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More Busing, Longer Ride Time and Higher Costs In New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina

Immediately after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans eliminated neighborhood attendance zones. Mandatory school choice and the decentralized school system has had a substantial impact on busing costs, distance and travel time to schools, and transportation safety. The Recovery School District (RSD) faces many challenges in getting its students to and from schools.

- **New Orleans is a city of transportation impediments.** Of the 350 square mile area of New Orleans, 169 square miles are land. Industrial canals, lakes, marshlands and bayous extend from the city in all directions.¹ The Mississippi River separates the larger and more populated East Bank from the West Bank. Only one bridge crosses the Mississippi within the city's boundaries, making it difficult for students to get to schools that are outside of their neighborhood on the other side of the river.
- **Distance is important when parents choose schools.** Distance is almost as important as academic quality when choosing schools. One research study indicates that New Orleans parents equate one letter grade on the Louisiana A to F grading system for schools as equivalent to three-quarters of a mile in driving distance.²
- **Students have to travel longer distances to get to school.** Tulane University studied students' home locations for the 2004-05 pre-Katrina school year and 2011-12 in relation to the nearest school to home and the school actually attended by the student.³ The study analyzed only *linear* distance between home and schools, which is an approximation of relative change of the substantially longer actual distance traveled on roads and across bridges. Bus routes for individual students are obviously much longer than simple home to school and back distances.⁴
 - » **Distance to school attended is six times greater than the nearest school.** The average linear distance to the nearest grade-relevant school increased only by about one-tenth of a mile after Hurricane Katrina (.53 to .65 miles). In 2004, 72 percent of students attended schools within two miles of home but by 2011, only 40 percent of students did so. The linear distance from home of a student to the school attended almost doubled from 1.8 miles in 2004 to 3.4 miles in 2011. The actual distance over roads is much farther.

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- » **Most students do not attend the closest school.** The percentage of students attending a school that is not closest to home increased from 53 percent in 2004 to 86 percent in 2011, suggesting either that a more desirable school was farther from the homes of students or that many parents were unable to find a seat for their child in a nearby school.
- » **Distance has an inequitable impact on the poor.** Before Katrina, families in heavily minority neighborhoods lived nearer to a school than white students, but after Katrina the pattern reversed. The reversal occurred even though survey data show that low-income parents place relatively more importance on the school's proximity to their home and to the availability of transportation.⁵
- **Transportation costs have increased.** Recovery School District Superintendent Paul Vallas reported in 2008-09 that 92 percent of students in the state direct-run schools were being bused daily.⁶ Further, busing costs are not spread evenly among city schools, with some schools budgeting nothing and other schools allocating up to 15 percent of their budget for transportation.
 - » **Costs have nearly doubled.** The school year before Hurricane Katrina, transportation costs for New Orleans schools were \$18 million. The cost of busing in 2013-14 was \$30 million for far fewer students and schools.⁷
 - » **Costs vary within New Orleans.** RSD direct-run schools spent 9 percent of the budget on transportation while the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) schools—the high-scoring schools escaping state takeover—spent 3 to 4 percent of their budget on transportation. Many OPSB schools do not provide school-sponsored transportation.⁸ The RSD planned to spend about \$1,290 per student on transportation for five direct-run schools in 2013-14.⁹ In 2010-11, the RSD paid an average of about \$1,563 per student at the 24 schools it then operated directly.
 - » **Not every school provides bus transportation.** By not providing busing, schools have extra money for other purposes and it could promote inequality. Of the seven “A” schools (on the state’s A-F school grading system in 2012-14), just one bused its students with the rest providing only public transportation tokens.¹⁰
- **New Orleans has significant transportation safety issues.** Bus safety in New Orleans has been a serious concern as a result of school choice. Students travel farther, longer and catch buses earlier—often in the dark. Without a central transportation authority, multiple transportation providers are not sufficiently monitored with regard to bus routes and bus stops at some of the busiest roads and intersections.¹¹ In February 2014, a first-grader died after being hit by a car as he ran across a four-lane street to his bus stop.¹² A day later, a car struck and injured a third-grader after he exited a bus and began to cross a residential street.¹³

ENDNOTES

¹ Doug Harris, Matthew Larsen and Jill Zimmerman. *Going to Great Lengths: Parental Choice and New Orleans Public Schools Before and After Katrina*, New Orleans: Tulane University, 2013.

² Doug Harris and Matthew Larsen. "What Schools Do Families Want (and Why)?

Academic Quality, Extracurricular Activities, and Indirect Costs in New Orleans Post-Katrina School Reforms," New Orleans: Tulane University, 2015.

³ Harris et al. 2013.

⁴ For example, a student living in Algiers on the West Bank might have an hour commute to attend a school that, in linear distance, is only a mile or two away.

⁵ Cowen Institute. *Transforming Public Education in New Orleans: The Recovery School District 2003-2011*. New Orleans: Tulane University, 2011

⁶ Raynard Sanders. "Our Gated Public Schools," *New Orleans Tribune*, blog, [hp://theneworleanstribune.com/gaed.htm](http://theneworleanstribune.com/gaed.htm).

⁷ Della Hasselle and Marta Jewson. "Cost of Busing Students in New Orleans Rises as Parents Exercise School Choice," *The Lens*, Sept. 12, 2013.

⁸ Louisiana Department of Education (2010-11). "School-Level Per Pupil Expenditures (State, Local & Federal Funds), Enrollment Data, and Staffing Data." Per-pupil expenditure is based on total enrollment and not on ridership. Many OPSB schools do not provide school-sponsored transportation to students.

⁹ Della Hasselle. "For Some Students at New Orleans' Best Schools, Just Getting There Is a Challenge," *The Lens*, Nov. 15, 2013.

¹⁰ Hasselle and Jewson, 2013.

¹¹ Jessica Williams and Della Hasselle. "Children Wait for School Buses Along Some of New Orleans' Busiest Thoroughfares," *The Lens*, Feb. 12, 2014.

¹² Ken Daley. "Child Killed in Gentilly Hit-and-Run Identified as Akili Academy First Grader," *Times-Picayune*, Feb. 3, 2014.

¹³ Jessica Williams. "Third-Grader Struck by Passing Car After Getting Off School Bus," *The Lens*, Feb. 13, 2014.