

STUDENTS ON RURAL TRANSIT

Our Vehicle for Educational Equity & Access



The Future of Rural Transit project builds relationships between transit agencies and school districts in Vermont to enhance student transportation and equity. Right now, and with modest effort, public transit can improve access and equity for students by filling gaps in existing school bus service. With increased coordination between schools and transit, there will be future opportunities to combine some school bus and public transit routes to further expand access as well as reduce community costs and emissions.

¹In much of the US, schools operate student-dedicated transit, transporting 26 million students on over 480,000 yellow school buses every year. This makes the national school bus fleet the largest US transit fleet at 2.5 times

the size of all other transit vehicle fleets combined. In Vermont, school transportation is a funding and management burden for communities. At the same time, there is existing public transportation service in many parts of Vermont that can be strengthened with greater ridership and community support. What if we transform that burden for the schools into additional ridership and support for public transit? Some Vermont communities have already chosen this path. Students in Burlington as well as some rural schools, such as Sharon Academy, across the state take the town bus to go to school. Communities adopting this path often have concerns about safety and student accommodation however in the words of a Burlington student “I never felt unsafe on the public bus. We were allowed to take on large bags of skis, instruments. Overall, it worked out well. On the Morning neighborhood special, you would get to know your driver.”



Figure 1

This project has worked with a range of education, transit, planning, and community stakeholders to identify the benefits of leveraging public transit service to enhance school transportation. This includes researching existing models in which school districts use transit to safely transport students, partnering with two school districts to explore the opportunity to collaborate with transit providers, and mapping existing transit routes their proximity to schools.

CASE STUDIES

Yates Dial-A-Ride is a county-wide transportation service in Lake County Michigan, providing both semi-fixed route and demand responsive services. Lake County is a largely rural county in western Michigan with just over 12,000 people covering 567 square miles, about 21 people per square mile in contrast to Vermont’s average of 67 people per square mile. The median household income in 2022 was \$38,356 per year. Since 1995, Yates Dial-A-Ride has provided student transportation for the Baldwin School District on buses that are shared with the general public. This partnership was born from necessity: local funding was insufficient to continue school transportation and the governor was reluctant to fund buses that would be parked most of the day. The state instead funded Yates Dial-A-Ride so they could expand their vehicle fleet and encouraged the school district to help cover some operational costs. This partnership between the school district and transit provider has safely transported students from all grade levels, K-12, for over 25 years.

¹ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Current_bus_at_Bellows_Falls_station,_October_2011.jpg

BENEFITS OF STUDENTS ON RURAL TRANSIT

EQUITY

- ✓ Ensure all students can access educational and extracurricular opportunities, even if school transportation is not offered or they don't have access to a personal vehicle.
- ✓ Reduce the need for students and parents to drive by offering more flexible schedules for sports and other extracurricular activities.
- ✓ Diversify transit ridership by including students, which will expand transit system use outside of traditional rider demographics.

ENVIRONMENT

- ✓ Reduce transportation related greenhouse gas emissions by reducing vehicle miles traveled in private vehicles and increasing ridership on buses.
- ✓ Provide schedule flexibility for students to stay late or arrive early without an automobile trip.
- ✓ Educate students on public transportation use, fostering life-long emissions reductions.

ECONOMICS

- ✓ Reduce cost and logistical burden on schools while increasing ridership levels and consistency for local transit agencies.
- ✓ Help Vermont families save money by providing an alternative to private transportation for extracurricular activities.
- ✓ Increased access to internship and job opportunities in the surrounding community.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT

1. Compare neighborhoods and school locations to existing transit routes to determine if these routes could serve students and school staff. Ideally, the route should require no more than minor deviations to be suitable for student transportation.
2. Collaborate with school district staff and transit staff to explore whether routes could be supported. Foster a working relationship between all parties.
3. Build community and school district support for the concept to demonstrate buy-in for the transit provider.
4. Seek formal transit agency support for any route modifications or schedule changes.
5. Work with school districts to promote the enhanced service and set expectations among students, parents, and staff. Keep track of feedback about what works and what needs to be adjusted.
6. Once enhanced service demonstrates the benefits of students using transit, engage with stakeholders to explore transitioning some school transportation routes to use public transit exclusively.

PROJECT RESOURCES:

<https://www.eanvt.org/events-and-initiatives/future-rural-transit/>

PROJECT PARTNERS

