and district administration are not always passed on: “Sometimes where we fall short is that she and I are in the middleman in the
bigger picture. That becomes a problem for the two of us when we're trying to communicate timing and availability. Messages are getting lost in translation. Other struggles shared by SFG Participant 3 were related to instances when her main charter contact was not available and wrong information was shared by the replacement. “Yesterday we were supposed to have a bus there at 2:15 and she wasn’t there. Our driver was given the wrong pickup time and so our team was 15 to 20 minutes late to the game because she wasn't there to handle the problem.”

SFG Participant 3 mentioned wanting to maintain consistency with the same drivers for athletic events. “Sometimes one driver drops the team off and another one picks them up. There’s been times that the pick-up bus doesn’t show up and we haven’t had a way to get kids home or it was super delayed.” SFG Participant 3 went on to share how many people she must contact if a team is late to an event, coaches, parents, officials, school administrators. “It also causes confusion for the kids and coaches after school. Where to hold them till the bus shows up.” Post focus-group I reviewed data that compared requested departure time to actual departure time for each week since the start of the athletic competitive schedule (Table 5).

As demonstrated in Table 5, once school started in Week 2 the bus company was unsuccessful at providing on-time charters. With the data representing a clear improvement starting in Week 8, I followed up with SFG Participant 3. She stated that she worked with the district transportation liaison on improving the late charters. The transportation liaison and SFG Participant 3 met with bus company leadership and the charter contact to rectify the situation. This meeting resulted in discovering miscommunication between the bus company leadership and the charter contact, as neither the district’s expectations nor contractual obligation was not shared. Because Week 7 was in flux and both the district and bus company were working to
ensure increased efficiency for Week 8, data was not collected on schedule for Week 7. The data demonstrates the meeting that held had a positive impact on charter departure times.

Table 5

Athletic Charter Departure Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Charter Departs at Requested Time (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (8/21)</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(school not yet in session)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (8/28)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (9/4)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (9/11)</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (9/18)</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (9/25)</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (10/2)</td>
<td>Data Not Available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 (10/9)</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 (10/16)</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 (10/23)</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Driver Experiences

School bus drivers contribute significantly to the education system by ensuring the safe arrival of students each day. Major differences existed in the data collected from employees of the school district and the data collected from the parents regarding their experiences with bus drivers, leading to the data for this key concept to be divided by study participant type. School
employees shared expectations for drivers and past shortcomings while parents focused on how effectively the driver served their family and interacted with their student(s).

**Parent Data**

Comments from Parent Focus Group A shared a common theme of appreciation and compassion for drivers, while comments from Parents Focus Group B were more critical (Table 6). The comment comparison model that led to this generalization is shown in Table 6. As I further reviewed the data collected and compared the two groups, it became apparent that there was one common denominator between participants in Focus Group A that may have made a difference in the overall tone of the group. Four parents shared their profession: two teachers, one administrative assistant to the principal, and one district level administrator. The administrative assistant to the principal works within the research setting and I was aware of her dual role as a parent and staff member prior to facilitating the focus group. All others work in neighboring districts, and I was unaware of their connection to schools. This information was provided in the context of sharing their own child’s experience and comparing it to the experiences of the students in their school district. None of the parents revealed their profession in Focus Group B.

**Staff Data**

Neither the script used to facilitate the staff focus group nor the list of questions asked of the transportation liaison directly mentioned bus drivers. However, in both the interview session and focus group, the driver was mentioned a total of ninety-one times, underscoring the
Table 6
Parent Focus Group Responses Regarding Driver Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent Focus Group A</th>
<th>Parent Focus Group B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participant</strong></td>
<td><strong>Response</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I have one child at a middle school and one at an elementary school. We have the same bus driver for both routes so that’s good.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>We love our elementary bus driver. She is amazing. She's been our boys bus driver for many, many years so she knows she's known both of my boys.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The bus drivers are the first face that the kids see in the morning and the last face that they see when they go home. The driver’s relationship with the kids really matters. Like it really matters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Our bus driver actually has seating arrangements. She puts younger kids in the front and then as you get older, you go towards the back.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>When I put my kids on the bus and they're nervous or they're having a bad morning and they see somebody [the driver] who smiles and knows their name and welcomes them. It can be hard when there's different people [not a consistent driver].</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
significance of driver experiences as a key concept identified. Participant 3 stated “not only do the drivers need to build relationships with the kids but I think we (staff members) need to build relationships with the drivers.” Participant 2 commented, “successful bus drivers realize that there is more to driving a bus than just the driving piece.” That same participant went on to share that she had no knowledge of the driver training or protocols that are in place with the bus company. This led to a conversation on the lack of trust between the transportation company and the district. SFG Participant 6 commented: “We put a significant amount of trust, as do the parents and on a third party that we don't have a deep understanding of quite honestly. We're just placing a lot of blind trust if you will.” As SFG Participant 6 finalized her comments, SFG Participant 9 added, “I had a student that was messing around on the bus earlier this year and hit her head. When I got the phone call, I panicked a bit because I did not know how the driver would handle the situation. I mean because so many other situations have been handled poorly and the fact that I don’t know anything about how the driver has been trained to handle this. It was quite scary.” Establishing a climate of trust offers numerous advantages and plays a pivotal role in enhancing overall organizational effectiveness (Tschannen-Moran, 2001). Based on the previous negative experiences of SFG Participant 9, an elementary school principal, she did not trust the driver or the bus company to act and care for the child.

Social Dynamics

The social aspect of riding the bus was discussed generally by both staff members and parents as they mentioned students wanting to talk and interact with friends on rides to and from school. PFGB Participant 1 shared that her two children insisted on taking the bus simply to share the journey with their peers. The parent went on to share that she preferred to drive her
children to school, however her third grade daughter looked forward to riding the bus. “I mean it's ok if they want to ride the bus, I just thought I would take my kids to and from school and get a job within those hours.” This parent went on to explain that the third grader looks at riding the bus like a “status thing” and the “cool kids ride the bus.” Her daughter does not want to miss out on the time she gets to socialize with her friends on the bus. PFGB Participant 2 commented that she believes the bus makes for a cohesive neighborhood and allows her daughter to interact with kids of all ages in the neighborhood: “She's friends with kids who are older than her and kids that are younger than her because of the bus.”

Assigned seating arrangements were mentioned throughout the data collection process by all focus groups and the transportation liaison. There was an overtone of wanting kids to have freedom in choosing seats but understanding that assignments may minimize behavioral and logistical issues. PFGA Participant 5 spoke specifically to the trade-off between seating arrangement and the importance of social connections during the commute: “My younger one is like a ping pong ball. He would be happy and prefers to sit on different spots on the bus, but my older student is the nervous Nelly and the buses can be hard and he's worried about where he's gonna find a seat.” During her interview, the transportation liaison shared a notable perspective on the challenges faced when assigning seating for all students. As she reminisced about the return of students to in-person learning after the pandemic, she reflected on the need for defined seating charts for contract tracing purposes. She detailed the difficulties the nurses and office staff had when referencing the seating chart, as they would uncover that in most cases the seating chart on paper did not reflect where the child sat.
Discussion

Safe and reliable transportation for school-aged children plays a crucial role in ensuring equitable access to education and promoting positive educational outcomes. Reliable and efficient transportation services enable students to overcome geographical barriers and logistical challenges, ensuring that they arrive at school on time and ready to engage in learning activities. This study aimed to examine the perspectives of parent and staff stakeholders on the student transportation experience, while considering multiple facets of school transportation, including the history and future trajectory. The study was conducted in a preK-8 school district in suburban Illinois and was limited to non-special services transportation in efforts to keep the final product clear and concise to its mission. Although regular and special education transportation are strongly connected, the complexities of transportation services for students with special needs would be better served by a separate study tailored to the intricacies of that programming.

Findings of this study underscored the significance of bus safety, communication, driver experiences, and social dynamics. These aspects collectively contribute to the overall effectiveness and impact of school transportation systems on student well-being, academic engagement, and community cohesion. School bus safety is controlled by local, state, and federal sources. The National Conference for School Transportation (NCST) of 300 delegates convenes every five years to update bus safety procedures. The NCST standards as well as regulations provided by each individual state document guidance for transportation companies and school districts. It is the responsibility of the local school board to ensure policies are in place that reflect these regulations, including the training of drivers, the reporting of accidents, and the performing of annual safety drills. In 2022, National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) reported that children who take a yellow school bus are 70 times more likely to arrive at school
safely than students who arrive by car or walk to school. While the NCSL report designates the school bus as the least accident-prone mode of transportation, it is vital to recognize that low accident risk represents just one aspect of this bus safety. Through the analysis process of the data collected from parent and staff stakeholders, two safety subtopics not related to accidents emerged, student behavior and mechanical issues.

Just as a teacher establishes the rules and norms within a classroom, a bus driver assumes a pivotal role in setting the tone and boundaries for student behavior on the bus. The school bus can be considered a microcosm of the school environment, providing opportunities for social interaction, peer support, and the development of important social skills. For students who ride the bus, the daily commute to and from school represents a significant aspect of their daily routine and contributes to their overall school experience. As Caraveteanu (2013) points out, once a venue for academics and literacy, school has become a core component of societal influences on the future generations. Parent study participants pointed out that families not only depend on the bus to get their child to school, but seek a positive, welcoming, and safe student rider experience. In addition, parents expressed concerns about the unstructured nature of bus, referring to behavior management, supervision, and consistency in rules and procedures. One potential solution, employing a paraprofessional on the bus focused on monitoring students, would allow drivers to focus all efforts on driving. Parents and staff members acknowledged the financial implications of this staffing addition would most have a negative impact on other educational programming. Despite efforts to understand and mitigate behavioral challenges, concrete solutions remain elusive, highlighting the need for further research and collaborative efforts among stakeholders to enhance bus safety and student well-being.
Staff members highlighted the chaos and confusion that is caused by buses that breakdown, while making comments on rusted-out stairs to enter the bus. In October of 2022, the National School Transportation Association (NSTA) addressed the Department of Transportation with concerns regarding the shortage and the inability for production of buses to meet demand (Gray, 2022), which equates to an aged fleet of vehicles. With the limited ability of transportation companies to buy new buses, the need for timely communication escalates, as parents and school leaders anticipate more breakdowns. PFGA Participant 5 shared “I wish I could get more real-time location of the bus, so I know where my kids are.”

This research was multifaceted and explored not only the history and origins of school transportation services but also the future trajectory of the industry. One such future trend mentioned in the literature review was the ability to track the location of the bus. Although global positioning systems (GPS) in school transportation vehicles are not new to the industry (Shaaban et al., 2013; Shariq et al., 2020), many districts, including the district in this study, do not utilize this technology to the fullest extent to which it is available. The lack of a robust infrastructure to implement bus tracking with fidelity was identified by the transportation liaison as the reason these systems are not prevalent within the school transportation industry. The transportation liaison concluded that manual data entry processes are frequently inaccurate causing parents to get inaccurate information.

By tracing the development of transportation policies and infrastructure, it became evident societal changes and legislative interventions have shaped the landscape of how kids get to school. Although bus initiatives were utilized to expedite desegregation efforts afforded by key court rulings (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954; Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 1955) and the Racial Imbalance Act, the literature reflects the resistance and backlash
surrounding these efforts at the time. Additionally, the study uncovered intriguing insights from parent data, indicating the influence of social status on the bus. Parent comments ranged from expressing their child’s desire to be with friends and socialize on this bus to accounting for the anxiety a child feels if they cannot find a seat. Transportation policies not only reflect societal values but also have a profound impact on social dynamics within school communities. Understanding and addressing these dimensions is essential for crafting effective transportation strategies that promote inclusivity, equity, and safety for all students.

School transportation serves as a vital link between home, school, and community, fostering a social connections and relationships between students and interactions with the daily driver. Moving forward, it is imperative for transportation leaders to prioritize the well-being and safety of students, ensuring that bus services facilitate positive educational experiences and support the academic success of all students. Through ongoing collaboration and innovation, districts and transportation companies can strive to create transportation systems that ensure students are safe and feel included in the daily bus environment, while parents are satisfied with communication efforts and trusting of the driver.

**Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

Using qualitative collection methods, this study provided insight into the participants’ perceptions of the district transportation. The facilitation of and results gathered from the staff focus group was one specific area of strength in this study. The staff participants represented all K-8 buildings in the district and included office staff, school administrators, teachers, and the athletic director. Although the participants did not have daily working relationships, there was no need for formal introductions, as all staff members were familiar with the names and titles of the
others in the focus group. Without the need for formal introductions, there was a comfort level that sparked open dialogue. Participants were openly able to expand on an idea presented by another or completely disagree and negate their experience.

Finding a time to hold a focus group session with all parent stakeholders proved difficult. In lieu of the in-person session with 7-10 participants that was intended, two focus groups met. The two smaller groups, five and four participants respectively, were facilitated in a virtual environment. Parent Focus Group A unintentionally included four people that currently work in a school district. The inadvertent inclusion of four individuals currently employed in public schools could have skewed the perspectives as their current role in education may influenced their viewpoints. If I would have anticipated this dynamic among the group of participants, I would have distributed them equally among both focus groups.

Another limiting factor was the non-response of the bus company to participate in the study. After multiple attempts to gain approval to include bus drivers in a focus group, I restructured my study to only include parents and staff members. Collecting data from parents and staff members regarding the student experience on the bus was a core component of the study. I hypothesize gathering data from drivers would have added a worthwhile third dimension to the study, as these individuals interact with students daily. This group could have potentially provided valuable insight into the dynamics of the student-driver interactions and potentially offered a deeper understanding of the factors influencing the overall student bus experience.

Lastly, my role as the leader of transportation services offered both advantages and constraints. My intimate understanding of protocols and operational intricacies made it easy to collect data, identify important factors, and make informed decisions throughout the study. While my familiarity with district transportation practices proved valuable to the overall
completion of this study, my position may have limited the exchange of negative opinions or concerns. Due to my status as a high-ranking official in the district, staff members may have perceived that sharing less than favorable comments would question or attack my authority.

**Opportunities for Further Research**

There are numerous facets of school transportation, yet the study findings underscore a need for research focusing on the development of trusting relationships between the transportation company and the school district, as well as between the parents and the drivers. Each of the four themes that emerged through the data analysis process, safety, communication, driver experiences, and social dynamics, had an underlying desire for trusting relationships to be at the center of transportation processes and logistics. Parents trust that children are under the care of a qualified and competent driver each day, while simultaneously relaying on the school district to effectively communicate late buses and route changes. School leaders trust that the bus company has hired qualified staff to transport children, ensuring their safety and well-being during the commute.

Future transportation research is needed to understand what parents and staff members expect from transportation relationships to build trust. Since bus companies partner with multiple school districts, it is possible that each district expects a different level of service and attention to detail. How might the bus company differentiate the rider experience based on the demands of the district? An idea worth exploring is conducting an annual transportation review, inclusive of feedback cycles, overseen by transportation company management and attended by district stakeholders. This collaborative effort aims to enhance communication and trust, thereby
fostering meaningful strategic planning. By comparing data collected year over year, progress toward service satisfaction could be identified and monitored.

Conclusion

In this study, I collected and analyzed data to gain insight on how parents and staff members perceive the transportation services in a school district. Coding of the focus groups and interview data yielded an analysis guided by the following themes: safety, communication, driver experiences and social dynamics. A common thread through the identified themes was trust, the desire for a trusting relationship between the parents and the driver and a trusting relationship between the transportation company and the district. This emphasis on trust demonstrates the importance of fostering mutually supportive and dependable relationships within school transportation. Parents emphasized their desire to feel assured that their children are in capable hands enroute to school or home. Similarly, staff members underscored the importance of trust between the bus company and the school district to ensure smooth and efficient functioning of the transportation services.

My original intent was to create a toolkit with multiple resources and templates for leaders to utilize that would assist with transportation tasks such as routing, late bus route communications, charter requests, and driving training. After reviewing the literature and analyzing the data, I observed the emphasis on trust that emerged from the data collected. When I considered the data collection process and the resulting insights into our school community’s priorities regarding the student transportation experience, I shifted focus from offering a toolkit of resources to crafting a guidebook. This guidebook aims to aid other transportation administrators in leading a process to determine the community values concerning school
transportation. The Bolman and Deal Leadership Framework I planned to help me organize the resource shifts to an organization tool to categorize reflective questions and processes to define those values, ultimately allowing for an individualized planning tool process for all school districts.
References


Good afternoon. Thank you for taking the time to join us to discuss transportation in District 73. My name is LeeAnn Taylor and in addition to serving as the Chief School Business Official for this school district, I am a doctoral candidate at Northern Illinois University. I am conducting a study to inform school transportation and need the perspectives of parents to ensure my research is comprehensive.

Prior to today’s session you filled out the informed consent form. I would like to thank you for doing that and remind you that your participation is voluntary. You do not have to answer every question and you are welcome to leave anytime.

There are no wrong answers today - this is an opportunity to hear different viewpoints on school transportation. Keep in mind that all of you may not agree on something that is said and/or have experience that may be quite different than what others share. It is important that those different stories and perspectives are shared.

I am recording this session - as all of your comments are valued and I would like to pay full attention to the conversation today and do the analysis later. I will not utilize any names in my final research paper. The final paper will be presented to a formal dissertation committee at my university later this year or early 2024.
Let’s find out a little more information about each person in the room to start.

How many children you have/had in the district and how your family utilizes the bus services of the district.

Facilitated Questions:

1. What are your overall impressions and experiences regarding the current daily bus route to which your child or children are assigned? If your child(ren) is not currently taking the bus to school, please describe any past experience.

2. In your opinion, what are the strengths of the current bus routes and schedules?

3. In your opinion, what are the areas for improvement of the current bus routes and schedules?

4. What does your child share with you about their experience on the bus? Interactions with the driver? Length of time on the bus?

5. How would you describe the manner in which the school communicates about transportation - notifies you of the route assigned, changes to the route, and other transportation focused communication? What specific communication or coordination challenges have you experienced?
6. Are there any specific measures or initiatives you believe could enhance the overall experience of bus transportation for students and their families?

7. Do you believe the current bus transportation system adequately addresses the unique needs and safety considerations of children?

8. Have you considered or utilized alternative transportation methods for your child, such as carpooling or walking to school? If yes, what factors influenced your decision?

9. Are there any notable positive experiences or instances where the bus transportation system has exceeded your expectations?

10. Suppose that you were asked to share a one or two sentence summary with the board of education regarding your experience with district transportation for your child(ren) - what would you say?

Is there anything you haven’t had the opportunity to share and would like to?

At the end of the session, remind participants to email with any other thoughts.
Appendix B

Focus Group Template: School Staff

Good afternoon. Thank you for taking the time to join us to discuss transportation in District 73. My name is LeeAnn Taylor and in addition to serving as the Chief School Business Official for this school district, I am a doctoral candidate at Northern Illinois University. I am conducting a study to inform school transportation in Hawthorn 73 and need the perspectives of district staff members to ensure my research is comprehensive.

Prior to today’s session you filled out the informed consent form. I would like to thank you for doing that and remind you that your participation is voluntary. You do not have to answer every question and you are welcome to leave anytime.

There are no wrong answers today - this is an opportunity to hear different viewpoints on school transportation. Keep in mind that all of you may not agree on something that is said and/or have experience that may be quite different than what others share. It is important that those different stories and perspectives are shared.

As you can see, there is a microphone present - as all of your comments are valued and I will need an opportunity to review the discussion after the conclusion of our session, as I would like to pay full attention to the conversation today and do the analysis later. I will not utilize any names in my final research paper. The final paper will be presented to a formal dissertation committee at my university later this year or early 2024.
Let’s find out a little more information about each person in the room to start.

Briefly state what building you work in - an elementary, kindergarten, or middle school building, and the number of years you have worked in the district?

DRAFT questions:

1. In your opinion, what are the essential factors that contribute to a successful school transportation system?

2. How would you describe the overall relationship between the schools and the contracted bus company? Follow-up question: Is there effective communication and collaboration between the two groups?

3. What are the most common challenges or issues you encounter related to school bus transportation? Follow-up question: How do you handle these challenges?

4. Have you observed any specific benefits of school bus transportation on the students attending your school? If so, please provide examples. (Be prepared to give an example)
5. What experiences do you have scheduling or utilizing the contracted bus service for events that take place outside of school hours? What has gone well with those experiences? What can be improved?

6. Are there any safety concerns or incidents related to school bus transportation that you have noticed or dealt with in the past? How were these situations addressed?

7. How do you handle communication with parents regarding changes or updates related to school bus transportation? Followup - Are there any areas where you feel improvements could be made in this communication process?

8. Have you noticed any trends or patterns in student behavior on the school bus? How does this behavior impact the overall school environment, and how do you address any issues that arise? What ideas do you have for how schools or bus companies could be more supportive of the behavior issues? - same question to the transportation staff.

9. Are there strategies or initiatives that either you or others have implemented that have improved the school bus transportation experience for students and their families?

10. Are there any particular areas or aspects of the school bus transportation system that you believe require improvement or additional resources? What suggestions do you have for addressing these areas?
Is there anything you haven’t had the opportunity to share and would like to?

At the end of the session, remind participants to email with any other thoughts.
Appendix C

District Transportation Liaison Interview Template

Good afternoon. Thank you for taking the time to join me to discuss transportation in the district.

My name is LeeAnn Taylor and in addition to serving as the Chief School Business Official for this school district, I am a doctoral candidate at Northern Illinois University. I am conducting a study to inform school transportation and need the perspectives of parents to ensure my research is comprehensive. The final paper will be presented to a formal dissertation committee at my university later this year or early 2024.

Prior to today’s session you filled out the informed consent form. I would like to thank you for doing that and remind you that your participation is voluntary. You do not have to answer every question and you are welcome to leave anytime.

There are no wrong answers today - this is an opportunity to hear about your experiences with school transportation. As you can see, there is a microphone present - as all of your comments are valued and I will need an opportunity to review the discussion after the conclusion of our session, as I would like to pay full attention to the conversation today and do the analysis later.
DRAFT questions:

1. How long have you been involved in coordinating school transportation? Could you describe your experience in this field?

2. Can you provide an overview of your role as a transportation coordinator in the school district?

3. What are the most common challenges or issues you encounter related to your transportation role? Followup question: How do you handle these challenges?

4. Can you share any specific instances where the current school transportation system has been effective? Same question - inefficient?

5. Can you explain the process of coordinating transportation for students within the school district?

6. What factors do you consider when coordinating with the bus company to determine the number of routes or assigning bus schedules?

7. What strategies or systems does the district have in place to ensure the safety and well-being of students?
8. How are issues or concerns raised by parents or guardians addressed regarding transportation services?

9. Have you implemented any improvements or changes to the transportation system based on feedback or observations? If so, can you describe those changes and their impact?

10. Can you share any memorable experiences or success stories related to school transportation coordination?

11. Are there strategies or initiatives that either you or others have implemented that have improved the school bus transportation experience for students and their families?

Is there anything you haven’t had the opportunity to share and would like to?

At the end of the session, remind the study participant to email with any other thoughts.
PAPER 3

SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION: DEFINING DISTRICT VALUES

AND COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS
School Transportation: Defining District Values and Community Expectations
# Table of Contents

## SECTION ONE:

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................2

The History of School Transportation .............................................................................................3

School Transportation in Illinois ........................................................................................................3

## SECTION TWO

Utilizing Leadership Frames to Define Values and Manage Expectations ......................................5

The Crucial First Step: Who will Lead? ..............................................................................................7

The Power of Planning.......................................................................................................................7

Committing to a Multi-frame Approach ...........................................................................................8

Defining the Gaps as a Reflective Tool ............................................................................................18

References .........................................................................................................................................20
SECTION ONE

Introduction

Navigating the complexities of school transportation involves a delicate balance between efficiency, safety, and meeting the unique needs of students and their families. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of this task, school leaders are increasingly seeking innovative approaches to enhance the effectiveness of transportation services. The data from a 2023 qualitative transportation study was utilized to guide the formation of a guidance tool for all who lead and transportation planning efforts in a school district. The research setting for the study was a preK-8 school district in suburban Illinois. Study participants included school district office staff, teaching staff, school administrator or the parent of a child(ren) who utilizes school transportation.

Although the district in the study outsources all transportation services, the framework and concepts presented in the pages that follow can also be relevant to districts that employ their own drivers. As a point of clarification, it is not intended for the guiding questions presented here to reach the level of specificity required to plan for special education routes.
The History of School Transportation

Given the crucial role that schools play in shaping a child's success, it is of utmost importance to support families in their efforts to get children to and from school each day. In 1869, Massachusetts became the first state to authorize funding for school transportation, calculating it was more cost-effective to support transporting students to school than supporting multiple separate country schools (Bedichek & Baskett, 1907). As the population grew in the United States and compulsory attendance became the norm, more states followed the lead of Massachusetts and by 1900, eighteen states authorized funding for school transportation (Anthony & Inman, 1986). Each state was left with the responsibility of ensuring students attended and had access to the actual learning institution. Researchers John Burns and Roe Johns, both from the Teacher College at Columbia University, stressed the need for formalized systems to determine who was eligible for bus service and how buses would be routed, a model that is still utilized today. Johns (1928) called individual states to put equitable access to schooling plans into action, noting the work and scientific research of Burns. Burn’s (1927) framework for transportation planning considers average daily attendance, number of pupils transported, number of school buildings, and the total number of square miles in the county.

School Transportation in Illinois

Section 29-3 of the Illinois School Code defines which school districts are required to provide adequate transportation to students who reside 1.5 miles or more to school or come across a safety hazard on their way to school. On an annual basis, school districts that provide transportation submit a claim to the ISBE to seek partial reimbursement for expenditures. In order to be eligible for transportation funding, districts must adhere to the complex state and federal operational guidelines. Responsibilities for all agencies involved, including ISBE, the
Illinois Secretary of State, the Illinois Department of Transportation, the U.S. Department of Transportation, local school boards, and school bus contractors are outlined in an annual administrative manual. The responsibility of the local school board is to ensure policies are in place that reflect the regulations provided by all outside entities, including the training of drivers, the reporting of accidents, and the performing of annual safety drills.
SECTION TWO

 Utilizing Leadership Frames to Define Values and Manage Expectations

The leaders of transportation efforts within a school district need a way to map out, prioritize, and make sense of the task list that accompanies how students get to school. Bolman and Deal (2017) define four frames, different lenses through which to view an organization: structural, political, symbolic, and human resource (Table 1): “A good frame makes it easier to know what you are up against and, ultimately, what you can do about it (p.11).” The frames are also intended to help point out patterns, ask new questions, and serve as a filter for information.

Bolman and Deal’s intention when developing the frames was for organizational leaders to apply them flexibly, depending on the situation. This document is intended to honor that flexibility and serves only as a blueprint for districts to structure transportation services that are reflective of stakeholder needs and represent the core values of the school district. Those that engage in this reflective process may find the need to alter, eliminate, substitute, or add additional reflective questions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Assumptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Structural** | 1. Organizations exist to achieve goals.  
2. Performance is improved by division of labor and specialization.  
3. Proactive coordination is necessary for organizational harmony.  
4. Coordination and control promote productivity.  
5. Organizational framework must align with the current circumstances.  
6. Inadequate performance must be greeted by problem solving and possible restructuring.                                                                                                                   |
| **Political**  | 1. Organizations consist of various individuals and stakeholder groups.  
2. Individuals in an organization maintain persistent variations in values, beliefs, knowledge, interests, and perspectives.  
3. The most important decisions center around the limited resources to determine who gets what.  
4. Conflict is at the forefront of the organization, making power the most valuable asset.  
5. Decisions are a result of bargaining and compromising among conflicting stakeholders.                                                                                                                  |
| **Symbolic**   | 1. The importance of what takes place is not as significant as how it is understood.  
2. Interpretations of events and actions are diverse.  
3. The process is more important than the result.  
4. Culture unites an organization and brings people together.                                                                                                                                                                         |
| **Human**      | 1. Organizations exist for human fulfillment.  
2. People and organizations are mutually dependent. Organizations require creativity, enthusiasm, and skill; individuals need jobs, income, and chances.  
3. Poor fit between individuals and organizations leads to mutual harm.  
4. A positive fit benefits both individuals and organizations. Individuals find fulfilling work, while organizations receive necessary talent and energy for success.                                                                 |
| **Resource**   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
The Crucial First Step: Who will Lead?

Start by designating a project manager to plan and lead the process. This may or may not be the administrator who is directly responsible for transportation services, as it is more important that this individual believes in the value of reflective practices and is open to change. The leader’s commitment to the process is crucial, along with the possession of these important qualities: curious, open-minded, empathetic, patient, well-organize, and committed. Prior to engaging in the steps that follow, the leader must ensure they have a deep understanding of Bolman and Deal’s work and exemplify their belief in the frames and acknowledge that multiframe thinking requires moving beyond narrow, one-dimensional approaches to leadership.

The Power of Planning

To plan for the process of reviewing transportation services through the lenses of each frame, the project manager must consider the actual logistics to accomplish the task. These questions have been constructed to assist with planning:

1. How can I best leverage all the data that already exists regarding our transportation practices? Are all documents and procedures in one place? Who can help gather what is available?

2. What assistance do I need to engage in the reflection process? How do I identify relevant stakeholders?

3. How do I clarify the purpose of the reflective process to those identified?

4. What time do I need to set aside and what information do I need to share to facilitate the conversations with the group?

5. How will the findings from each frame be integrated into a coherent understanding of strengths, challenges, and opportunities?
6. How can the findings be translated into actionable recommendations that can be presented from possible implementation?

7. What is the overall timeline and how can I establish milestones along the way to ensure the project keeps moving forward?

8. Once a final deliverable has been completed, how should it be shared out and utilized to improve practice?

9. How do we continue to foster a culture of continuous improvement by welcoming and considering feedback?

**Committing to a Multi-frame Approach**

Once the project manager has been identified and the questions have been considered to guide the process, it is time to engage in the reflective work with each of the frames. The entire process can be implemented in a variety of ways according to the time and plan defined by the manager. In the pages that follow, each frame is defined followed by the assumptions that Bolman and Deal have defined. These assumptions have been used to draft the questions that were key to the reflective process.
The Structural Frame

Highlights the importance of specialization and expertise, emphasizing the need for effective teams and proficiency in all skilled areas.

Guiding Questions:

Does our district possess or have access to a specialized skill set to lead transportation efforts?

How can proactive planning be used to plan and coordinate school transportation based on current and future circumstances?

Assumption #1:
Organizations exist to achieve goals.

How clear are our transportation goals? Do these goals align with overall district goals?

- Do we value efficiency over comfort or comfort over efficiency?
- What do we believe about the length of time a child is on the bus?
- Are there capacity limits that we want to set to avoid overcrowded buses?
- What circumstances must exist for us to change a route or stop at the request of a parent of a building leader?

Assumption #2:
Performance is improved by division of labor and specialization.

To whom are all the transportation tasks assigned? Are there any tasks that regularly do not get accomplished?

- What missteps have occurred multiple times?
- What causes the missteps? Does the team or person responsible for the inadequately performed tasks understand their role?
- Are some tasks performed more efficiently or with higher quality than others?
- Is there a way to replicate that success in areas that are struggling to perform?
Assumption #3: Proactive coordination is necessary to for organizational harmony.

How well do different teams within the school district coordinate with the outside company or district transportation department?

- Are the responsibilities of the district and the contracted vendor clearly defined?
- How often are we hearing from stakeholders “I wasn’t aware of that?”
- How are messages from the transportation department or company cascaded throughout transportation?
- How is essential information from an individual department or school shared with the transportation company?

Assumption #4: Coordination and control promotes productivity.

How do we monitor and evaluate the performance of our transportation services to ensure it meets the needs of the community?

- How do we regularly collect feedback from stakeholders?
- How do monitor our recordkeeping, routing, and all other operations to ensure alignment with state requirements?
- Are there areas where additional coordination is needed and could be implemented to improve overall efficiency?

Assumption #5: Organizational framework must align with the current circumstances.

Is our district transportation services able to adapt to meet the changing needs of the community and/or student population?

- When there is a road closure or change in traffic patterns, how do we make decisions about route changes?
- Are there regular assessments of services to ensure operations align with the evolving circumstances?
- Have we considered the actual housing locations of student populations across the district to ensure routes have not become unbalanced?
Assumption #6:
Inadequate performance must be greeted by problem solving and possible restructuring.

How is inadequate performance in transportation identified?

- How do we respond to negative feedback?
- If there is disagreement among team members during the problem solving process how do we address it?
- What criteria is utilized to determine if restructuring or reallocation of resources is necessary?
- Is the criteria we defined reflective of our overall goals for student transportation?
The Political Frame

Considers conflict central, recognizing that continuous battles occur due to the differing interests of individuals and groups.

Guiding Questions:

How do we recognize and react to conflicts of interest?

How can different interests be satisfied when limited resources exist?

Assumption #1:
Organizations consist of various individuals and stakeholder groups.

How do we identify and acknowledge the different individuals and stakeholder groups that utilize our transportation services?

- How do we prioritize needs and/or requests to create a well-balanced service?
- What evidence exists to demonstrate we are agile and adaptable in our approach to accommodating the evolving needs of families, students, schools, and athletics?
- How do we recognize and address disparities in access to service or quality of service as it relates to geographic area or demographic group?

Assumption #2:
Individuals in an organization maintain persistent variations in values, beliefs, knowledge, interests, and perspectives.

In what ways can we tap in the unique perspectives of students, parents, staff, and bus drivers to enhance our transportation services?

- How do we support and promote a culture that values diversity of thought and ideas brought forward by individuals?
- How do we mitigate potential biases that arise from our differences to ensure fair and equitable access to school?
- What strategies exist to proactively address any conflicts between stakeholders with different viewpoints?
Assumption #3:
The most important decisions center around the limited resources to determine who gets what.

How are we currently prioritizing and making decisions regarding the allocation of limited resources within our school transportation system?

- What do we define as the most critical components/non-negotiables of our transportation service to ensure we the safety and well being of our students?
- What data do we need access to and how can that data be analyzed to evaluate the effectiveness of how resources are allocated?
- How do we collaborate with our transportation company and/or other entities to ensure we have optimized the use of resources?

Assumption #4:
Conflict is at the forefront of the organization, making power the most valuable asset.

Do we use power appropriately to solve problems and increase effectiveness?

- What role does leadership play in managing conflicts?
- What strategies are in place to ensure conflict is met by considering the collective benefit rather than valuing individual power?
- What mechanisms are in place to identify and address power imbalances between the transportation company and the school district?

Assumption #5:
Decisions are a result of bargaining and compromising among conflicting stakeholders.

How effective are we at encouraging bargaining and compromise among conflicting stakeholders when making decisions?

- How do we promote an environment that cares to comfort?
- Do we have specific, relevant examples where compromise was used to improve our transportation services?
- How can we use these examples to replicate a formal system of compromise?
The Human Resource Frame

Focuses on the interactions between the organization and individuals.

Guiding Question:

How do we gauge the success of the relationships and interactions between all stakeholder groups?

- Bus Company and District Leaders
- Parents and District/Bus Company
- Students and Bus Drivers
- School Leaders and Bus Drivers

Assumption #1:
Organizations exist for human fulfillment.

How are we aligning our transportation goal with the well-being and fulfillment of our team members?

- Are we aware of any situations where transportation procedures or a current situation is impacting an employee or group of employees negatively?
- How can we promote a work environment that fosters purpose and satisfaction?
- How can we partner with the transportation company to ensure the drivers feel supported and valued?

Assumption #2:
People and organizations are mutually dependent. Organizations require creativity, enthusiasm, and skill; individuals need jobs, income, and chances

How do we honor organizational needs while being mindful of an individual’s need to be employed?

- When a transportation procedure needs to be altered, how do we balance organizational needs with individual needs?
- How often do we engage in feedback cycles and individual check-ins with individuals that have transportation related tasks? (example: staff members who perform morning and afternoon bus duty, school office staff, principals)
Assumption #3
The process is more important than the result.

*How do transportation planning processes embrace and recognize the importance of ongoing refinement and adaptation?*

- How do we ensure our processes are guided by ethical standards and a sense of fairness?
- How do we reflect on the criteria used in decision making to ensure transportation practices are in alignment with community values?
- Do we demonstrate an understanding of and belief in the iterative process – revisiting and refining plans contributes to overall success.

Assumption #4:
Culture unites an organization and brings people together.

*How do our current transportation practices contribute to a sense of belonging and recognize that a shared planning journey fosters a greater sense of community?*

- How do we foster a sense of pride and unity among stakeholders and celebrate key milestones in our organizations?
- How do include a diverse group of stakeholders in key decision-making to enhance the results of planning outcomes?
- In what ways do we ensure sensitivity to cultural nuances, creating opportunities and spaces for diverse voices to be heard?
The Symbolic Frame

Centers on the meaning and beliefs behind the processes, events and decisions.

**Guiding Questions:**

How aware are district leaders of the symbols and narratives regarding transportation that are emerging within our school district?

How effectively are we communicating the underlying meaning and purpose of transportation decisions with external and internal audiences?

Assumption #1:
The importance of what takes place is not as significant as how it is understood.

How do we assess the perceptions and understanding of stakeholders regarding transportation services?

- In what ways can stakeholder understanding be used to inform future transportation planning and communication?
- How can transportation related decision making processes be more transparent to ensure a clear understanding among stakeholder groups?

Assumption #2:
Interpretations of events and actions are diverse.

How do we proactively address any discrepancies between the perceived and intended meaning of transportation related actions?

- How do we use feedback to gauge how actions are interpreted?
- How do we optimize communication platforms based on feedback to enhance accessibility and understanding?
- What measures are in place to bridge potential gaps in how different groups interpret and perceive transportation related communication?
Assumption #3
The process is more important than the result.

How do transportation planning processes embrace and recognize the importance of ongoing refinement and adaptation?

- How do we ensure our processes are guided by ethical standards and a sense of fairness?
- How do we reflect on the criteria used in decision making to ensure transportation practices are in alignment with community values?
- Do we demonstrate an understanding of and belief in the iterative process—revisiting and refining plans contributes to overall success.

Assumption #4:
Culture unites an organization and brings people together.

How do our current transportation practices contribute to a sense of belonging and recognize that a shared planning journey fosters a greater sense of community?

- How do we foster a sense of pride and unity among stakeholders and celebrate key milestones in our organizations?
- How do include a diverse group of stakeholders in key decision-making to enhance the results of planning outcomes?
- In what ways do we ensure sensitivity to cultural nuances, creating opportunities and spaces for diverse voices to be heard?
Defining the Gaps as a Reflective Tool

To encourage schools to customize their approach, the actual reflective process is loosely defined. For leaders needing a concrete example this gap analysis template has been created as an example.

Gap Analysis Tool Example

| Does our district possess or have access to a specialized skill set to lead transportation efforts? |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Where are we now? | How do we get there? | Where do we want to be? |
| 40% of the transportation liaisons job is related to transportation. | Track actual hours worked and document details of work to seek efficiencies. | 25% of the transportation liaisons job is related to transportation. |
| When she started in the district, she had no formal training on school transportation. It has been learned on the job. | Research the professional organizations that exist for school transportation and discover training opportunities. | Liaison to receive formalized training. |
| Transportation reports to the business manager. Business manager of the school district is the final decision maker and administrator that oversees the contracted services agreement. | N/A | No change necessary |
| We do not have a full understanding roles and responsibilities at the transportation company. | | We have a full understanding of the roles and responsibilities at the transportation company. |

Final Thoughts

The entire reflective process is intended to ensure school districts are reviewing all facets of school transportation through a variety of lenses, allowing for new questions to be asked and greater efficiencies to be considered. By taking time to ensure district values and community
expectations are aligned with current transportation practices, districts are committing to a proactive approach that will safely transport and serve the student population.
References


