

Making Equitable and Sustainable Transportation a Reality in San Francisco Unified School District: Where do we go from here?



Julia Ehrman, PLUS Fellow 2015

QUESTION:

What steps can SFUSD take to advance equitable and sustainable transportation in the immediate term?

CONTEXT:

SFUSD continues to provide school bus service to a small number of students, but the majority of SFUSD students rely on other transportation modes. Many students face excessively long or unsafe commutes, while others rely on private vehicles because alternatives are insufficient for busy lifestyles. **The complex school assignment system, diverse school contexts, and limited resources create complex transportation challenges.**

FINDINGS: There is no one size fits all solution.

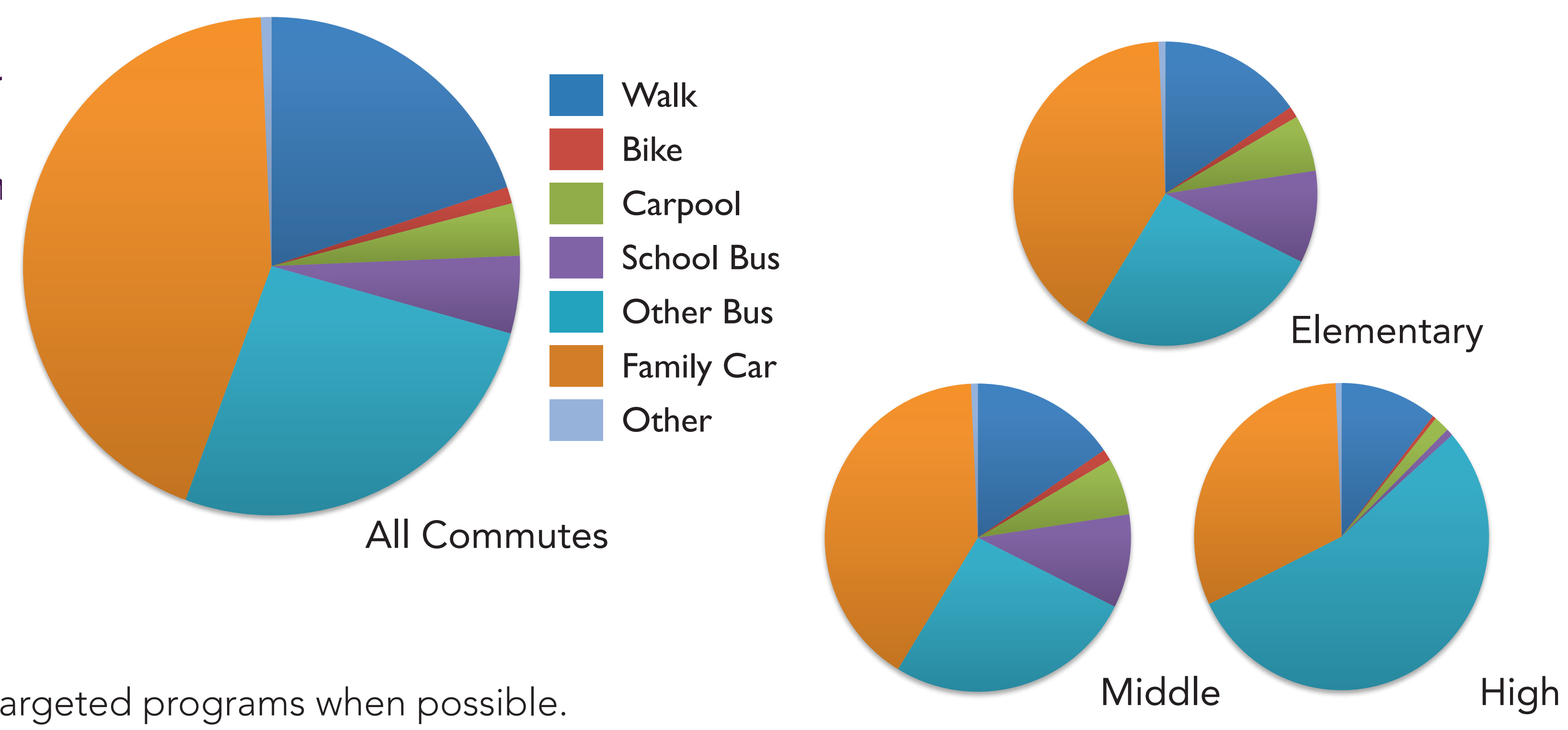
Instead, student transportation depends on a coordinated effort between SFUSD and the city to improve transportation conditions for families and implement targeted programs when possible. SFUSD needs **added institutional capacity** in order to develop and pursue a **strategic transportation plan**, and to become a **strong advocate for youth and family mobility** among its city partners.

Students need healthy, affordable, and convenient transportation to arrive at school on time and ready to learn.

Improving transportation conditions is essential to achieving equitable education access and citywide sustainability.

Like many school Districts, SFUSD does not have a coordinated strategy in place to reduce car dependency and ensure that transportation is not a barrier to school attendance or school choice.

How Students Get to School, 2014-2015:



GAPS:

Research: Anecdotal evidence, student testimony, and recent reporting suggests that transportation is a barrier to education in San Francisco. SFUSD has not undertaken a research process to understand the impact of transportation on school attendance, school choice, and student achievement.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Use data to create typologies of school transportation characteristics
- Design and implement a needs assessment to understand transportation barriers and opportunities to increase sustainable commuting district-wide.
- Document and assess ongoing school or neighborhood based efforts, including walking school buses, CBO services, and other initiatives.
- Establish channels for students and parents to provide feedback and seek assistance if they face transportation barriers to education.

OPPORTUNITIES:

The SFMTA was recently asked to brief the Board of Supervisors on its efforts to improve service for students. Following a research process, SFUSD could identify service priorities and help guide these efforts to increase MTA service in areas of highest need.

Strategic Planning: School transportation requires safe streets, convenient, affordable transit, traffic enforcement, capital improvements, and community organizing. There is a lack of leadership to facilitate a strategic planning process to systematically coordinate existing and new efforts in these areas and ensure that all students are adequately served.

- Develop a coordinated transportation plan that promotes safety, sustainability, and equity in all modes of travel to and from school.
- Develop priorities for intervention, district objectives, and advocacy issues for inter-departmental collaboration.
- Define and pursue a policy agenda to promote youth and family mobility in San Francisco

In Potrero Hill, a CBO pays trained chaperones to lead regular walking school buses to make sure that students at two neighborhood schools arrive at school safely and on time for breakfast. This reduces stress for students and families and promotes health and academic achievement. A strategic planning process could identify opportunities to expand this type of program to other schools that might benefit from it.

Implementation: The SFUSD Office of Sustainability lacks sufficient capacity to implement District-wide bicycle education, install bike racks, manage the expansion of SF Safe Routes to School, streamline communication materials between District offices, schools, and families, and actively pursue collaboration with other SFUSD departments and city agencies to advance equitable and sustainable student transportation.

- Manage communications material between the district, schools, and families.
- Ensure that information about existing transportation resources is reaching all families in accessible formats and languages.
- Implement bicycle education and install bicycle parking at all schools.
- Manage Safe Routes to School expansion district-wide.

The SFUSD Office of Sustainability provides education and outreach support to promote safe active commuting at SFUSD schools that are not included in the SF Safe Routes to School program. The Office of Sustainability has also acquired grant funding to supply bike racks and Balance Bikes for every SFUSD pre-kindergarten program. Additional staff is needed to continue these activities.

Coordinated Collaboration: Equitable and sustainable transportation depends on collaboration between school district, city, and community partners. A designated point of contact is needed to coordinate work within the district and liaison to other city departments and partner organizations. These include, among others, the SFUSD Policy and Transportation departments, the Safe Routes to School Partnership, the Vision Zero Task Force, the SFMTA, the SF Youth Commission, the SFUSD Community Schools initiative and School based CBOS.

- Assign a point of contact for student transportation related efforts and inquiries. This is the liaison to SF Safe Routes to School, the Mayor's Vision Zero Coalition, and the SFMTA for bike racks, capital improvements, and Free Muni for Youth.
- Assign a representative to attend relevant meetings, report back to appropriate SFUSD departments, and advance the district's agenda in partnership efforts.

At a recent Vision Zero meeting at City Hall, the idea of convening a policy committee was raised. A designated point of contact would ensure that an SFUSD staff member was available to serve on that committee.

During the roll-out of Free Muni for Youth, SFUSD needed a liaison to communicate with SFMTA, relay enrollment protocol to the schools, and ensure that relevant parties were up to date. A liaison could also serve as a point of contact for schools to report problems with Free Muni registration, or for families to seek assistance.