

# School districts asking families to start paying for the school bus ride

By Stateline.org, adapted by Newsela staff

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WASHINGTON — Money from taxes usually helps cover the costs of sending children to and from school on buses.

Yet school districts in at least five states are now asking parents to pay for school bus service.

Dan Domenech, executive director of the School Superintendents Association, says this is because states have less money and have tightened budgets — the amount they spend in a year. New plans to pay for schools started popping up after the economic crisis of 2008, when the stock market tumbled and many people lost their jobs. People and businesses couldn't pay as much in taxes to support schools.

“School districts’ budgets were cut back severely,” Domenech said. Instead of cutting school programs, districts started “charging fees for sports events, uniforms, after-school activities, and eventually transportation,” he said.

## Making Up Lost Funding

Nationwide, school districts receive about 45 percent of their funding from the state. They get roughly the same percentage from local government.

But state funding for education has declined during the last seven years. In October, a Washington research group found that at least 30 states provided less money per student last year than they had before 2008. In fourteen of those 30 states, funding was cut 10 percent or more.

The move to charge for bus transportation has angered parents in some communities. It has also worried some school officials about children’s safety.

Mike Martin is a national student transportation executive. He says that when budgets are cut, “it’s usually children and their parents who take the hit.”

Martin pointed out that school districts do not charge bus fees to make money. They are just trying to make up for money that was cut out of their budgets.

## **Not Everyone Pays The Same**

Transportation fees vary from district to district. The Jeffco Public Schools in Golden, Colorado, charge \$150 a child per year. Students in grades 7 through 12 in Franklin, Massachusetts, pay \$325 each, but no more than \$975 per family. And the Poway Unified School District in San Diego County, California, bills \$575 a year per child, with a limit of \$1,437 for three or more children.

School districts do not charge if students are disabled and qualify for transportation or are foster children or homeless. Some also offer discounted or free service to low-income families.

Charging parents for transportation is not an entirely new idea. School districts in a number of states have been charging bus fees, but only for students who live close to the school. Families who live just a mile or two away pay to use the service because it is more convenient than driving students to school or walking. Families who live farther away have traditionally gotten free bus service.

But shrinking budgets and higher transportation costs have pushed some districts to make changes. They are starting to charge families who live outside of their school's paid pick-up zones.

## **Parents Are Not Happy**

Barbara Ortiz-Monson directs transportation for one of California's lowest-funded districts. "It costs \$3.5 million a year to run the transportation program," she said. "The state only gives us \$86,000."

Ortiz-Monson's district does not provide bus service to high school students who live within 3 miles of school. For middle school students, the boundary is 2 miles; for elementary students, it's 1 mile. Families who live farther away must pay for bus service.

Last year, the district took in nearly \$280,000 from bus passes, according to Ortiz-Monson. "It's a drop in the bucket when we're looking at \$3.5 million," she said.

While transportation fees might help make up for lost funding, some districts are having trouble making the new policies work. Parents are complaining about the charges. Many have stopped using the bus service. Some schools are having big problems with traffic jams because so many people have started driving kids to school instead.

## **Some Say Bus Fees Are Unfair**

Some officials say that bus fees are unfair to students from low-income backgrounds. They worry that the high costs might prevent some kids from being able to get to school. Families that cannot afford the bus fees might not have cars, either.

Districts do not always look at how much money a family makes when they are deciding how much to charge them.

According to Charlie Hood, student safety should be part of the discussion, too. Hood leads a national organization for student transportation directors. He believes school buses provide top-notch safety. Charging for transportation means some families will have to choose less safe ways of getting kids to school, Hood said.

## Safety Figures In

Safety is one reason some parents support the idea of paying for bus service.

Five years ago, one Colorado school district launched a program that charges fees, but also uses a GPS system to track students on the bus. The district's transportation director, Donna Grattino, said parents were supportive.

"We're a large district that covers over 900 square miles. Some stops are 26 miles from the school," Grattino said. She said the tracking system shows where students are at all times "and parents recognized the value of that."

As the economy continues to improve, Domenech hopes districts will stop charging bus fees. He says it is important for them to make free transportation available to all students.

"We're short-changing our children when we don't provide the necessary funding for their education," he said.

## Quiz Questions

1. What would be another good title for the article?
  - (A) "Budgets shrink and traffic grows"
  - (B) "Student safety is a top concern"
  - (C) "Low-income students struggle with getting to school"
  - (D) "Less money for schools equals more fees for families"

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2. Which paragraph in the section "Parents Are Not Happy" is MOST important to include in a summary of the article?

3. Why do some people view the new bus fees as unfair?

(A) because getting students to school safely is important

(B) because not everyone needs to ride buses to school

(C) because affording the fees can be difficult for some families

(D) because the state should provide enough funding for school buses

4. Which of the following people quoted in the article would be MOST likely to agree that charging bus fees can be a good idea?

(A) Dan Domenech

(B) Mike Martin

(C) Charlie Hood

(D) Donna Grattino

**3 Point Written Response**

Should school districts require families to pay to ride the school bus?