



Linking Equity + Sustainability:

A Transportation Plan for San Francisco Unified School District

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ISSUE

San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) aims to increase environmentally sustainable transportation among District families. In the wake of cuts to school bus service, 95% of San Francisco students are now responsible for their own transportation and close to 50% rely on private automobiles to get to school. The District aims to reduce car dependency because it contributes to city traffic, pollution, and safety hazards for students. SFUSD's complex school assignment policy causes many families to travel long distances to school in pursuit of educational opportunities. Current programs to promote alternative transportation modes lack coordination, funding, and capacity. The implications of transportation on school access have not been addressed.

METHODS

As the transportation intern in the SFUSD Office of Sustainability, I began by investigating ways to expand and improve existing sustainable transportation programs so that they would reach all SFUSD schools. Since August 2013, I have participated in the strategic planning and parent outreach efforts of the Safe Routes to School Partnership. Additionally, I reviewed District commute mode data, school transportation websites for the District and for each school, and attended workshops and meetings with parents, administrators, and city staff. Through these methods, I have identified gaps in knowledge and information about student transportation that limit our ability to design an effective transportation program.

FINDINGS

In San Francisco, three factors pose significant challenges to student transportation, and illuminate the need to include affordability, access, and safety in a context-specific sustainable transportation plan.

School choice: SFUSD uses a choice lottery system to overcome neighborhood-based disparities in school quality and give all families access to top quality schools, language immersion, and other specialized programs. Students are not guaranteed access to their neighborhood schools. This means that many families travel across the city to reach educational opportunities.

Limited transportation resources: School bus service was recently cut and now serves just 5% of SFUSD students. There is no comprehensive plan to provide alternative transportation service. Limited resources are available to support walking, bicycling, carpool, and youth transit affordability through the Safe Routes to School Partnership at the Department of Public Health, the Department of the Environment, and the Municipal Transportation Agency. These programs rely on short term grant funding and many only operate in a small selection of schools.

Diverse School contexts: The transportation environment varies greatly between schools depending on topography, transit service, street safety, caregiver involvement and availability, and other factors. The impact of transportation on SFUSD families and on their school enrollment decisions is not well understood. District-level commute data is used to determine sustainable transportation goals, but the aggregated distribution does not capture the reality for families at individual schools.



LESSONS

In San Francisco, equitable and sustainable student transportation will not be achieved without safe, reliable, and affordable transportation options for students and families. Inadequate transportation significantly limits a students' ability to take advantage of school choice. School attendance patterns suggest that school choice may be constrained by the reliable transportation options available to families, which vary based on transit service, car and caregiver availability, street safety, pavement and lighting quality, and other factors. While many city agencies have a role in providing this transportation, SFUSD has a unique responsibility to each and every student, and is therefore the proper entity to provide an overarching policy and plan. Student transportation should be treated as integral to achieving the Districts overarching goals of "Access and Equity". The lack of data about gaps in existing transportation infrastructure for students, and the effect that this has on educational access in San Francisco is a barrier to success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For SFUSD

- SFUSD should institute a high-level policy that incorporates health, safety, affordability, and reliability into a vision for sustainable transportation throughout the District.
- SFUSD should simplify and centralize messaging about all transportation options. The District should provide a clear point of contact for questions about transportation.
- SFUSD should assemble school-specific transportation information to assess service distribution, identify gaps, and provide information to families about the transportation resources available to them.
- SFUSD should provide strong support for the expansion and institutionalization of the Free Muni for Youth Program. Additionally, the District must develop strategic partnerships with staff members at SFMTA to advocate for transit design and investments that serve youth.
- The SFUSD Transportation, Policy, and Sustainability offices should work together to integrate school bus service into a comprehensive transportation strategy, and explore opportunities to incorporate sustainable transportation alternatives in the special needs transportation program.

For Safe Routes to School Partners

- Safe Routes to School should operate in a broader framework and vision set by SFUSD, and align programs and evaluation to broader, long-term district goals.
- The Safe Routes to School outreach team should use parent focus groups and surveys to gather data about transportation needs at each school and interrogate the effectiveness of existing outreach.

For Researchers

Research in three areas is needed to support a comprehensive transportation plan for SFUSD:

- The impact of transportation service on school choice in SFUSD.
- Ways in which equity and sustainability goals conflict and reinforce one another.
- How to adapt transit, walking, bicycling, and carpool promotion programs to meet the needs of families.