

An Overview of Pennsylvania Public School Transportation

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This study analyzed Pennsylvania Department of Education data from 2013-14 to 2017-18 to examine changes in school enrollment, transportation ridership, and transportation finances at the state level and by rural and urban location. It quantified changes in the number of service providers to learn more about the current school transportation structure in Pennsylvania. The research also analyzed crash data published by the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation between 2013 and 2018 to evaluate the safety of public school transportation in Pennsylvania.

Key Findings

- Declines in school enrollment were relatively gradual in urban school districts but more severe in rural school districts.
- On average, 95.8 percent of rural public school students relied on public school transportation between 2013-14 and 2017-18.
- Transporting fewer students over large areas or longer distances drives up the cost per student transported in rural school districts.
- More school districts were seeking independent contractors for all or some of their transportation services during the study period.
- The continued decline in the number of transportation service providers in the “contracted service with contractor” category (vs. contracted service with a parent/individual or another Local Education Agency) may lead to an increased market share for some larger contractors.

Introduction

This study analyzed Pennsylvania Department of Education data from 2013-14 to 2017-18 to examine changes in school enrollment, transportation ridership, and transportation finances at the state, rural, and urban levels. It quantified changes in the number of service providers to learn more about the current school transportation structure in Pennsylvania. The research also analyzed crash data published by the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation between 2013 and 2018 to evaluate the safety of public school transportation in Pennsylvania. These analyses provide an overview

of Pennsylvania public school transportation over a 5 year period.

From 2013-14 to 2017-18, school enrollment and transportation ridership decreased by 4.6 percent and 5.0 percent, respectively, in rural school districts. Urban school districts saw a 1.3 percent decline in enrollment, and a 1.4 percent increase in transportation ridership. As a result of inequivalent changes between rural and urban school districts, Pennsylvania experienced a 2.2 percent decrease in school enrollment, and a 0.4 percent decrease in transportation ridership. The

enrollment decline was relatively gradual in urban districts but more severe in rural districts.

A downward trend in nonpublic school ridership and an upward trend in charter school ridership co-existed at the state, rural, and urban levels. Rural school enrollment was lower than total pupils transported during the study period because of nonpublic and charter school ridership. On average, nonpublic and charter school students accounted for 5.3 percent of total pupils transported in rural school districts and 16.9 percent in urban school districts. More importantly, on average, 95.8 percent of rural public school students relied on public school transportation during the study period.

The continuous decline in enrollment and the steady rise in transportation costs, unsurprisingly, caused a statewide increase of 10.7 percent in costs per student transported during the study period. From 2013-14 to 2017-18, the statewide, rural, and urban average costs per pupil transported were about \$953, \$984, and \$941, respectively. On average, rural school districts received 39.5 percent of the total state transportation subsidy over the study period. However, 59.1 percent of rural transportation costs were subsidized by the state. Transporting fewer students over large areas or longer distances drives up the cost per student transported in rural school districts.

Noticeable changes in the structure of school transportation service providers were identified over the 5 year study period. First, contracted transportation service with another Local Education Agency (LEA) increased by 292.3 percent. Second, the number of school districts that provide LEA-owned transportation services decreased by 8.3 percent. These two changes indicate that more school districts were seeking independent contractors for all or some of their transportation services during the study period. Third, contracted transportation services with parents or other individuals decreased by 11.3 percent. The continuous decline in the number of service providers in the contracted service with a contractor category may lead to an increased market share for some larger contractors.

Finally, the results from the school transportation safety analysis revealed that school bus crashes were concentrated in urban school districts but scattered among rural school districts. During the

study period, among all school-bus-crash-induced fatalities, one was a school bus driver, and one was a school-age pedestrian. The total number of school bus crashes fluctuated between 2013 and 2018, with an overall downward trend.

Visit www.rural.pa.gov for the full report, *An Overview of Pennsylvania Public School Transportation*.

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