

Boosting K-12 Attendance With Innovative Transportation Solutions

A Strategic Guide for District Leaders on Leveraging Multimodal Transportation to Restore Attendance and Boost Equity

HopSkipDrive

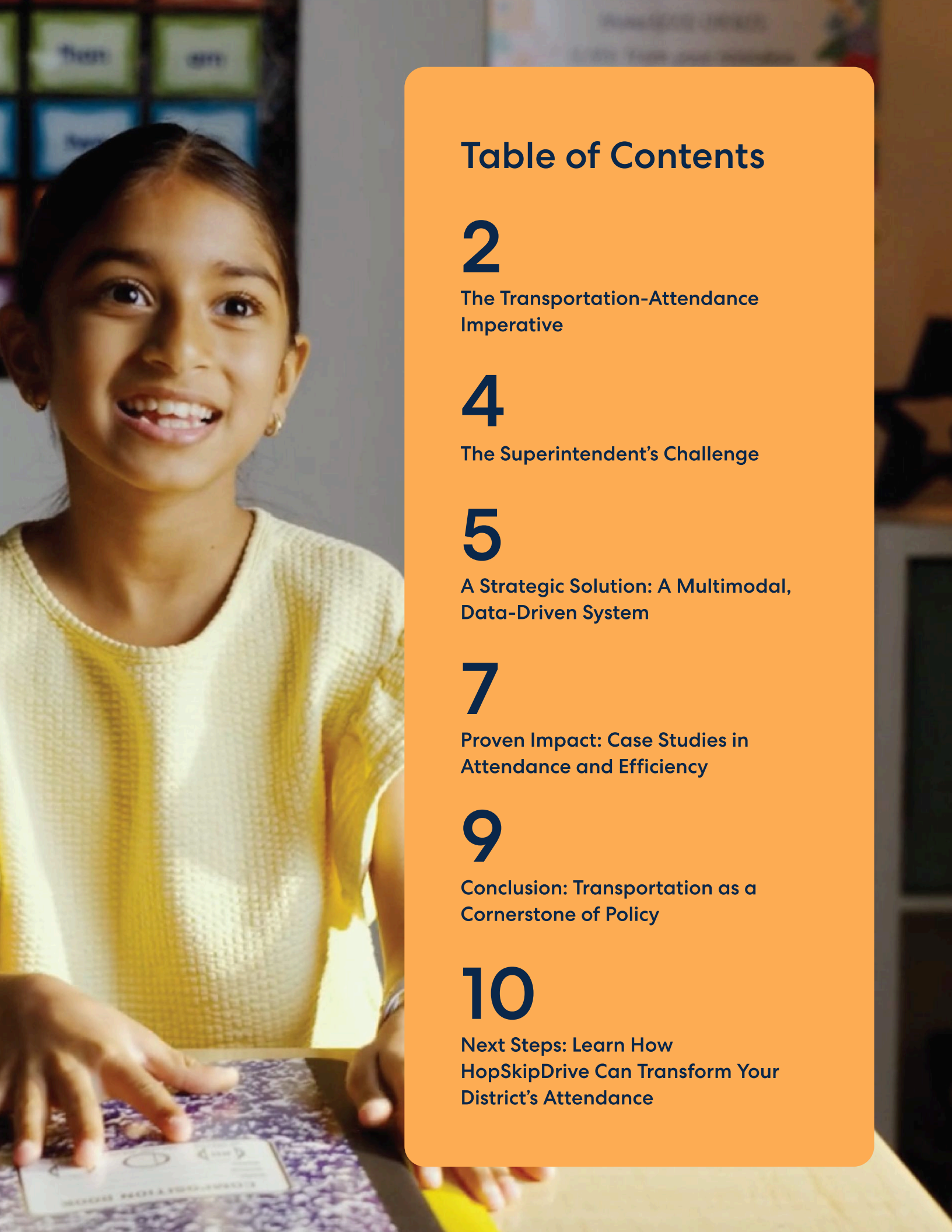


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The Transportation-Attendance Imperative

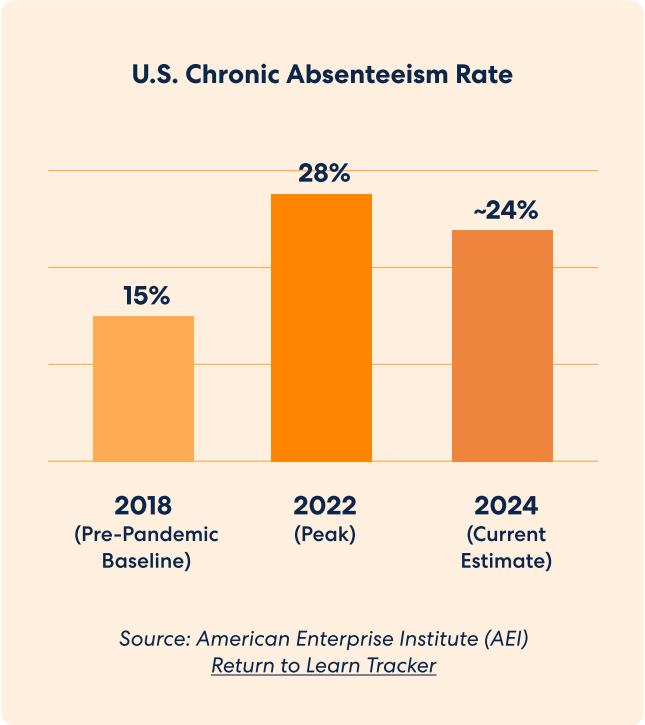
The connection between student attendance and transportation is more direct and critical than often acknowledged. While a complex array of factors drives chronic absenteeism — one of the most critical threats to K–12 success — a fundamental and frequently overlooked root cause is the failure of existing transportation mechanisms to reliably connect all students to the classroom.

The student attendance crisis is not just an academic problem; it is a systemic challenge that directly impacts federal and state funding, staffing efficiency, and district stability, making the need for reliable transport an attendance imperative.

This white paper outlines a strategic, data-driven approach for district administrators to move beyond reliance on the yellow school bus alone. By adopting flexible, tech-driven, supplemental transportation solutions, districts can systematically eliminate barriers for their most vulnerable students — including those experiencing homelessness (McKinney-Vento) or living in foster care, students with special needs (IEP/504), or English language learner (ELL) students — leading to measurable improvements in attendance, operational efficiency, and long-term cost savings.

The Persistent Crisis: Data and Disruption

The post-pandemic surge in chronic absenteeism has fundamentally changed the operational landscape of K–12 education. The national chronic absenteeism rate — defined as students missing 10% or more of school days — surged dramatically after 2020. While rates have slightly improved from their peak, they remain stubbornly elevated, underscoring a persistent structural problem.



Source: American Enterprise Institute (AEI) Return to Learn Tracker

At 24%, the most recently reported rate is still roughly **60% higher** than the pre-pandemic baseline, representing millions of students who are consistently missing essential instruction and support. Addressing this systemic crisis requires tackling the primary logistical and operational hurdles, one of the most significant of which is transportation.

Transportation: A Leading Operational Barrier to Attendance

Transportation is not merely a logistical challenge; it is a leading barrier that prevents vulnerable students from consistently accessing education. This is widely recognized by school leaders: the 2025 State of School Transportation Report from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research in partnership with HopSkipDrive confirmed that **75% of school administrators identify limited access to transportation as a major factor driving chronic absenteeism in their districts.**

This problem is most acute for students whose needs exceed the capability of fixed-route systems. The surging demand for specialized student transportation highlights where traditional school busing can fail these high-needs groups.

Highly Mobile Youth (McKinney-Vento Eligible)

Since 2020, data from the HopSkipDrive platform reflects a **4,859% increase in rides** for students eligible for transportation under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. This staggering number represents the immense logistical burden of transportation for students experiencing housing insecurity. Traditional routes cannot accommodate the frequent and unpredictable movement of families, making it nearly impossible for these students to reliably reach their designated "school of origin" without alternative transportation options.

Students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)

Similarly, rides for students with IEPs have surged by **2,624%** on the HopSkipDrive platform. Traditional bus routes are often too generalized and inflexible to accommodate the specialized needs of these students. This increase in demand is driven by requirements for door-to-door service, individualized attention, or transportation to crucial non-school appointments, such as behavioral therapy or medical services, which fixed bus schedules cannot absorb.

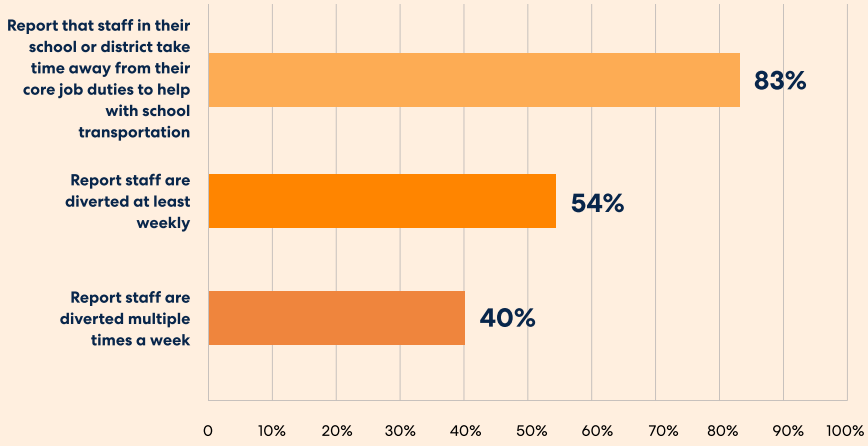


The Superintendent's Challenge

School transportation issues can create a cascade of negative effects. Bus driver shortages can lead to route consolidations and subsequently, longer commute times — or the cancellation of some routes entirely — all of which correlates directly with worse absenteeism rates.

Unfortunately, this often means that staff, including teachers and administrators, are diverted from their core duties to manage transportation.

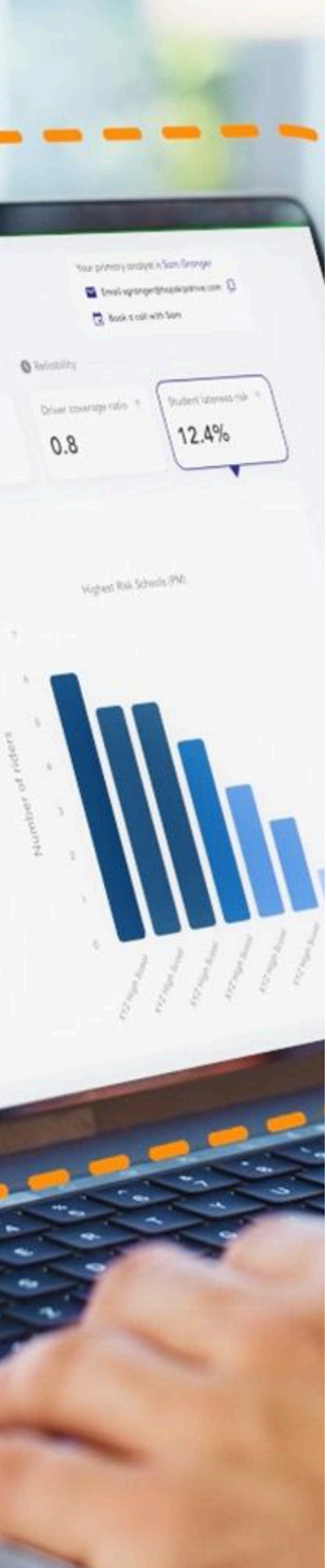
Staff Time Diverted to School Transportation Duties, According to School Administrators



Typical Tasks: Managing car lines, physically driving buses/vans

Source: 2025 State of School Transportation Report, The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research in partnership with HopSkipDrive

This significant operational strain has profound impacts, leading to less time for curriculum development, individualized student support, and other critical educational tasks — which can negatively impact the quality of education and the overall school environment.



A Strategic Solution: A Multimodal, Data-Driven System

Solving the attendance crisis requires a shift in strategic thinking from viewing transportation as a fixed operation to embracing it as a strategic investment designed for flexibility, equity, operational efficiency, and student success. This new, holistic approach recognizes that traditional systems often struggle to meet the complex, individualized needs of today's diverse student populations, particularly those experiencing housing instability, those with special needs, or those who require after-hours support.

By leveraging flexible, supplemental transportation that works alongside the yellow bus; integrating intelligent technology for optimization; and focusing on targeted, predictive interventions, districts can systematically dismantle attendance barriers so that every student has a reliable pathway to the classroom. This comprehensive strategy is built upon three critical pillars.

Pillar 1: Leveraging Supplemental, Flexible Transportation

Supplemental transportation is not a replacement for the yellow bus. It works in tandem with traditional student transportation methods already in use to fill gaps and offer more agile solutions.

Given the uncertainty of federal funding and the pressure on district budgets, **supplemental transportation offers a vital financial advantage: a pay-as-you-go model.** Districts only pay for the specific rides or services they need, precisely when they need them. This approach replaces the high, fixed costs associated with maintaining a specialized fleet or under-utilized routes, ensuring limited budgets are spent efficiently on delivering essential services.

- **McKinney-Vento and Foster Care:** Supplemental transportation can nimbly respond to the dynamic needs of students experiencing homelessness or those living in foster care, whose living situations can change frequently. Fast turnaround times for ride booking can help to ensure these students can consistently attend their school of origin.
- **IEP/504 Requirements:** Supplemental transit options can offer safe, consistent small-vehicle transport that is often essential for students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or 504 plans with transportation requirements. Traditional bus routes can be unsuitable or impractical for these students due to their behavioral, medical, sensory, or scheduling needs.
- **Extended-Day Programs and Extracurriculars:** Flexible transportation options enable participation for all students in enriching activities that take place off campus or beyond the regular school day, like tutoring, extracurricular activities, or career and technical education (CTE) programs.

Pillar 2: Integrating Technology and Intelligence

The challenge of chronic student absenteeism demands a proactive solution that moves beyond simple bus route mapping. HopSkipDrive's RouteWise AI™ represents a critical shift from basic logistics to predictive operational intelligence, allowing school districts to identify and address systemic mobility barriers.

For school districts, AI-driven school transportation intelligence planning can provide the necessary foresight to manage complex student needs, turning transportation from a point of friction into a reliable driver of attendance and educational equity.

- **Scenario Planning:** Going beyond simple route optimization to an in-depth analysis of complex transportation data — including bus routes, student populations, bell times, and vehicle capacity — helps districts identify inefficiencies and model the cost and operational impact of changes.
- **Right-Sizing Vehicles:** By identifying critical service gaps and aligning student needs with the best-fit vehicle, districts can optimize existing full-capacity bus routes, reduce excessively long routes, and account for the dynamic needs of highly mobile students to address chronic tardiness and attendance issues.

> When we started, we had bus routes without drivers, furious parents, overwhelmed staff, and kids missing invaluable learning time. That is all changing. Our creative and hard-working transportation team, in partnership with HopSkipDrive, is transforming our district's approach to transportation
>
> **Michael Gall,** Superintendent, Colorado Springs School District 11

Pillar 3: Enacting Targeted Interventions

Rather than waiting for a student to cross the chronic absenteeism threshold, administrators can deploy swift, focused interventions supported by real-time transportation data. This is where the synthesis of technology and flexible transportation options delivers maximum impact.

- **Tracking Absent Riders:** Schools and districts should be empowered with real-time alerts showing which scheduled students missed their ride. HopSkipDrive's Daily Absent Rider Email does just that, enabling school staff to make immediate, proactive phone calls or home visits to intervene before minor absences escalate into chronic issues.
- **Seamless Ride Adjustments:** For McKinney-Vento and foster care transportation, the ability to modify drop-off or pickup locations easily via an intuitive platform should be non-negotiable. Reducing the administrative complexity of re-routing high-mobility students can save district and school staff time while setting students up for success. HopSkipDrive's RideIQ platform enables location changes up to two hours before a scheduled ride's start time.
- **Consistency and Care for Specialized Needs:** Student transportation is not just about the vehicle — it's also about the ride experience. Utilizing a dedicated network of deeply vetted CareDrivers and consistent driver-student pairings provides the stability and routine essential for students with IEPs and behavioral needs, ensuring they feel safe and ready to learn upon arrival.



Proven Impact: Case Studies in Attendance and Efficiency

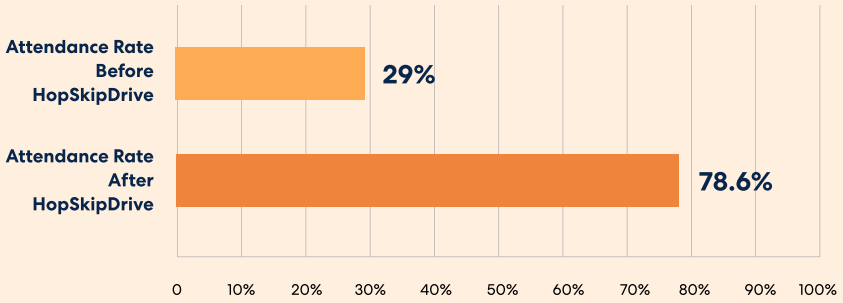
The successful integration of flexible transportation into a district's overall strategy yields both measurable improvements in attendance and significant operational efficiencies. The following case studies powerfully illustrate the direct correlation between reliable, safe transportation and a student's ability to engage with their education.

Restoring Attendance for At-Risk Youth

Riverside County Office of Education (RCOE), California

RCOE faced severe attendance challenges among youth in foster care enrolled in the county's Alternative Education Community School Program, which provides educational services for students in grades 7–12 who have been expelled from their home district. RCOE partnered with HopSkipDrive to provide flexible transportation for these at-risk students, prioritizing educational stability.

RCOE Case Study: Attendance Rate for Youth Living in Foster Care (Before vs. After Intervention)



Result: A 49.6 percentage-point increase in attendance

Source: How One County Grew Attendance for Foster Youth from 29% to 78%

The results demonstrate the power of removing the transportation barrier for students who need additional support, proving that flexible, safe access to school directly translates into student success.

Driving Attendance and Supporting Students in Need

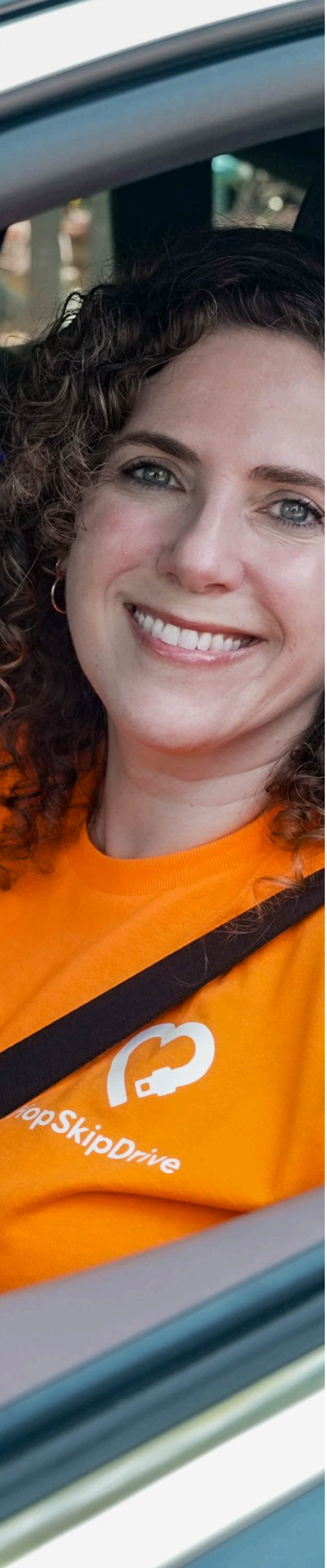
Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD), Michigan

DPSCD, which serves over 48,000 students, faced severe challenges including a 78% poverty rate, high McKinney-Vento needs, and escalating transportation costs. The district has made significant strides in improving student attendance by implementing an innovative, multimodal transportation strategy that includes supplemental services from HopSkipDrive. This approach has been particularly beneficial for highly mobile students and those with individualized needs, effectively removing key barriers to consistent school attendance.

Between the 2021–2022 and 2023–2024 school years, **DPSCD observed a 14 percentage point reduction in chronic absenteeism.** Beyond improving attendance, the district's adoption of a multimodal strategy has also yielded several other advantages: it has lessened reliance on the traditional bus fleet, mitigated the financial strain of maintaining an aging vehicle fleet, and facilitated the provision of personalized transportation solutions for students with unique requirements.

> With HopSkipDrive, we can swiftly meet the changing needs of highly mobile populations. The RideIQ platform streamlines ride adjustments and scheduling, enhancing our ability to provide reliable transportation services for all students while optimizing resources and time management.
>
> **Aaron Walter,** Executive Director of Transportation, Detroit Public Schools Community District



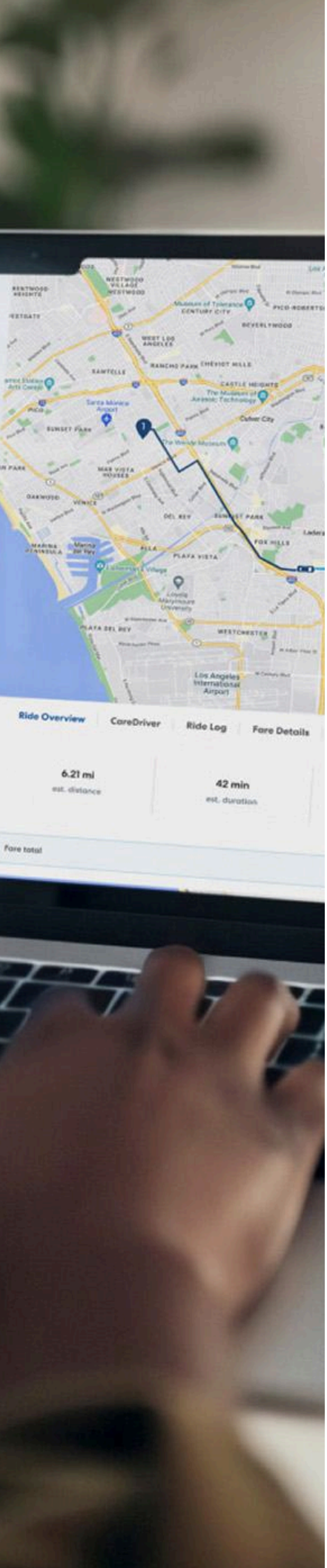


Conclusion: Transportation as a Cornerstone of Policy

The chronic absenteeism crisis demands that district leaders view transportation not as an operational cost center but as a crucial tool for achieving student attendance goals and ensuring equity. When transportation is inflexible and misaligned with student needs, it becomes a systemic barrier to learning. When it is multimodal, data-driven, and focused on student needs, it becomes a vital cornerstone of attendance policy.

By partnering with innovative transportation solutions, districts can:

- **Boost Equitable Access:** Flexible transportation solutions can help districts ensure that every student, regardless of housing status or disability, has a reliable way to get to school and supportive activities.
- **Optimize Resources:** AI-powered intelligence can maximize bus fleet utilization, reduce capital expenses, and free up administrative staff.
- **Drive Student Success:** By proactively tackling both school- and student-related challenges head on, districts can increase attendance rates, improve educational outcomes, and foster stronger community connections.



Next Steps: Learn How HopSkipDrive Can Transform Your District's Attendance

HopSkipDrive is a leader in supplemental student transportation, offering access to safe, reliable rides as well as RouteWise AI™, the world's first student transportation intelligence platform — all powered by transformative technology. We partner with districts, schools, counties, and organizations to solve complex transportation challenges where there is a heightened need for safety, equity, and care.

Resources for District Leaders

- **Watch the Video:**
  Multimodal Transportation Can Help Combat Chronic Absenteeism
- **Download Our Report:** Discover how supplemental school transportation can transform your district, and how smaller vehicles and specialized services can complement traditional busing, ensuring every student gets to school safely and efficiently.
  - Serving All Students With Supplemental School Transportation
- **Request a Consultation:** Learn more about how supplemental transportation can help fill in gaps at your district or school, and how a partnership with HopSkipDrive can work for you.

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