



The State of School Transportation Report 2026



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Executive Summary



School districts across the country are under pressure from all directions at once. Bus driver shortages have been reshaping operations for years while specialized student needs continue to grow. Budget mandates are being imposed without district or school staff having the cost visibility to strategically act on them. Enrollment is declining in large urban districts across the country as well as in smaller and suburban ones, and chronic absenteeism remains a persistent challenge years after the pandemic.

Transportation sits at the intersection of all of this — yet most districts don't recognize it as the strategic driver of enrollment, attendance, and academic outcomes that it actually is.

That is the central finding of this year's State of School Transportation Report, which draws on survey data from district administrators and parents of K-12 students across the country. The data tells a consistent story:

Getting student transportation right is a key to unlocking an educational environment where students are in class, schools meet enrollment goals, everyone has a fair chance at success, and districts receive the funding they need.

But this report shows that too many districts aren't using transportation to solve these problems. They see transportation as the simple act of moving students. And that misses a huge opportunity.

Key Findings

The operational impacts of bus driver shortages remain one of the most visible pressures facing districts today. According to this year's survey, 71% of district administrators say they have experienced at least one documented consequence of not having enough bus drivers in the past year, including longer ride times, missed pickups, staff burnout, or the elimination of transportation for extracurricular activities.

Although the number of districts reporting constrained operations is lower than prior years, that should not be mistaken as evidence of recovery. Many districts have quietly reduced their transportation offerings and have recalibrated their expectations to match.

Cost pressures compound district challenges. Over half of districts surveyed have been asked to reduce transportation spending in the past two years — the single most common strategic mandate reported by survey respondents. But while transportation departments are being asked to cut costs, over half (61%) of districts indicate they don’t know what their annual per-student transportation cost is for students who use district-provided transportation. In addition, 64% say they don’t know if their district has ever conducted a formal total cost of ownership* analysis for district-owned vans and non-bus vehicles, sometimes referred to as a “white fleet.”

When districts don’t have visibility into transportation utilization to determine full costs for those students who are actually riding — and when they don’t understand the cost of ownership for white fleets (i.e. non-bus vehicles) — they don’t have a full cost picture. A mandate to cut costs without insight into the full transportation cost picture doesn’t produce structural savings. It produces cuts to the most visible line items, which almost always means service.

Meanwhile, transportation’s seat at the district leadership table is growing, but unevenly. Nearly half (49%) of districts say transportation is included more often in broader strategic conversations than it was five years ago. It is reliably present when districts talk about vulnerable student populations. These are positive trends. However, transportation is largely absent when districts talk about academic performance or enrollment.

That absence is significant, because the parent data in this report makes the enrollment and attendance connections

concrete. Nearly half (45%) of public school parents surveyed report that transportation availability was a major factor in choosing their child’s current school, while 52% say their child missed school at least once in the past year because of a transportation problem. Meanwhile, 75% of districts surveyed say they believe transportation access affects attendance, yet only 25% are actively tracking and reporting on that relationship.

Just as cutting budget lines without a full cost picture rarely produces effective savings, working to raise attendance, enrollment, and academic outcomes without accounting for transportation’s role and impact in these areas is short-sighted.

For students with the highest needs, there is a major gap between specific transportation requirements and services being offered. Under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, districts are required to provide transportation without delay from the moment a student experiencing homelessness is identified. Yet only 14% of districts surveyed say they can arrange a ride the same day, and 31% report they require three or more days’ notice. This means these children may be missing at least three days of school while waiting for transportation.

Our own [data](#) shows that many students experiencing homelessness move three or more times in a school year. If it takes three days to set up new transportation, that child may be needlessly missing nearly 10 days of school, simply because they don’t have a ride. We’ve seen students with an unimaginable 14 unique residential addresses in a school year. A single move disrupts a child’s world, and multiple moves can quickly cause them to become chronically absent,

71% of districts say they’ve experienced at least one tangible operational consequence of driver shortages in the past year, such as longer ride times; fewer routes offered; and reduced service for extracurriculars field trips, and athletics

49% of districts say transportation is included more often in strategic conversations than it was five years ago

75% of districts say they believe transportation access affects attendance

61% of districts don't know their annual per-rider transportation costs

derailing academic progress. On average, states report that [nearly half \(48%\)](#) of students experiencing homelessness were chronically absent in the 2023–2024 school year. For these already vulnerable students, this all-too-common scenario is no fault of their own but rather due to the district’s inability to arrange and provide timely transportation.

When asked what matters most with transportation for students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), 47% of districts surveyed said understanding a student’s individual needs — more than any other factor named. In fact, when asked to compare the importance of two factors relevant to IEP transportation, 64% of districts report that driver experience with students with special needs matters more than having the same driver every day (36%). Respondents also choose the ability to accommodate last-minute changes over having the same driver every day by nearly two to one (65% vs. 35%).

Transportation for students with disabilities and IEPs also requires strict adherence to legal mandates. As the above data shows, districts aren’t just looking for consistency. They need a transportation partner that understands their students; can adapt quickly when needed; and can deliver (and prove) compliance — and not every partner can meet that high bar.

The final section of this year’s report looks at what distinguishes districts that are navigating these mounting pressures well. Districts that treat working with outside transportation partners as a strategic decision — one that is evaluated against a real cost baseline, held to a defined service standard, and structured as an ongoing relationship rather than only an emergency solution — are better positioned across every dimension this report measures. The ones still outsourcing only when the driver pool runs dry are using transportation reactively, not proactively.

Transportation has always been an integral part of our educational infrastructure. This year’s data shows it can also be a key strategic lever. The districts that understand this are not waiting for the next crisis; they are building a resilient, multimodal system that works in tandem with the school bus, providing support and filling in gaps when and where needed. When transportation is no longer seen as just a line-item cost to manage, it can be used as one of the most powerful tools for student success.

*Per our 2026 State of School Transportation survey and for the purposes of this report, “**total cost of ownership**” is defined as the full lifecycle cost of operating district-owned vans and non-bus vehicles, including purchase price or lease payments, fuel, routine maintenance, repairs, insurance, registration, depreciation, driver or staff time to manage and schedule those vehicles, and any compliance or safety inspection costs.

Driver Shortages: A Reality — Not Just a Phase — With Significant Consequences



71% of districts have experienced at least one tangible consequence from bus driver shortages this past year



Bus driver shortages are not a pandemic-era anomaly or a passing disruption. Districts have been grappling with this issue for years, and the data we've collected through our annual State of School Transportation survey confirms this is a persistent, structural issue rather than a temporary, situational one.

District administrators who responded to this year's survey indicate driver shortages and the impacts of them continue to pose significant challenges. Almost three-quarters (71%) say driver shortages have led to at least one operational consequence in the past year, such as longer commute times, missed or late pickups, cancelled or consolidated bus routes, and more.



The underlying problem has not eased. Districts have absorbed the shortages and now treat the reduced service level as the norm.

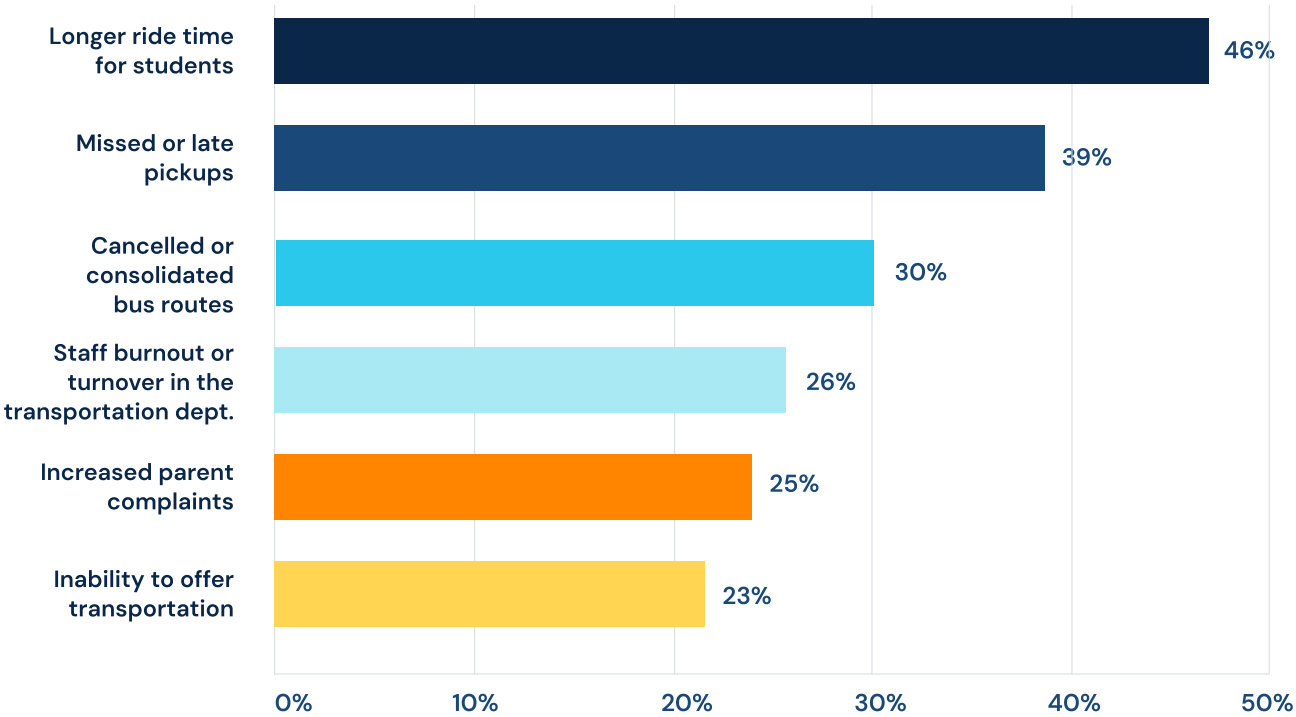
The problem hasn't gotten smaller; districts have just gotten used to it — and they've also gotten used to dealing with the impacts. Almost half (46%) report longer ride times for students as a direct result of driver shortages. More than a third (39%) report missed or late pickups, and 26% report staff burnout or turnover in the transportation department. Driver shortages are not just a staffing problem; they're a systemic one, with effects that ripple across a district's budget, its transportation staff, and its students' ability to simply show up.

Many districts have spent years implementing workarounds: cutting bus routes, extending walk boundaries, or scaling back service. Some have simply recalibrated what "constrained" means against a smaller baseline. A district that eliminated three routes two years ago to cope with a driver shortage isn't unconstrained today — it has absorbed the shortage by eliminating routes and now treats that reduced service level as the norm.

Consolidating routes or absorbing the strain elsewhere in a district budget are reasonable things to try, but they are reactive and do not account for what happens when a family whose child can't get to school because their bus route was eliminated decides they've had enough. A district that can't offer reliable transportation to all students is giving families a reason to look elsewhere, which could lead to a transfer request for a nearby district or charter school. That's not something reflected in a transportation line item — it can be lost per-pupil funding — and most districts aren't connecting the two.



71% of districts have experienced at least one tangible operational consequence of driver shortages in the past year, including:



23% of districts say they can no longer offer transportation for extracurricular activities, field trips, or athletics

Perhaps the most underappreciated consequence of driver shortages is what they have done to the student experience beyond the ride itself. Almost one-quarter (23%) of districts say they can no longer offer transportation for extracurricular activities, field trips, or athletics. A student who cannot get to a game, a museum visit, or an after-school program because the district doesn't have enough bus drivers is experiencing a loss that does not appear in any ridership count. It shows up instead in learning outcomes, emotional health, and long-term student success.

Nationally, students who participate in extracurricular activities have higher graduation rates and stronger standardized test scores than students who don't — and colleges weigh those test scores, along with involvement in extracurriculars, in admissions decisions. These enrichment-based activities should not then be seen as something that can easily be scaled back or eliminated from a district's offerings. Instead, they should be viewed as what they are: a vital part of the complete educational experience, one that opens the door to future opportunities for students.

The Visibility Gap: Districts Face Pressure to Cut Transportation Costs Without Full Insight Into What and How They're Spending



54% of districts have been asked to cut transportation costs or operate within a tighter budget in the past two years

61% of districts say they don't know their per-rider transportation cost

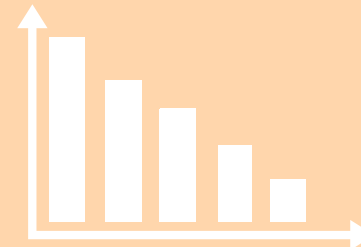


More than half (54%) of district administrators surveyed say they have been asked to reduce transportation costs or operate within a tighter budget in the past two years. This is the single most common strategic mandate districts are facing according to the results of our survey, and it is the biggest pressure district leaders are currently facing. The problem is that most districts lack the cost visibility they need to make effective, informed, and targeted decisions.

With 61% of survey respondents reporting they don't know their annual transportation cost per rider and 64% indicating they don't know if their district has ever conducted a formal total cost of ownership analysis for district-owned vans and non-bus vehicles, or "white fleets," it's clear the data districts need to effectively and efficiently manage their full range of transportation costs often isn't being tracked. Districts that don't know how many students are actually riding the bus can't calculate a true cost per student — and without that number, they have no reliable basis for routing or service-level decisions. Districts that don't know the full cost of operating their non-bus owned vehicles can't adequately weigh that cost against alternative transportation options. Without knowing what transportation costs across the board, districts cannot optimally identify where the real savings are — and any efforts to respond to a mandate to cut costs become a guessing game instead of a strategy.

Cost mandates without proper financial insight often result instead in cuts to whatever line items are most visible, such as routes, driver hours, and service levels. And cutting transportation service carries downstream costs that are even harder to track such as chronic absenteeism impacts, enrollment pressures, parental burden, and legal exposure for populations the district is federally obligated to serve.

Meanwhile, the things that are hardest to see keep costing what they always cost. And there is a great deal that districts are not seeing.



Transportation costs are not always tracked in Transportation, if they're tracked at all, making full cost visibility nearly impossible.

	Tracked in the transportation budget	Tracked in a different department budget	Not Tracked Anywhere/ I Don't Know
Staff time managing transportation issues (e.g., parent complaints, rerouting, etc.)	27%	15%	58%
Administrative and clerical time related to transportation	33%	17%	50%
Overtime paid to drivers or dispatchers	40%	13%	47%
Legal fees or settlements related to transportation incidents	16%	34%	51%
Insurance costs	32%	33%	35%
Fuel	53%	7%	40%
Labor	47%	13%	40%
Vehicle maintenance	51%	8%	42%
Alternative student transportation	51%	21%	27%
Driver recruitment, education, and retention costs	35%	13%	52%
Costs related to specific McKinney-Vento or foster care transportation	39%	31%	30%
Costs related to special education transportation	46%	30%	24%

Across 12 cost categories surveyed, a consistent pattern emerges: Districts track what moves buses. While fuel, labor, and vehicle maintenance are the best-understood categories, only 60% are tracking them. This leaves 40% of districts with a costly blind spot — and that blind spot can get more expensive by the day. Diesel fuel prices are unpredictable and have spiked recently, and there’s no clear indication of when or if they’ll come back down. A 72-passenger bus carrying a handful of students is already inefficient; with diesel prices climbing, it’s a cost districts cannot keep absorbing.

Our data shows the further a cost category sits from the bus itself, the less visible it becomes. The cost of staff time spent managing transportation-related issues such as handling parent complaints, coordinating reroutes, and covering scheduling gaps, is the least visible cost in the survey. More than half (58%) of districts say this cost is either not tracked anywhere or they don’t know if it is. This is not a minor administrative footnote. Survey results show that 35% of respondents spend more than five hours per week on this work. That labor is significant and recurring but it is not accounted for in most transportation budgets.

Driver recruitment and retention costs are nearly as invisible: 52% of survey respondents say they don’t have any insight into them. That figure sits directly alongside another: 71% of respondents say they have experienced at least one operational consequence of driver shortages in the past year. The cost of managing the problem causing the most operational pain is, in most districts, entirely untracked. Decisions about how much to invest in recruitment, what incentives to offer, and even whether the effort to continue trying to hire additional help is worth it are being made without any baseline for what the status quo actually costs.

This lack of visibility has another direct consequence: It limits a district’s ability to evaluate alternatives. The goal for any district should be to arrange the best possible transportation service for all students in the most cost-effective way, which means comparing the full cost of the current approach against other ways to deliver that same service. Without knowing what staff time, recruitment, and retention actually cost today, districts have no baseline to weigh those alternatives against, and no way to tell whether a different model would deliver equal or better access and service at the same, or a lower, cost.

Utilization is the piece most districts can't see at all. The majority (61%) of districts surveyed report they don't know their annual cost per rider, and only a small fraction (11%) could even offer a rough estimate above \$3,000 per rider. The rest were scattered across every band from under \$500 to just under \$3,000. These responses are a sign that most districts aren’t mapping spend to usage at all. Without cost-per-rider visibility, districts can know its total transportation budget down to the dollar and still have no idea whether that spend is buying efficient, well-utilized service or covering routes running well under capacity.

Another very important but often overlooked cost category is risk management, from insurance costs to legal expenses. Legal fees and settlements related to transportation incidents go untracked or unknown according to 51% of district respondents, and 40% say the same thing about insurance costs. These are not hypothetical expenses; they are liabilities that impact district budgets.

It's important to note that this lack of cost transparency does not reflect a failure of intent. Transportation directors are managing complex operations under significant pressure, and they are often tracking what the systems around them enable them to track. The gap here is structural. Transportation cost data lives in separate departments and is often absorbed into general administration, special education, and student services budgets, making full visibility into comprehensive transportation costs difficult.

Most districts that are choosing between district-owned white fleets and alternative transportation options are doing so without the numbers to make a fully informed decision. **Only 9% of survey respondents report their district has completed a formal total cost of ownership analysis for district-owned vans and non-bus vehicles in the past two years**, meaning the vast majority don't have a clear understanding of what their white fleet actually costs. Districts that understand their unit economics — including the hidden labor costs, the recruitment drain, and the legal exposure — tend to make structurally different choices about their transportation mix and how transportation gets managed.

A district trying to save money on student transportation without a complete cost picture may be trading a visible budget line for an invisible, and much more expensive, one.



The Full Cost of Owning & Operating a White Fleet of Vans

Capital & Ownership	Operating Costs
• Vehicle purchase or lease/financing payments • Interest on loans or bonds used to buy the fleet • Depreciation / capital replacement reserve • Vehicle insurance (liability, comprehensive, umbrella) • Registration & state inspection fees (varies by state) • In-vehicle camera & GPS hardware installation • Long procurement lead times (6–18 months for yellow fleet/specialized vehicles) limiting ability to respond to new demand	• Fuel (gas or electricity) • Maintenance & repairs (parts, labor, tires) • Driver wages & benefits (health, retirement, payroll tax) • Deadhead / non-revenue mileage (fuel & driver time to/from routes) • Low-occupancy trips (same vehicle cost whether 1 seat or all seats are filled) • Driver recruiting, training, background checks & drug/alcohol testing • Substitute driver coverage for absences • Driver-dispatch communication tools (radios, apps, telematics) • Dispatch staff & routing software • Facility costs (parking/staging area, fueling, utilities)
Administrative & Overhead	Special Ed & McKinney-Vento Add-Ons
• Transportation director & compliance staff • Staff time coordinating eligibility, routing & liaison logistics • Camera & GPS monitoring software, footage storage • Safety & compliance program costs • Legal costs (transportation disputes, due process)	• Wheelchair-accessible van ramps/lifts • Child car seats & booster seats (purchase, periodic replacement, installation training) • Aides / monitors required by IEPs • Individualized, door-to-door routing • Cross-district "school of origin" trips • Last-minute re-routing when a student's address or shelter placement changes • Trauma-informed care & IEP training for drivers/aides

District Strategy: Transportation Is Gaining a Seat at the Table, Just Not Always the Right One



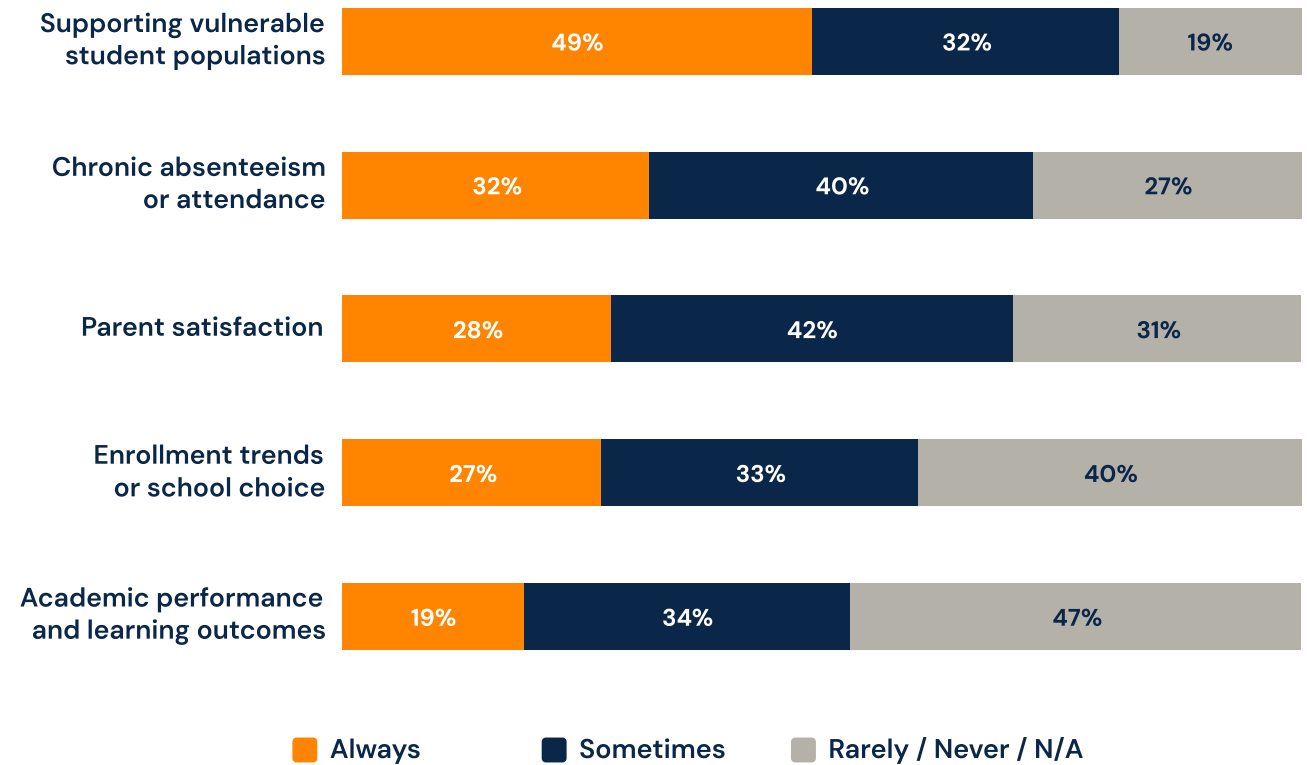
**49% say
transportation is
discussed more in
strategic
conversations
than it was five
years ago**

The good news: More districts are talking about transportation than they were previously. Nearly half (49%) of respondents say transportation has been included in broader district conversations more often than it was five years ago. Only 2% say it is included less often.

The issue is which conversations transportation is being included in, and which ones it is still being excluded from due to not being viewed as an important strategic partner.

Transportation has earned its way into conversations about vulnerable student populations and operational challenges. When districts discuss supporting students with IEPs, students experiencing homelessness, or those in foster care, 49% of respondents report that transportation is always part of the conversation. This makes sense, as federal mandates create accountability, and the consequences of failing these students are visible and legally significant.

Transportation is mostly excluded from district conversations about student satisfaction, enrollment, and academic performance.



Only 19% say transportation is always included in academic performance conversations; 47% say it rarely or never is

75% of districts see a correlation between transportation and attendance, but only 25% actually track it



But move the conversation toward chronic absenteeism, and that changes. Only 32% of districts say transportation is always included when absenteeism comes up — even though 29% of districts have been explicitly asked to address chronic absenteeism as a strategic priority in the past two years, the second most common mandate according to survey results. Transportation is also largely absent as a consideration in discussions about academic performance and learning outcomes: Only 19% of survey respondents say it is always included in those conversations, and 47% say it rarely or never is.

This is a significant gap. Three-quarters (75%) of district respondents say they see a correlation between access to transportation and student attendance, yet only 25% actively track and report on that relationship. Another 28% say they collect both attendance and transportation data, and yet have still never formally analyzed whether one affects the other. The data is there, but districts are not putting it together.

The Annenberg Institute at Brown University published [research](#) in January 2026 that shows that **missing as few as 3–7% of school days, far below the 10% threshold that typically triggers district intervention, is already predictive of poor academic performance.** This means that the measurement gap isn’t just an administrative oversight. Districts that don’t track the transportation–attendance relationship may be missing early signals of academic risk before they ever reach the point of formal concern.

Survey respondents report the same pattern no matter how much transportation responsibility they have: Transportation is present in equity conversations and absent in academic ones. This is not a transportation director problem; the cause of this is structure. Districts approach decisions about transportation separately from decisions about attendance, enrollment, and academic outcomes, and that produces a disconnect that persists regardless of who is in the room.

Districts that keep transportation walled off from conversations about academic achievement, enrollment, and outcomes are treating it as a logistics line item. The ones that bring it into those conversations are treating it as what it actually is: a crucial operational asset for districts and a central part of every student’s educational journey.

Transportation Access: A Strategic Lever for Enrollment and Attendance



49% of parents say transportation availability was a major factor in choosing their child's current school

82% of private-school parents would consider switching schools for better transportation options, even without an academic improvement

American public school districts are losing students. According to a [2025 analysis](#), between fall 2019 and fall 2023, public school enrollment fell by 1.2 million students nationally — and projections suggest another 2.4 million will leave by 2031, a nearly 5% additional decline. Urban districts have absorbed the steepest losses: Cities shed roughly 675,000 students in the post-pandemic period, a drop of about 4%, while suburban and rural districts saw more modest declines.

The consequences of enrollment declines are direct and financial. In most states, funding flows on a per-pupil basis, so fewer students means less revenue — even as costs for staffing, buildings, and operations remain fixed. For districts already managing driver shortages and budget constraints, a drop in enrollment isn't a distant concern; it's an underlying pressure that only adds to every other problem they're trying to solve.

Districts are utilizing a range of responses, including curriculum redesign, expanded outreach, new school models, and community engagement campaigns. Most of these options are expensive, with uncertain outcomes that take time to materialize. The data from our 2026 State of School Transportation survey suggests a simpler solution may already be within reach.

Nearly half (49%) of all parents surveyed (all school types combined, including public, charter, and private schools) say transportation availability was a major factor when choosing their child's current school. That figure alone should give districts pause. Enrollment decisions are not made purely on academic reputation or proximity. For many families, the practical question of how their child will get to school is just as big a determinant. And the parents most likely to be weighing that question include those whose children attend charter or private schools or those that offer school choice —populations districts are actively trying to attract or retain. Among parents of charter school students, 79% say they would consider enrolling their child in a different school with better transportation, even without an academic improvement. Among private school parents, that figure rises to 82%.

44%



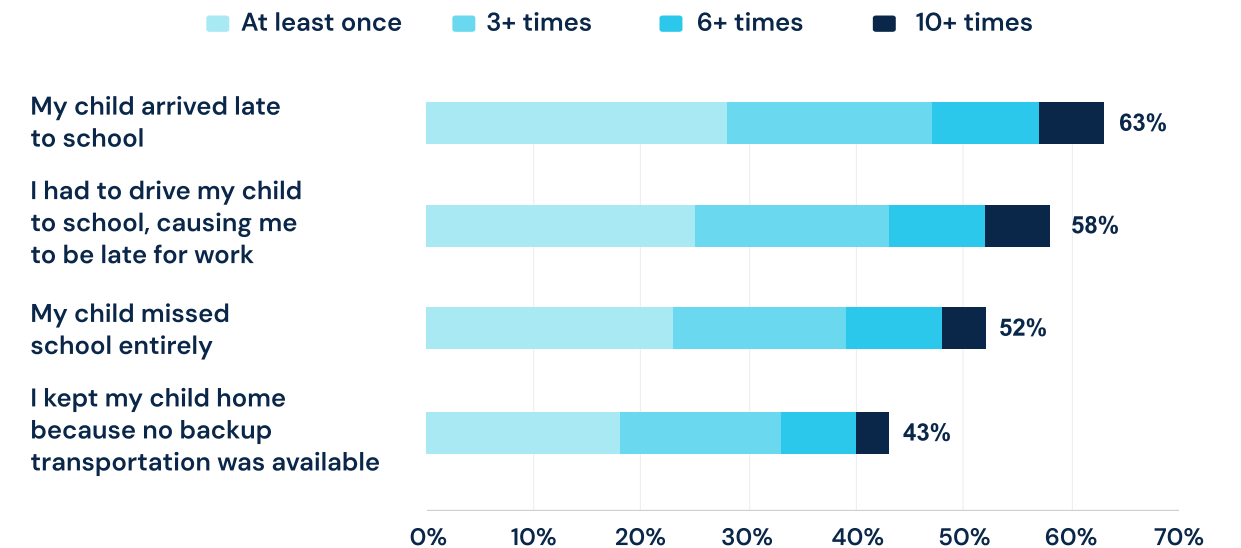
of parents have seriously considered switching their child's school because of transportation problems

52% of parents say their child missed school entirely at least once in the past year because of a transportation problem

These are not families who are indifferent to school quality; they are families who have already actively made educational choices who say that transportation is a deciding factor in whether they would make a different one. For districts trying to reverse enrollment trends, this is a meaningful signal about a point of leverage that is already available to them.

The same connection to transportation exists with student attendance. More than half (52%) of parents surveyed say their child missed school entirely at least once in the past year because of a transportation problem, and 63% say their child arrived late at least once for the same reason.

Most students have been late, or missed school entirely due to transportation issues: most parents have been late to work.



40% of parents say their child experienced a safety-related incident on the bus at least once this year

These are not isolated incidents — they are the lived experiences of a majority of the families districts serve. It's notable that 75% of district respondents say they already believe access to transportation affects attendance, which means most districts are aware of this causal relationship, even if only 25% are formally tracking data about it.

For districts in average-daily-attendance funding states like California, Idaho, Kentucky, Missouri, and Texas, transportation can actually play an important part in growing the budget. When state dollars follow attendance rather than enrollment alone, every student who shows up has a direct dollar value attached. In this case, transportation isn't just an operational cost to manage — it's one of the more direct paths a district has to increase revenue, not just protect it.

The two problems, enrollment pressure and chronic absenteeism, are typically managed as separate priorities with separate strategies. What this data shows is that they share a root. Transportation is not a secondary variable behind either issue. For families deciding whether to enroll at a school, it is part of the decision. For families whose children are already enrolled, it is part of whether or not they stay and/or consistently attend. Districts that make the shift to seeing transportation as a relevant variable can use it to make a positive impact in both of these areas.



The McKinney–Vento Challenge: Speed



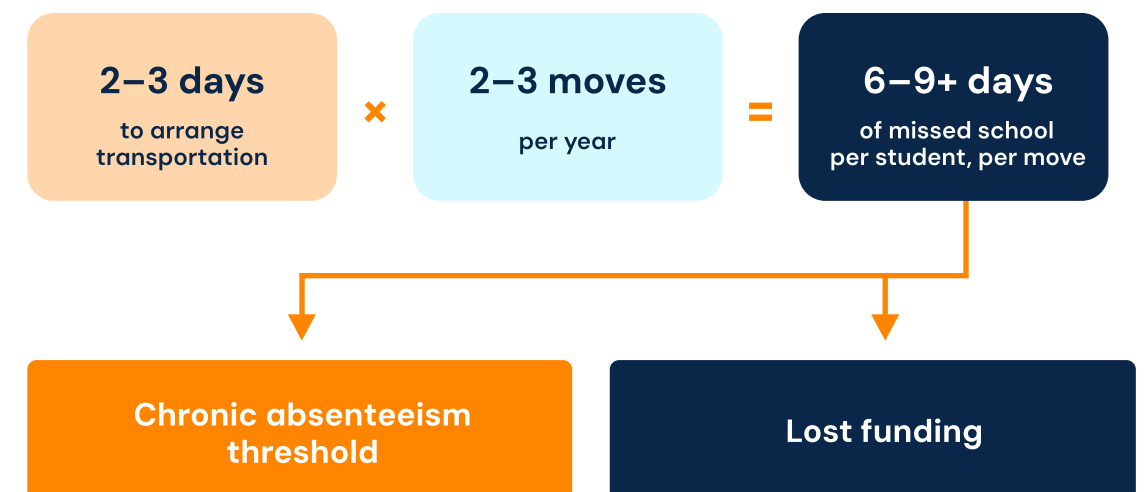
Only 14% of districts can arrange transportation the same day for a newly identified student experiencing homelessness

Almost half, 45%, report it typically takes one to two days, and 31% say three or more days are required



Students experiencing homelessness are among the most mobile, most vulnerable, and most legally protected populations a district serves. Under the McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act, districts are required to provide transportation “without delay” from the moment a student is identified — a standard written to reflect the urgency of the situation, not a school district’s transportation capabilities.

The data we gathered through this year’s survey shows how far most districts are from being able to deliver on that standard. Only 14% of districts surveyed that support McKinney–Vento transportation say they can arrange transportation the same day a newly identified student is referred. Almost half, 45%, report it typically takes one to two days, and 31% say three or more days are required. Notably, 9% of respondents say they don’t track this data at all — meaning even basic visibility into response time is absent. For a student already navigating housing instability, these administrative delays result in missed learning time, often leading to chronic absenteeism and lost funding for the district.



35% of districts name "speed of response" more than any other factor as the top priority for McKinney-Vento transportation

What makes this gap particularly worthy of diving into is that it is not the result of indifference or poor planning from districts. Fixed-route bus systems are built around predictable, scheduled ridership established months in advance. Students who qualify for McKinney-Vento transportation are, by definition, a population with transportation needs that arise without warning. The mismatch is foundational and difficult to overcome since the system was never designed to accommodate it.

Districts know this. When asked what matters most with McKinney-Vento transportation, 35% of survey respondents named speed of response — more than any other factor, including cost, consistency, and routing complexity. When respondents described their own experiences in their own words, the same theme surfaced repeatedly: “Quick turnaround,” wrote one. “Delays in getting everything set up,” wrote another. A third described the challenge plainly: “The time [it takes] to get a route established and communicated to the parent.” It’s clear from the data and these responses that speed is not just what districts say matters in an abstract sense; it’s an operational barrier they continually face.

Districts consistently name a fast turnaround time as their top need for McKinney-Vento transportation — and this is also where their current systems fall short. This operational challenge is one that has serious consequences for students experiencing housing instability. For them, transportation disruption is not just a logistical inconvenience — it is another break in an already fractured sense of stability.

Getting a student experiencing homelessness to school consistently, starting from the day they are identified, is one of the most direct interventions available. The law already requires it, yet the system districts rely on is not built to deliver it at the speed the law envisions.



Parents and Districts Agree: Consistency Is Good for Students with IEPs, But Understanding Individualized Needs Is Non-Negotiable



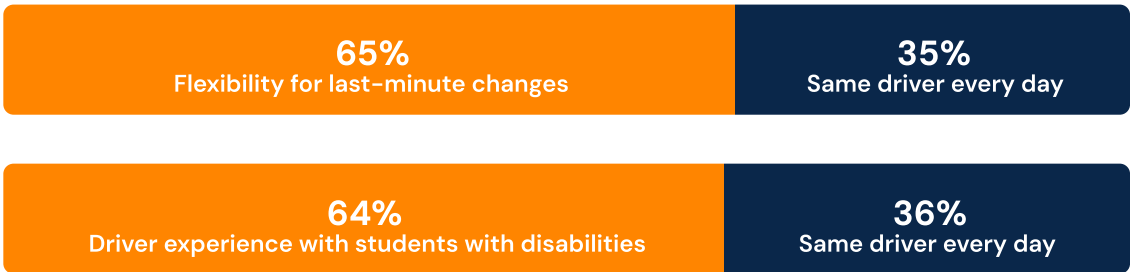
47% of districts say understanding student needs matters most for IEP transportation vs. 26% who say the same driver every day is the top priority

Given a direct tradeoff, 65% of districts say flexibility matters more for IEP transportation vs. 35% who say daily consistency does

There is a version of “consistency” that sounds like the right answer for IEP transportation: the same driver, every day, no exceptions. Districts say they want it. Parents say they want it. It appears, on the surface, to be a shared priority. But the data we gathered through this year’s survey tells a different story.

When districts are asked directly what matters most in an IEP transportation provider, the largest share, 47%, say understanding the student’s individual needs. Having the same driver every day comes in second, at 26%. That gap narrows but does not disappear when districts are asked to compare two options and choose which one is a higher priority: flexibility for last-minute changes beats consistency with the same driver by nearly two to one (65% to 35%), and driver experience with students with special needs beats the same driver every day by almost the same margin (64% to 36%).

When asked to rank priorities for IEP rides, districts emphasize an understanding of student needs, flexibility, and driver experience.



Source: HopSkipDrive State of School Transportation Survey, 2026

What this shows is that “consistency” does not mean having the exact same driver show up every day. It means having a driver who is knowledgeable about supporting that particular student’s special needs — who knows and deeply understands each rider’s individual needs and preferences — so they can provide consistent, familiar service. With the right technology, drivers get the information they need to do this while giving schools the flexibility to adapt to last-minute changes. The ability to understand and be responsive to student needs leads to a calmer, more reliable ride experience — one that sets students up to arrive at school ready to learn.

As part of our survey, families described, in their own words, things they consider important for transportation for their children:

“
Having a driver who has special needs children/training and can meet them where they are.
”

“
Always hav[ing] a familiar backup driver who is trained in de-escalation.
”

“
Transportation would feel truly safe and well-suited to my child’s needs if there was a reliable system with trained drivers . . . I would also feel more comfortable if there was good communication with parents, like updates if there are delays or changes.
”

Coordinating rides for students in special circumstances is the single most common task absorbing diverted staff time

The common thread across all three of those statements is not a demand for sameness. It is a demand for understanding — and for transparency when things unexpectedly change. Parents grasp that the same driver can’t be behind the wheel every day. What they don’t want is a substitute driver who arrives without any knowledge of their child.

Driver illness, planned time off, and unexpected events are a normal part of any transportation program, no matter how well it’s run. The programs that actually serve districts and families well aren’t the ones that promise an unbroken chain of one driver forever. They’re the ones built for continuity of experience. That’s the distinction that matters.

The quantitative data confirms how significant disruption is when it occurs. Among IEP households, frequent driver changes are the most commonly reported transportation breakdown (53%), followed by having no way to track their child during the ride (48%). When something unexpected happens, 22% of parents describe it as extremely destabilizing and among the most challenging situations they have faced with school transportation. And school districts do their best to keep up in any way they can: More than half (54%) of surveyed districts report that non-transportation staff are pulled into IEP-related transportation issues at least weekly, and coordinating rides for students in special circumstances is the single most common task absorbing that diverted time.

Looking at the data, we can see this isn’t a case of parents and administrators talking past each other. In reality, they’re describing the same priorities and the same solution, independently: Build a system where a familiar driver is always available and consistently informed of that child’s needs.



Alternative Transportation Partnerships: A Strategy — Not a Stopgap



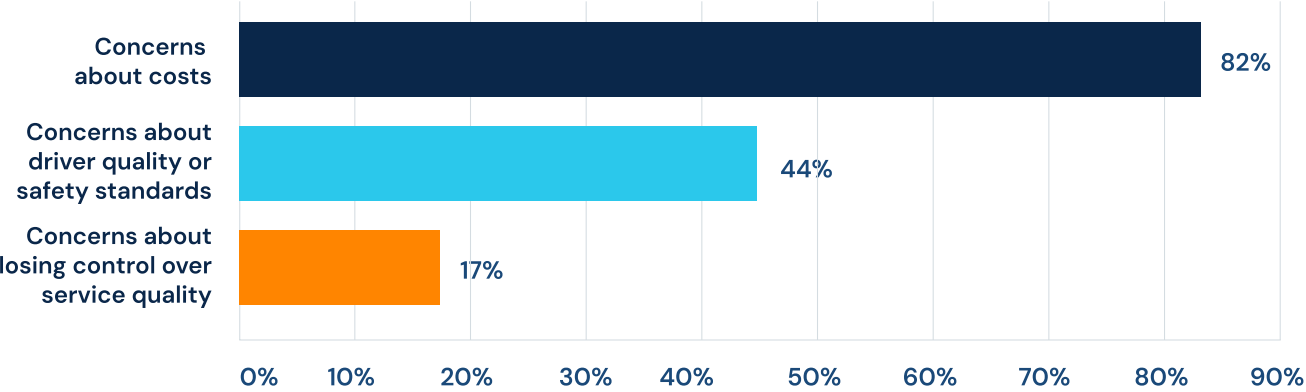
Taken together, the findings in this report describe a system under sustained pressure. Driver shortages have reshaped what service level districts are able to offer. Budget mandates have arrived without the cost visibility needed to act on them intelligently by evaluating and identifying the best and most cost-effective service option. Transportation is gaining inclusion in some strategic district conversations but is not yet regularly included in discussions around enrollment and academics. And the students who most need reliable, responsive transportation — those with IEPs or experiencing homelessness — are being served by a system that was not designed with their needs in mind.

Districts know all of this, but whether they view transportation as an operational cost or a strategic opportunity makes all the difference. Districts are, of course, responding to the challenges they are facing. The question is whether they are strategically using all of the internal resources, like transportation, that are available to them. According to our 2026 data, 78% of districts have taken at least one substantive action over the past two years: bringing in a third-party alternative transportation provider (44%), consolidating routes (42%), raising driver pay (33%), or asking non-transportation staff to absorb transportation duties (22%). The response to the issues that arise is there. What's less clear is the strategy and thinking behind it.

The open-ended responses we received tell this story plainly. When asked what would need to be true to outsource a larger portion of transportation to alternative student transportation vendors, one district administrator wrote: "We only outsource when we cannot fill the route." Another said the trigger would be "sudden loss of driver pool," while a third respondent pushed the threshold even higher: "No bus service AT ALL." This is not what a strategic approach looks like; these are emergency responses with a vendor attached.

Cost is cited as the primary barrier to districts to doing more rides with alternative transportation partners

Top Three Barriers to Outsourcing More of Your District's Student Transportation to Alternative Student Transportation Partners:



82% cite cost as a barrier to expanding alternative transportation partnerships, but without a baseline cost-per-rider, "it costs too much" is just a statement based on a feeling

This reactive approach to the use of alternative transportation partnerships shapes every relevant decision, including how cost gets evaluated. The majority, 82%, of district respondents identify cost as the leading barrier to outsourcing more transportation to alternative partners — almost double the next highest ranked concern cited by 44%: driver quality and safety standards. But the same districts citing cost as their primary barrier are also the ones least equipped to assess it. More than half (61%) of districts don't know their annual transportation cost per rider. Without this important baseline to go on, saying "it costs too much" is just a statement based on a feeling. An approach that can't be backed up by financial analysis isn't a strategy — it's a guess, and it's one that is unlikely to lead to serving students as effectively or efficiently as possible.

The districts that approach outsourcing to alternative transportation partners differently start from a different perspective. Rather than asking whether an alternative provider is cheaper than the status quo, they ask what the status quo actually costs when all things are taken into account, including driver recruitment and turnover, staff time diverted to transportation coordination, legal exposure, insurance, and the effects of service gaps on attendance and enrollment. That full picture almost always changes the math — and it changes the nature of the conversation with a vendor from "Can you do this cheaper than we currently do?" to "Can you do this better than we currently can, at a cost we can justify?" For example, if districts used alternative transportation to immediately serve McKinney-Vento students, it could mean zero school missed, and greater funding opportunities.

When districts think through what they actually need from an alternative transportation partner, their priorities shift. When given the choice, districts surveyed choose flexibility for last-minute changes over daily consistency by nearly two to one. They choose driver experience with students with special needs over the same driver every day at almost the same rate. What districts say they want when they slow down and consider everything is expertise, familiarity, adaptability, and accountability. One district administrator captured the standard succinctly in an open-ended response:

“Timeliness of service — late rides are my single biggest issue. When there is a legitimate explanation, I can be understanding. But when it's simply because the driver didn't care enough to be on time, that's a huge problem.”

This professional expectation reflects the shift that distinguishes districts that treat outsourcing to alternative transportation partners as a strategy: They hold outside partners to service standards, evaluate performance against them, and structure the relationship accordingly. They manage it the same way they would manage a strategic sourcing decision: They don't just sign a contract and forget about it; they proactively work with the partner and revisit it as needs and budgets change.

Information on what would move more districts toward embracing alternative transportation partnerships reinforces this. Cost appears repeatedly in the open-ended responses, but so do other things: "Costs, efficiency, and accountability," wrote one respondent. "Cost-effectiveness, driver background checks/quality standards, and flexibility of ride changes," wrote another. Districts are not only considering whether alternative transportation options are affordable — they are thinking about whether these partnerships offer accountability, and whether there is a standard, a record, and a relationship they can stand behind when a board member or a parent asks.

Looking ahead two to three years, 83% of districts surveyed cite rising costs as a top concern and 61% mention continued driver shortages. These are not problems that will resolve with incremental adjustments to the existing model. They are structural pressures that accumulate, and the districts best positioned to manage them are the ones that have already built the cost visibility and strategic vendor relationships they need to respond from a position of preparation. Once a district sees how far transportation's impact actually reaches, managing it well stops being a cost-control exercise and starts being a strategy.

Conclusion: The Shift Districts Can't Afford to Miss



All of the pressures documented in this report share a common thread: Districts are managing student transportation with less information than the decisions involved demand. Driver shortages haven't eased so much as they've been absorbed into a smaller version of service. Budget mandates keep arriving without the cost data needed to effectively address them. And the students whose needs are most acute — those experiencing homelessness or with IEPs — are navigating a system designed for predictability in situations that are anything but.

What separates the districts that are managing these pressures well isn't a bigger budget or more resources. It's a shift in mindset — from reacting to driver shortages in the moment to building a cost baseline that can withstand scrutiny and allow for evaluation of service options. From treating IEP and McKinney-Vento transportation as compliance obligations to considering them proof points for the whole system's responsiveness to complex student needs. From leaving transportation out of conversations about enrollment and academic performance to recognizing it as a critical component districts can use to positively impact both of these issues at once.

The data on parent decision-making only emphasizes the extensive reach and varied impacts of transportation, which is already shaping which schools families choose — and whether or not they stay. Districts that haven't yet connected the dots on all of these things are not making full use of a powerful tool they already have on hand.

Districts that have already made this shift are making structurally different decisions, and the data suggests the impacts of these decisions add up: better cost visibility leads to better vendor conversations, which lead to more responsive service, which shows up in attendance and enrollment numbers a district can actually point to.

Student transportation was never meant to be a background function. It is involved in and impacts many aspects of the educational experience, including whether a child with a housing crisis makes it to class, whether a family chooses to stay enrolled at a particular school, and whether a district can say with confidence what its own operations cost. The infrastructure is already in place in every district in this survey. What's missing, in many of them, is the decision to treat it like the strategic asset the data says it is.

 If the findings in this report raise questions about where your district stands, HopSkipDrive welcomes the conversation. Visit hopskipdrive.com to learn more.

About This Report

The 2026 State of School Transportation Report draws on two surveys conducted by HopSkipDrive in May and June 2026. The district survey was fielded from May 28 through June 24, 2026, and distributed via email to HopSkipDrive's network of district contacts; 205 respondents began the survey and 173 completed it. All district respondents were screened to confirm meaningful responsibility for student transportation decisions at their school or district. The parent survey was conducted via an online panel from May 29 through June 5, 2026; 534 parents were invited and 490 completed the survey. All parent respondents were confirmed parents, caregivers, or legal guardians of at least one child currently enrolled in kindergarten through 12th grade. Of those, 214 completed an additional module specific to families with a child who has an IEP. Neither survey was weighted.



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