

EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN TRANSPORTATION JUSTICE + STUDENT TRAVEL

Research Roundtable Summary
January 12, 2019 - Washington, D.C.



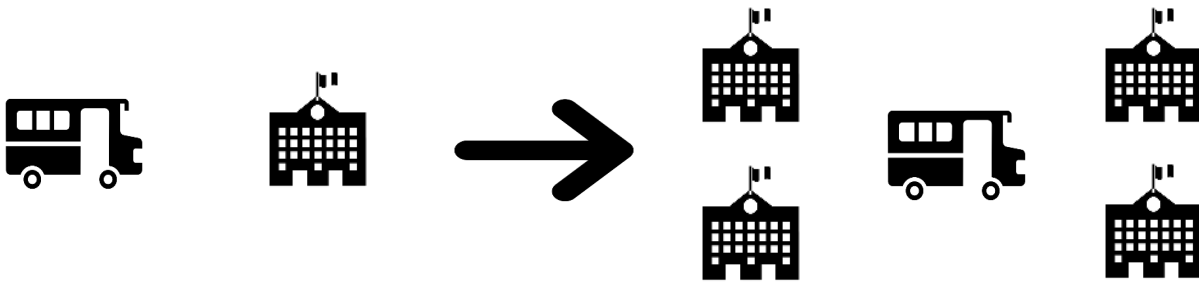
Photo: Paul Chinn, The San Francisco Chronicle

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Framing the Issue

One promise of public education in the United States is that all children have access to high-quality schools that will prepare them to become productive residents capable of leading fulfilling lives and participating actively in civic life. For many, this promise is realized inside the walls of a nearby public school that is easy to get to on foot or by a short drive on an iconic yellow school bus. But the reality of today's public education system is more complicated; a normative emphasis on neighborhood schools and by-right transportation has waned as districts have cut spending on school buses and moved to systems of choice that implicitly rely on automobile-dependent student transportation.

School choice is likely a permanent fixture of the American public education landscape. We must now determine how that choice can aid in achieving the promise of greater education equity through increased access. Importantly, if students are unable to get to school reliably, affordably, and conveniently, school choice is not likely to be something that all families can take advantage of.



On Saturday January 12th, 2019, 26 scholars and practitioners gathered in Washington, D.C. for a roundtable discussion exploring the intersections between transportation justice, student travel, and educational equity.

To set the context for the discussion, co-organizers Ariel Bierbaum, Alex Karner, and Jesus Barajas opened the afternoon with a framing presentation and white paper that laid out a twofold argument:

1. Education equity in the context of school choice can only be facilitated under conditions of equitable transportation access.
2. Transportation equity can only be realized if we consider the particular travel needs of some of our most vulnerable populations, including students, youth, and families trying to navigate systems of school choice.

These arguments and the structured agenda challenged participants to grapple with how transportation scholars can center youth and school travel in questions of transportation equity, and likewise, how education scholars and practitioners can more deeply consider issues of transportation in discussions about access to quality schools.

The roundtable's goals were to:

- Share current research on transportation equity, student travel, and education equity in the context of school choice
- Discuss how transportation justice frameworks can support and be supported by research on student travel
- Set a research agenda and identify opportunities for collaboration

Following the opening framing, participants worked in small groups to delve into the intersections between transportation justice, student travel, and educational equity. Each group was given a set of prompts to tackle during two breakout sessions. At the close of each breakout, groups reported their main findings/discussions to the other participants.

Breakout 1: Defining problem space(s) in research and practice

In the first breakout session, participants sought to define the problem space(s) in both research and practice. These conversations were open-ended to allow for brainstorming across participants' diverse expertise and experiences. Guiding prompts included:

- What are transportation dimensions of school choice policies?
- What are the range of school choice policies (e.g., open enrollment, voluntary or involuntary desegregation plans, charter schools, magnet schools)? What are their transportation dimensions/challenges?
- What other school policies need to be considered vis-a-vis transportation (e.g., closures, consolidations, new school siting, etc.)?
- Choose one of the above policies to really delve deeply on the challenges and opportunities OR think about multiple and the extent to which they similar or different?
- How do current transportation equity frameworks map onto these policies?
- How do these policies complicate our understanding of school travel or transportation equity?



Below, we summarize the major themes that emerged from this first breakout.

Historical and Contextual Analyses

An overarching concern was the importance of foregrounding the local and historical context of schooling and transportation given variations across states and localities in both education and transportation policies, politics, and infrastructure. These historical and contextual considerations—particularly dimensions of race and socioeconomic—are critical in both the research and practice agendas around transportation and educational equity.

Defining Choice

Conversations surrounding choice center on two aspects: the definitional and the functional.

The definitional aspects of choice grapple with the parameters of “choice” as a phenomenon. Charter schools often monopolize the choice discussion, but there exist multiple other forms of school choice that impact families and students and which implicate transportation justice, including magnet or other specialized programs, open enrollment, and desegregation schemes.

The functional aspects of choice confront the issues of family decision-making in the face of multiple educational options. There is a dearth of research on how families make decisions, and the extent to which transportation access is considered as families grapple with questions of school choice.

Limited Funding and Variable Policy Approaches

Lack of adequate and equitable funding and highly variable policy contexts challenge efforts to ensure both educational and transportation access. In light of state and federal budget cuts, local jurisdictions and school districts often do not have adequate funding to provide necessary transportation, particularly in systems of choice where students travel outside their home neighborhood.

Managing these budget constraints sometimes involves working with transit agencies or third-party transportation providers like taxis or on-demand services (e.g., Uber or Lyft). These strategies are under-researched yet raise important questions about the policy structure and viability of these services to provide adequate and equitable transportation for student travel.



When districts move to a system of choice from a neighborhood-based school system, transportation costs are likely to increase. The financial costs are variably distributed across the state, city, school district, public transportation agencies, and parents. This ambiguity around financial costs can result in tension between education officials/administrators and transportation professionals.

The lack of consistent school transportation policy across state and local jurisdictions provides a challenge for researchers as it complicates multi-state or multi-city research on student travel.

Place-Based Social Cohesion

The impacts of school choice on place-based social cohesion and neighborhood ties complicate the issues of school choice and student travel for both researchers and practitioners. Students traveling far distances for educational purposes may become separated and disconnected from their immediate communities. Removing students from home neighborhoods may accrue some benefits if, for example, school choice provides significantly greater educational opportunity, takes students out of dangerous environments, or serves as a means of quality child care. But these benefits must be traded off against the potential costs associated with reducing place-based social cohesion.

School choice additionally complicates social cohesion for students relative to their schools. Long travel distances disrupt students' and families' ability to participate in extracurricular activities and other school-based events. This separates students from their communities of practice within their schools as well as their communities of residence at home.

Finally, the importance of local historical context commands attention in any theorization of school choice and social cohesion. The historical and current importance of neighborhood ties, particularly in high-poverty communities, informs the ways in which educational choice programs do or do not impact cohesion.

Lack of Adequate Data

Roundtable participants identified three main data problems surrounding transportation justice and student travel: inadequate data collection, limited access to the data, and low quality of relevant data.

First, much of the data necessary for proper investigation of student transportation equity are simply not collected. There are too few student travel questions in the National Household Travel Survey, too few rigorously collected sources regarding household decision-making processes regarding school transportation, and too few administrative data sets capturing variables relevant to questions of student transportation.

Second, data that are collected are often inaccessible. In particular, individual-level student data are justifiably protected by both FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974) and subsequent state regulations. These protections extend the timelines of any studies that hope to make use of the data in order to obtain appropriate approvals. Even when publicly accessible sources exist, the ability to tie those sources to other data elements of interest is prohibitively burdensome.

Finally, even where data do exist and can be accessed by researchers and practitioners, there are problems of data quality. This is hardly unique to issues of transportation or educational justice but are particularly stymying in a field that requires coordination across administrative, primary, and "big" data sources in order to truly articulate structural challenges and develop viable policy and practice solutions.

Scale

Transportation as a phenomenon does not occur solely within hyper-localized geographies, especially as systems of choice expand. Roundtable participants teased out numerous questions about the scale(s) at which we consider transportation phenomena and transportation justice.

Historically, school transportation research considered transportation to traditionally constituted school(s): that is, schools embedded within a bounded geography, administered through a district structure, attended by students within a certain boundary. However, this very localized scale may not be effective when discussing transportation equity. While both policy decisions (e.g., district boundary-setting) and student data management often align to traditional district structures, student movement and household decision-making regarding education options may not. A regional perspective may better support researchers and practitioners in constructing both research questions and policy solutions.

Additionally, degree of urbanicity has implications for student travel and educational equity. In addition to the extensive body of research regarding urbanicity and school quality, the growing school choice landscape creates scenarios in which students may traverse urban, suburban, and rural landscapes as they travel from home to school. The implications for municipalities, school districts, transportation agencies, and families may vary widely depending on their location.

Breakout 2: Interventions to the problem space

The second breakout session provided a more focused discussion around three topic areas that straddle research and practice within the problem spaces defined in the first session:

1. How do we define “equitable access”?
2. What are the mechanisms of “choice”?
3. Who bears the costs of student travel?

Equitable access

Transportation equity and educational equity as fields of study still lack universal definitions and measurement approaches regarding existential concerns. “School quality,” “acceptable distance,” and “viable travel time” (to name a few) all remain contested.

Researchers and practitioners need to agree upon baseline definitions and approaches to measurement that can reliably and validly capture equitability and access across state, city, and district lines. A suggested model to assess equitable access currently used today for employment measures could potentially provide a viable option for educational measures—i.e., from any given location there are X



many “good” schools or “high quality seats” within Y distance. However, this still leaves open the unresolved definitional questions of “good” and “high quality.”

Further, as discussed above, historical and local context must be assessed and deeply understood when discussing transportation access and viable student transportation options for families. In particular, the racial context in which schools exist cannot be ignored when defining equitable access in the context of school choice and transportation justice.

Mechanisms of Choice

The fields of study also lack clarity on the purpose of choice: are we aiming to improve school quality or to provide parents with options based on a self-determined need? This question is fundamental to understanding how districts structure systems of choice and how parents make decisions about schools and transportation.

The data problems described above—inadequate collection, limited accessibility, and low quality of relevant data—persist in understanding family decision-making processes for schools and transportation. More diverse data gathered through mixed methods would enhance researchers’ and practitioners’ work.

Cost Burden of School Choice and Student Travel

There are both direct and indirect costs associated with student travel, spread across multiple agencies and actors. Districts bear a monetary responsibility for school transportation, but due to the complicated set of actors and changing school landscape, there is ambiguity regarding which specific actors bear which specific costs.

Roundtable participants discussed a few current funding practices. Traditional methods include reimbursement by states to districts for transportation costs, sometimes with a capped per pupil reimbursement in which districts cover the balance. Some districts are considering a means-tested funding method as school choice options increase. Increased federal participation in student travel and transportation justice conversations could also provide a means to achieve more equitable student transportation options.

In addition to the monetary costs of student travel and transportation, students, families, and schools also confront numerous opportunity costs. Individuals, households, schools, districts, regions, and states all have different approaches to weighting the relative costs of travel time, school distance, school quality, connectedness to neighborhood, connectedness to school, and subsequent health concerns vis-a-vis consequent post-secondary and career payoffs. These opportunity costs have various implications at the individual, agency, and policy levels that must be isolated and examined to better understand how to build equitable cost solutions in the student transportation problem space.

Moving the conversation forward

The final discussion of the afternoon focused on potential next steps towards an interdisciplinary research agenda for transportation and educational equity. A few items rose to the top:

1. Work towards definitional clarity and consistency on terms like “access,” “choice,” and “equity”
2. Cultivate new and build on existing research-practice partnerships with school districts, metropolitan planning organizations, and local jurisdictions
3. Identify potential sources of research funding, such as the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences (IES), private foundations, and university research funds
4. Develop a research network that supports multidisciplinary, mixed methods research and research-practice partnerships across the U.S.



Participants

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