

An Agenda for Studying Rural School Busing

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Although the phenomenon of school transportation (“busing”) is familiar to every American, very little research into the phenomenon exists, aside from SEA studies of cost efficiency or those bearing on busing to achieve racial integration. Rural features of the issue of busing remain predictably obscure. The Policy Program of the Rural School and Community Trust and the Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) have joined with individuals known to have a current interest in the issue of rural school busing. AEL’s role was to facilitate development of a comprehensive research agenda to address the issue. The agreed-upon research domain—in contrast to the existing body of literature—was effects of school busing on rural children, families, and communities. The agenda, presented below, organizes an extensive set of researchable questions around nine categories and gives recommendations for immediate research action.

Introduction

The Policy Program of the Rural School and Community Trust and AEL, Inc. collaborated to develop a research agenda for school busing, a topic for which little research exists from a rural perspective (Zars, 1998). The two organizations sought the help of rural education researchers known to be working in the field.¹ These researchers were convened in Columbus, Ohio, on December 15, 1998. Via e-mail, this group worked over the next several weeks to draft the topics of the agenda. This research note gives the ultimate result of AEL’s portion of the collaboration: a list of topics and questions to inform research in this area.

Our research agenda focuses on questions regarding “who benefits?” and “who suffers?” under the prevailing arrangement. In other words, our prime interest concerns fairness and equity, especially for rural children, rural families, and rural communities. A different group arguably would fashion a different agenda.

“Busing” is typically understood as a generic education issue, with a decided focus on the technology of buying, maintaining, improving, and routing *buses*. In an earlier era, busing was seen as a tool for fostering racial integration, and the term—busing—still conveys those associations. Today, by contrast, the interests that families, communities, and students have in the arrangements and

effects of busing seldom receive any attention from policy makers or researchers.

Like Fox (1995), the Columbus-meeting participants believed that busing may constitute a costly intrusion into family and community life, especially when it involves long rides. Further, participants agreed that there is little information concerning the degree to which children suffer long bus rides needlessly, and, indeed, to what ill-effects. Participants also seemed to agree that sharply heightened concern is justified by continuing consolidations in rural districts, a trend that inevitably lengthens rides.

Neither AEL nor the Rural Trust Policy Program makes the claim that this agenda is value-free or neutral. On the other hand, all involved were academics or practitioner-scholars committed to legitimate scholarship, logical argument, and a fair representation of reality. Nevertheless, the clear focus of this agenda is on rural children, rural families, and rural communities. The agenda comprises nine broad topics, and, with the exception of the final topic, it is roughly organized from the more general to the more specific.

History of Rural School Busing

The history of school busing has hardly been told, at least not from the perspective of busing’s impact on rural

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communities. The history of rural communities, of course, is a major portion of the history of the transformations of United States culture in the 20th century. In a sense, this history is the background for understanding all other questions.

- A. How have social changes in American society been reflected in the experience of rural school busing (e.g., violence on buses, mixed ages of riders, attitudinal changes)?
- B. To what extent has consolidation lengthened rural school bus rides? (Where, by what means, and in concert with what other historical changes?)
- C. What are the major sociopolitical and economic forces at national, state, and local levels that have contributed, directly or indirectly, to the creation of current rural school busing practices?
- D. What significant reports, explanations, or passages about rural school busing exist within the rural literature (including fiction, scholarship in salient disciplines, and personal non-fiction accounts)?

Politics of Rural School Busing

This topic is concerned with the political processes that determine policies and practices regarding school busing.

- A. Who must ride long distances on buses, and why? (We defined "long" as a one-way ride of at least 30 minutes.)
 - Who makes these decisions? Who is excluded? With what effect?
 - According to what procedures are decisions made?
 - What role does consolidation play in forcing these decisions? What issues drive consolidation? What is the state's role?
 - What state and local policies exist on length of bus rides? How are they implemented or enforced? With what effect, and for whom?
 - Who benefits when some students are bused long distances?

- Are there any transportation circumstances that excuse children from compulsory attendance under the various state laws (e.g., extremely remote or secluded residence)? How are such children schooled or transported to schools or other educational sites?

- B. What political processes (formal and informal) surround decision making about rural school transportation?

- Must school districts provide transportation? What is the statutory and case law on this issue? How does it vary among states?
- What unusual rural school transportation arrangements exist? Why? With what effects, and on whom?
- To what extent have contiguous districts coordinated the delivery of transportation services to minimize bus time for rural students?
- What groups participate in rural school transportation decisions? What groups are excluded? With what effect, and for whom?
- To what extent do state rules and regulations on transportation accommodate the rural circumstance within states?
- What is the federal involvement in school transportation generally? Under what authority? With what effects for rural schools and communities?
- To what extent are all affected parties represented in rural school busing decisions?
- What contingencies create inefficiency in bus routes (e.g., the need to not cross district boundaries in completing bus routes, the need to gather even the remotest children in a district)?

Geographic Justice and the Spatial Distribution of Schools

This topic relates to the U.S. pattern of "geographically zoned" common schooling, under which all children

in a particular geographic area attend a particular school (or district). This long-standing pattern is perhaps changing somewhat, but it remains the dominant pattern. The placement of schools is seen as an issue of justice related to physical accessibility. This perception is actually a long-standing concern. Some of the earliest case law related to public education concerns conflicts over the placement of the school (generally a single building) within school districts, the issue being whose children had the most difficult walk.

- A. What role does the pattern of geographically-zoned schooling (and practices and ideologies related to it) play in fostering lengthy bus rides? Does an alternative to this pattern exist elsewhere in rural parts of the developed world? At other historical periods in the U.S.? In imagination?
- B. Does the geographic distribution of schools make sense in terms of the distribution of students?
 - How inequitable is this distribution?
 - How much more do some students travel than others?
 - How much variance is there in miles traveled? How is it best measured?
- C. Does the spatial distribution of schools unfairly impact lower-SES students as compared to higher-SES students?
- D. What long-term mechanism can be established to ensure adequate and accurate information about travel distances?
 - How could data from schools be channeled, as part of a required policy, so that researchers and the public could be kept informed of rural school busing as an issue of continuing concern?
 - How would such information be most effectively disseminated to political leaders, policy makers, and citizens (so as to facilitate changes in policy and practice)? What would a rural bus travel-time report card look like?

Relationship of Consolidation to Rural School Busing

This topic might be understood as very specific, rather than general. But since consolidation is a major historical process of schooling in the U.S., and since it continues to figure as a prominent state-level policy issue, we have placed it at this point in the list. A complex and unexplored relationship exists between consolidation and busing: Rural school busing doubtless enabled consolidation, and rural school consolidation has enabled rural school busing. The topic, as articulated here, relates to the preceding three topics: history, politics, and justice.

- A. To what extent is rural school busing an issue (e.g., as raised by patrons or as formally considered by administrators and school boards) when schools and districts consolidate, merge, or are closed?
 - Do certain groups oppose or favor consolidation of schools and districts based on proximity or other factors relevant to rural school transportation?
 - What issues do patrons raise? With whom and with what ideological base? With what effect, and under what circumstances?
 - What considerations do administrators or school boards engage formally? Informally? With whom, and with what ideological base? With what effect, and under what circumstances?
- B. Do the incentives used by SEAs to encourage consolidation include additional support for rural school transportation? To what extent? Where? How? With what effect, and on whom?
- C. To what extent are funds reallocated when rural schools or districts consolidate, merge, or close? To what purposes? With what relationship to rural school transportation?
- D. What are the implications for transportation and related issues (e.g., outcomes, social costs, politics, funding, alternatives, geographic justice, health and safety, social and cultural circumstances) for schools at different levels (elementary, middle level, high school) when rural schools or districts consolidate, merge, or close?

- E. When rural elementary schools (K-4, K-6, or K-8) consolidate or close, what attention is paid to ensuring short bus rides for students (e.g., less than 20 minutes, one-way)?

Social and Cultural Circumstances of Rural School Busing

This topic might be understood as a more closely-grained correlate of the preceding two topics. Although it contains three main questions, it nonetheless is concerned with two principal issues, one “ideological” (attitudes and beliefs implicating fundamental values, views, and commitments) and the other “phenomenological” (how the phenomenon of riding the bus is experienced by communities, families, and children). Concerns for the relationship of race and ethnicity (as well as SES) would be properly investigated under this topic and the next two topics.

- A. What ideologies of rural school busing do various parties hold?
- How do these ideologies influence the rural busing situation within districts, and within and among states?
 - To what extent, and in what ways, do these ideologies vary among patrons of a school, district, or state?
 - To what extent are citizens whose children are not bused aware of the social costs of busing on others?
- B. What is the experience of the rural school bus ride (particularly long rides) for bus drivers, teachers, students, parents, administrators, communities?
- Who rides the bus? Are some rural groups more likely to be bused long distances? Which? Under what circumstances? Why? With what effect?
 - What are the characteristics of the bus ride (e.g., road conditions, length of travel, length of wait time, bus comfort, number of riders, age of those bused)?
 - Does the SES of rural bus riders differ from those who do not ride the bus?
- C. What are the social costs of rural school busing for students and families?
- To what extent do parents of bused rural children provide transportation and under what circumstances?
 - What do students and families sacrifice to accommodate long rural bus rides? What coping mechanisms do they use to deal with long rural bus rides?
 - In what ways are the lives of children and families involved in long rural bus rides different from those not confronting long rides (e.g., extracurricular participation, family life, peer relationships, community participation)?
 - Are some groups (e.g., the poor, people of color) more likely to bear these costs? Where? Under what circumstances? With what effect?
 - To what extent, where, under what circumstances, and with what effects do rural schools and districts provide transportation home after regular academic hours (late buses)?

Outcomes or Correlates of Schooling Influenced by Rural School Busing

This topic quite specifically concerns the academically related effects of rural school busing on communities, families, parents, and students.

- A. All else equal, how do academic outcomes compare in places where bus rides are generally long to such outcomes in places where bus rides are much shorter?
- B. All else equal, how does length of bus ride (time or distance) relate to:
- student academic achievement
 - student course-taking (e.g., vocational, mathematics)
 - student grades
 - student extracurricular participation

- student aspirations (e.g., education, career, personal)
- student motivation
- student self-esteem
- student attendance, absenteeism, and truancy
- student high school completion (or school-leaving)
- student special education diagnoses (e.g., ADD, LD, SBD)
- student out-of-school study time
- student use of leisure time (e.g., play, recreation, reading, television, phone use)
- parent interaction with school (or disengagement from school)
- parent satisfaction with school, district, and administration
- family well-being (e.g., cohesion, stress)
- family cultural discontinuity with school
- family valuation (or ideology) of formal education (in general)
- family valuation (or ideology) of rural living
- community well-being (e.g., autonomy, integrity, identity, vitality)
- community cultural discontinuity with schooling
- community participation in curriculum and instruction
- community participation in district decision making

Influences of Rural School Busing on Children's Health and Safety

This topic is of the same sort as the preceding rubric, except that the focus is on physical (or mental) health and safety.

A. What policies exist to ensure the health and safety of rural students who are bused?

- Are rural school buses inspected carefully and well-maintained? How do we know? What policies ensure this result?
- What range of policies cover busing incidents, emergencies, or accidents (including violence, sexual harassment, and student illnesses)?
- Are rural school bus drivers adequately trained to deal effectively with emergencies (e.g., accidents, illness, breakdowns, violence)?
- What are the rules about seat belt provision and use? Are they adequate to protect rural school bus riders?
- Are rural school bus shelters adequate? What policies ensure this result?

B. All else equal, how does length of bus ride (time and/or distance) relate to:

- motion sickness
- fatigue-related syndromes
- eating breakfast
- securing adequate rest and sleep
- incidence of asthma or other respiratory ailments
- risk of serious injury or death
- securing sufficient exercise (e.g., play time)
- incidence of significant psychological complaints (e.g., boredom, depression, anxiety, ADD, phobias)

- C. To what extent do lengthy bus rides compound pre-existing student physical conditions (e.g., asthma, susceptibility to infections or colds) or psychological conditions (e.g., ADD, severe behavior disorders)?

Rural School Transportation Finance

Most studies of school transportation have focused on financial efficiency. The need for efficiency is apparent to all, of course. The present topic includes concerns for efficiency, but also points to the need to develop a broader view of transportation finance. It nonetheless is a more narrow concern than the previous topics.

- A. What information management systems exist (federal, state, local) to track transportation costs and expenditures? How, by whom, and to what effect is this information used?
- B. What management techniques maximize the efficiency of rural school transportation (e.g., contracting out, grants, parent-supplied transport)? With what effects, and on whom (e.g., students, families, communities, teachers, LEA administrators, SEA staff, legislators)?
- C. What is the cost (or expenditure) structure of rural school busing per se?
- What financial costs (or expenditures) does rural school busing entail? What are the components of these costs (or expenditures)?
 - How do states and localities measure costs (e.g., miles, road conditions, per student expenditures)? Would this make a difference? In what ways?
 - How do the states' funding provisions vary for regular student transportation? Why? With what effect, and for whom?
 - What revenue sources fund rural school busing? How does this vary among states? Why? With what effect, and for whom?
 - What unusual alternatives for funding have been tried, by whom, under what circumstances, and with what results?

- D. In comparison to instructional or current operating expenditures, what proportion of total expenditures does the transportation budget claim?

- What differences exist by state? Why? With what effect, and for whom?
- What differences exist by districts nationally and within states (e.g., rural vs. urban, rich vs. poor, minority vs. other communities)?
- Does the proportion claimed by transportation influence the proportion available for other purposes? Which? Why? With what effect for whom?
- How do the budgets of high-transportation-cost districts compare to low-transportation-cost districts (e.g., with respect to instructional expense and to the ratio of instructional to current expenditures)?

Alternatives to Current Circumstances of Rural School Busing

This topic circles back to more general concerns. These alternatives cannot be understood without reference to the perspectives that the Columbus-meeting participants attempted to build into the preceding topics: attention to educational effects and justice, and to the quality of community, family, and student life. This topic is quite specific because, lacking better information about rural school busing, the development of appropriate alternatives is premature. Nonetheless, this topic points up initial thinking about possible alternatives.

- A. What practices do parents and/or communities use to circumvent long bus rides for their children?
- B. What practices do rural schools and districts use to circumvent long bus rides for their students, improve the quality of time children must devote to lengthy bus rides, or mitigate possible adverse effects of such rides?
- C. To what degree are such practices as home schooling, alternative schools, charter schools, home-bound instruction, circuit teachers, and distance learning used as formal alternatives to long bus rides? By whom

and where? To what extent? Under what circumstances? With what effect, and on whom?

- D. To what extent is cross-district collaboration used to shorten bus rides?
- E. How long a ride is too long? Why? For whom? What policies can states adopt to minimize the length of rural bus rides and to proactively prevent rides that are too long?

Immediate Research Action

The following suggestions for research are not put forward as a coherent program of investigation, but rather as merely a nomination of pressing questions that, if the answers were known, could help concerned organizations and individuals exert an immediate influence on policy and practice. This "short list" includes brief warrants for the selection made.

What is the unique influence of length of bus ride on the academic performance of low-income rural children?

Rationale. State-level accountability systems are sensitive to the influences on students' achievement. The greatest improvements in the academic performance of a school or district (and the easiest to secure) are to be realized among low-income or at-risk students. If long bus rides are an impediment to the school performance of such children, policy makers and school administrators can change the relevant practice and policies to mitigate the ill effects.

To what extent do school busing patterns in consolidated rural high schools exclude students from participating in extracurricular activities?

Rationale. A long line of evidence suggests that extracurricular participation is greater in smaller high schools (e.g., Coladarci & Cobb, 1996). In larger high schools, fewer students participate as a structural matter (i.e., the ratio of roles to students is lower). If consolidated rural high schools do not provide late buses to accommodate the transportation needs of students in remote locales, this structural disadvantage of large size is magnified. As a related question, which students suffer the worst consequences?

What are the social costs of long bus rides for rural students, families, and communities?

Rationale. David Monk, a leading rural education researcher, has frequently observed that administrative decisions always have costs; some of these costs may be

monetary, but some costs may be borne by families and students (e.g. Haller & Monk, 1988). The reduced accessibility of the school to some families is such a cost, which may surface in the form of increased private transportation costs, lost sleep, lost family time, and so forth. Fox (1995) investigated such costs in one Quebec district, and obtained promising results. More work, and on a larger scale, is warranted.

Conclusion

Our research agenda is a first attempt to intuit the features of an unexamined issue. Raising the issue is difficult enough, but more difficult still is the work of promoting actual examination of the issue. Again, the difficulty concerns moving against the grain: The U.S. school transportation system *is* a stunning achievement. Tens of millions of children are moved in comparative safety each day. In a way, this transportation system has itself enabled the success of compulsory schooling. Not only have more children been enabled to attend school, but the school day and year have lengthened considerably since the advent of paved roads and the school systems' purchase (or use) of buses. But, if so, it has also enabled the failure of compulsory schooling and the further imposition of "official knowledge" through the machinery of schooling (cf. Apple, 2000).

In this weight of tradition, success, and failure lie powers and interests to which the effects of long rides among rural children must seem, or have seemed for some time, of minor concern. No one knows how long a bus ride is too long, or for whom and under what circumstances, or how many children and families now tolerate such (hypothetically damaging) conditions in their daily routines.

Rural bus rides are perhaps becoming symbols of other pressing dilemmas that encompass the entire experience of schooling as we move into the new millennium. These dilemmas are not simple ones, and most people may *feel* them more than they *understand* them. The dilemmas include the alienation of school and community (when their closeness is so widely believed to benefit learning), the misuse of schooling to sort and segregate students (a function that undermines democratic institutions), the diminished priority of nation-building (in favor of globalization) as a function of mass education, and the decline of the local communities that might amplify identity and generate the common purpose necessary to confront the human condition more artfully and with better faith (Berry, 1995; Kemmis, 1990; Orr, 1994; Theobald, 1997). The range and nature of such questions underscore our belief that the issue of school busing is hardly one that is confined to rural areas.

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