

## **How long is too long? The problem with long bus rides in rural areas of the United States.**

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A yellow school bus is the traditional form of transportation for students who commute to and from schools. According to School Transportation News, about 26 million students ride these yellow school buses daily in the US (School Transportation News, 2025). Most urban students' rides aren't long; for example, the average length of a school bus in New York City is less than 30 minutes (Cordes, Rick, & Schwartz, 2022). However, the ride might be much longer for rural students, with some spending three to four hours a day on the bus (Arnold, 2024).

These lengthy rides are more common in many rural areas, since students often reside far from schools. A study conducted in 2001 reports that rural students who rode a bus experienced longer commute times and distances compared to suburban students. In addition, suburban students were more likely to use a private vehicle due to having to travel a shorter distance to school (Howley, 2001). Almost 25 years later, the problem has not disappeared. In West Virginia, for example, some 5-year-old kindergarten students spend 3 hours on a bus ride every day, waking up at 5 am in the morning, and getting home 12 hours later (Monroe, 2024).

And many parents and teachers are worried that commute times for rural students might become even longer. The US has seen the closure of over 12,000 schools since 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023), and the number will only increase with the recent push for district consolidation and school closure (Lieberman, 2024). States such as New Jersey and Vermont are considering legislation mandating schools to merge or share resources in order to control the rising costs of education. (Biryukov, 2024; McDonald, 2025)

These trends lead to important questions about the academic, social, and health effects of long bus rides on rural students. Those additional hours on the ride might take away time

spent on homework and extracurricular activities and dinners with friends and family and even affect physical health.

### **Academic outcomes**

Research suggests that bus rides exceeding an hour will have a negative impact on students' test scores, grades, and absenteeism rates. A study conducted nearly 70 years ago reported poorer attendance and lower grades for rural students travelling from farther than 4 miles away from the school, while students who travelled more than 13 miles had the worst academic performance (Scrabenek, 1956). More recent research obtained similar results: third graders' test scores correlated with travel time, such that longer bus rides resulted in poorer academic performance (Talen, 2001). While there is relatively little research conducted on bus rides in rural areas specifically, an urban study found that district choice students with long bus rides (bus rides exceeding 60 minutes) have lower attendance rates (missing more than a day each year) and are much more likely to be chronically absent, with chronic absenteeism rates about 12% among this group (Cordes, Rick & Schwartz, 2022); chronic absenteeism, in turn, is associated with a greater likelihood of dropping out (School Pathways, 2024). Research in two Canadian cities also found a negative effect of school bus ride length on 10<sup>th</sup> grade literacy scores (Lutz, Rakowska, & Adams, 2024). A systemic review of research internationally also found that longer commute times were related to negative academic outcomes, unless they were associated with access to stronger schools (Hopson et al., 2022).

### **Health outcomes**

School buses are generally considered to be one of the safest modes of transportation. Each year, there are less than 1% traffic fatalities that involve children or school buses (U.S. Department of Transportation). However, only 9 states have laws requiring seatbelts, and federal attempts to implement seatbelts in each bus have been unsuccessful. Longer bus rides

mean a higher risk of getting involved in an accident, simply due to more time on the bus, as well as the potential for driver fatigue (Mastros, 2022).

Even though school buses are considered a safe way of transportation, long commute times can still have a serious impact on children. First, school bus rides have long been known to have negative impacts on riders' respiratory health (Spivey, 2002); longer rides can worsen those impacts. In addition, prolonged bus rides can cut into sleep. A recent study conducted in the US reports that longer bus rides are strongly associated with less time spent on sleep: for each additional 45 minutes spent on the bus, a child will lose an hour of sleep (Voulgaris, Smart, & Taylor, 2019). Thus, long bus rides could lead to sleep deficiency, which further results in lower academic performance, higher levels of anxiety and depression, and other negative health outcomes (National Heart, Lung and Blood institute, 2022).

### **Social outcomes**

There are social benefits of bus rides. For example, students can gain communication skills and develop emotional intelligence by learning and practicing prosocial behaviors on the bus. However, this research does not account for the length of the bus, and benefits might dwindle or even reverse after a certain length of time (Galliger, Tisak, & Tisak, 2009).

In addition, longer bus rides have negative impacts on participation in extracurricular activities for rural students (Fox, 1996), which can be important opportunities to develop those communication skills or make students more well-rounded and enhance their chances of getting into more competitive colleges. Rural students may also have less time with families during the school year; one study described the typical experience of a student in West Virginia: leaving the house at 6:30 am, coming back near 5 pm, leaving time only for some homework in the evening (Spence, 2000).

Because longer bus rides are also associated with greater distance from schools, a decrease in family involvement might also be tied to longer bus rides (Spence, 2000). Parents

may be less willing or able to volunteer, attend activities, participate in conferences, or even pick up sick children midday.

## **Policies**

There are also very few regulations of the time spent on the school bus. Even though the federal government regulates safety on the bus, the length of a bus ride is a question left for states' consideration (Education Law, 3635). And most states do not have specific laws or recommendations regarding the time spent on the bus; the majority leave this choice up to a district. As an example, in New York, school districts are expected to provide bus rides of "reasonable" length, which depend on a student's specific circumstances, like whether they have a disability (New York State Education Department).

The only states that have policies regarding the length of a bus ride are South Carolina and West Virginia. South Carolina recommends limiting rides to a maximum of 90 minutes (South Carolina Legislature), while West Virginia has more detailed recommendations: 30 minutes for elementary school students, 45 minutes for middle school, and an hour for high school. (West Virginia Code) However, it appears that, at least in West Virginia, these recommendations can be exceeded following district consolidation and school closure.

The federal government also leaves bus ride length for students with disabilities up to states. While there is very little information about how many states standardize the length of a school bus ride for students with disabilities, Connecticut appears to have policies that prevent bus rides from exceeding an hour each way for these students; however, the majority of states leave those choices up to a school district (Connecticut State Department of Education).

## **Conclusion**

Long bus rides remain an important issue in the American education system, since there are thousands of students who spend more than 3 or 4 hours each day on a bus in order to

receive an education. The most vulnerable are rural students with low-income households and those living farthest away from the closest schools, often as a result of school closure. Those long bus rides can result in negative health, academic, and social impacts, such as lower test scores, poorer sleep quality, and less time for extracurricular activities. In addition, there are no federal regulations and few state regulations to help address these issues. And little research addresses this topic, and much of what does exist dates back to the mid to late twentieth century.

Therefore, bringing awareness to the problem of enormously long bus rides could push governments to create regulations and policies. There are some small communities and concerned parents who continue to speak up about the problem and are trying to change the situation. As an example, the website K-12 Transportation specializes in the solution of transportation related problems in smaller districts and promotes awareness about the long bus ride problem. Apps such as “Here Come the Bus” help parents to track the location of the bus and may help lower anxiety and concerns. Because the majority of education policies and regulations are set at the state- and district-level, communities are usually more able to create change locally.

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