



Background Report on Fare Free Bus Passes for Students K-12 in the City of Gainesville

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July 2020

In 2018 GNV4ALL recommended that Gainesville, Florida's Regional Transit System (RTS) implement a K-12 Fare Free transportation program. Similar programs have been implemented across the US and are seen as an effective tool that helps improve quality of life and provide a pathway out of poverty for many students and families in the US.

Background

There are a variety of free public transit programs for students throughout Florida and the nation that provide young people with access to new opportunities through increased mobility in their local communities. If the City of Gainesville were to take on a similar program, it would not be alone in this effort and has best practices and complimentary models to follow. Many fare free public transit student programs rely on partnerships with county or city school districts which purchase at-price or discounted fare passes for students which are distributed through the schools. Other programs are paid for by the city or the public transit service and use student IDs to get on the bus. Due to the fact that RTS is a department within the city, the city or a third party would be responsible for funding the program if there is no involvement of the School Board.

In northeast Gainesville's Gainesville Empowerment Zone, a survey in the 32609 zip code demonstrated that, of 200 respondents, 20% reported transportation to be one of the two biggest challenges. Further, in Alachua County, black households are most likely to own 0 or one automobile (Knowles and Jarrett, 2017), making them most likely to be transportation disadvantaged. This lack of transportation can make it hard for students of these families to attend school if they miss the bus, participate in recreational activities, go to medical appointments, visit the local library, engage in religious activities, etc. Chronic absenteeism in school is one of the most common driving factors behind the various fare free programs for students around the country (Sacramento Regional Transit; DC Department of Transportation; Fairfax County Metro; Green Bay Metro) and is defined in Alachua County as missing 21 days of school per year. If a student is transportation disadvantaged and misses the morning school bus, they are likely to miss school that day (Resnick, W. personal communication, June 9, 2020). In a study on absenteeism among Florida secondary students, 54.8% of chronically absent students in 2015-2016 school year cited insecure transportation as a cause of their absences (Bundage, Castillo, and Batsche, 2017). Alachua County sees a 10-14.9% rate of chronic absenteeism in all grades as of the 2015-2016 school year (Florida Department of Education). Absenteeism in Alachua County public schools is especially problematic in schools of lower socioeconomic status with transportation cited an influential cause (Hopson, 2020). Further, 46% of students in Alachua County are considered of low socioeconomic background (Hopson, 2020). In a study of the effects of free public transit for students on attendance, it was found that public transit accessibility increased attendance by 18% (Das and Fan, 2015). With more accessible and reliable transportation, students could still get to school even if the bus is missed, reducing absenteeism and increasing their ability to participate in afterschool programs. The need for public transit aid in Gainesville is clear.

The K-12 fare free program would not replace yellow school buses, but rather supplement transportation for schools and provide additional transportation on the weekends. Not only could this decrease absence in school, but it also opens opportunities for students to fill prescriptions, grocery shop, go to parks and participate fully in their community with fewer transportation barriers. A comparable example is Green Bay, WI (page 4). Green Bay has a population of approximately 104,000 with their fare free program serving 21,000 students at 20,000 rides per month. Due to comparable population size, we can expect a similar number of monthly riders in Gainesville.

There are a variety of transportation assistance programs, which range from providing free rides to youth 18 and under during operational hours to high school students only at restricted hours. Information was gathered by researching 11 fare free programs in 8 states and speaking with local government officials and program directors on their restrictions, implementation cost, agency, and more. This information is listed below to further inform Gainesville For All's recommendation to the City/RTS.

Within Florida

- a. Leon County
 - a. Population: 275,487
 - b. Student Population Served: 13,000 students in school system

The most well-known model of a fare free service for public school students K-12 in Florida is that of StarMetro, Leon County's public transit service. This four-year-old program allows public school students in all of Leon County K-12 to use their valid student ID as their bus pass or they must request one from StarMetro bus service (Tallahassee Democrat, 2016). Rides are free within the fixed route area and the cost was stated as minimal to none for the same reason as Fairfax County – that the buses were already running empty (Merzer Fleming, A., personal communication, June 18, 2020). With the implementation of this program, StarMetro saw ridership leap from 100,000 students riding their buses in 2015 to 350,000 students riding in 2018 (Children's Trust Alachua County, 2019). Because this original program lacked some controls, there have been fights and altercations on the buses. Due to this, a new program is being launched which will require special student fare cards instead of showing an ID, warning strikes that will be communicated from the bus operator to the school resources officer (SRO) and the parents, it will be opt-in and require permission from parent or guardian with rules acknowledged, and K-5 will need to be accompanied by an older person (Merzer Fleming, A., personal communication, June 18, 2020).

b. Polk County

a. Population: 602,095

b. Student Population Served: Approximately 3,333

Polk County has had a program for high school students since 2014. Polk County Students show student ID as their boarding pass. Buses run 6 days a week and students can make use of those buses at all times of operation. The program costs \$56,000 per year and is paid by the Polk County School Board. October 2019 to March 2020 there have been 20,000 student rides on the buses according to Erin Killebrew, Director of External Affairs, at Citrus Connection. The public bus is well used by high school students and has had no behavioral issues.

Outside Florida

a. Little Rock, AR

a. Population: 197,312

b. Student Population Served: 2,700

The Little Rock transit service serves the Rock Region defined as Little Rock and its surrounding areas. The fare free program is only for high school students in Little Rock School District. Students receive Student ID cards with bus pass stickers every semester from their school administrator. This program costs the school district \$18,560 per year and has been ongoing since 2017, serving approximately 2,700 students per year. Rock Region Metro provides the schools with bus pass stickers each semester to update eligibility on the bus. There have been no behavioral issues at all (Avery, J., personal communication, June 15, 2020).

b. Buffalo, NY

a. Population: 255,284

b. Student Population Served: 10,400 students

The city of Buffalo has a contract with Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority to transport high school students on fixed routes to and from their schools. Buffalo School District pays the full price for monthly passes for all their students, amounting to \$8 million per year. Students are issued passes by the school which identifies assigned routes home. These passes allow students to use the buses and the NFTA Light Rail system, with 10,400 high school students riding the transit and 33 morning and 78 afternoon “special” trips specifically to account for students (Jones, R., personal communication, June 1, 2020). Because of the high volume of students, Buffalo sometimes dispatches its police department to certain highly congregated stations to account for behavioral issues, which

usually entail loud voices but no crime. The passes are good only for school times, so they do not apply on the weekends or on time off.

c. Green Bay, WI

a. Population: 104,578

b. Student Population Served: 21,000 students

Green Bay Metro and the Green Bay Area Public School District entered into an agreement to provide all public school students K-12 with free public transit beginning in July 2017. Students have access to free transit during all operating hours. Students 8 and over can ride alone, where students 7 and under must be accompanied by an older sibling or adult. If an adult is with the student, they must pay the typical fare. Elementary students do not need to show their student ID, but middle and high school students must show their ID to enter the bus for free. If on a field trip or school related activity with students, supervisors or school faculty can also ride free with a valid school ID. The program costs the Green Bay Area Public School District \$160,000 per year. The program is well used with student ridership being at or above 20,000 per month for nearly every month of school according to most recent data through February 2020 (Kiewiz, P., personal communication, June 15, 2020). Green Bay Metro has had no history of behavioral issues on their system and did not describe any mechanism for public transit etiquette enforcement.

d. Los Angeles County, CA

a. Population: 10,039,107

b. Student Population Served: Approximately 36,000 but distorted by COVID-19

In Los Angeles County, California, K-12 students can ride public transit for free through the 'DASH to class' program. The school must be located in LA County. Students can apply online, in person, or by mail by submitting some proof of enrollment in school and will receive a student fare card. They must use the student fare card to tap into the bus each time they ride. The program costs LA Department of Transportation \$128,000 paid for by a state funded grant. Beginning in August 2019, there have been 257,000 student rides through March. Students' free rides are not restricted to certain hours and are available at all LADOT operating hours (Leung, C. personal communication, June 3, 2020). This program was brought about primarily by a need to decrease chronic absenteeism in schools and initially bought passes for students K-College in 2013 (Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, 2013). With the same goal in mind, the current program provides K-12 students with special buses called "DASH" using the above process.

e. Washington, DC

- a. Population: 720, 687
- b. Student Population Served: 50,000

Washington, DC implemented a “Kids Ride Free” program in October 2018 to combat chronic absenteeism in their students. All schools - public, private, charter, and parochial – distribute the WMATA passes. The program costs \$20 million and is paid for by DC Department of Transportation (WMATA).

- f. Fairfax County, VA
 - a. Population: 1,147,532
 - b. Student Population Served: 135,200 annual trips

Fairfax County provides free fares to middle and high school students through their school for rides between 5am and 10pm 7 days a week. The pass does not give free transfers to the Metrobus or Metrorail. The program began in 2013. Kala Quintana, director of the program, said that there was minimal to no ‘cost’ of implementation because many of their buses were already running but empty (personal communication, June 15, 2020). Quintana reports an outstanding review of the program, citing fewer car crashes, less congestion, no behavioral issues in the 7 years of the program, and a total “win-win-win-win.” Quintana cited that part of the behavior benefits may be because public transit etiquette is listed on the back of their transit cards and the students have been told by their schools that if an issue were to arise, police could come though this has never happened.

- g. Austin, TX
 - a. Population: 2,227,083
 - b. Population Served: Just under 200,000

This fare free program is not just directed at students under 18. The program is run and paid for by the transit service, Capital Metro which operates independently from the city, and costs between \$250,000 and \$300,000 per year to transport approximately 200,000 children under 18. Austin’s program was implemented in phases over a six-month period beginning in June 2018. After positive feedback from the community, Capital Metro went completely free for under 18 kids permanently in December 2018. Kids get on the bus by showing their valid student ID to ride.

- h. Sacramento County, CA
 - a. Population: 1,418,788

b. Student Population Served: 220,000

In Sacramento County, CA, there are free bus, microtransit, and light rail rides for all students K-12 in the county. This program allows for students to use all forms of public transit in Sacramento County for free, as long as they have a student sticker renewed each year, given by the schools, libraries, or can be obtained from the SacRT customer service center. It is a bus supplement to yellow buses, necessitated by chronic absenteeism and an opportunity for students to get to and from part time jobs. This program also employs a partnership between the City of Sacramento, Sacramento Regional Transit and local school districts, costing \$1.5 million per year. The City of Sacramento funds \$1 million of the program through an initiative called Measure U which is focused on youth benefits and programming, the school districts within SacRT routes paid \$200,000 and SacRT directly paid \$300,000 (Devra Selenis, personal communication., July 8, 2020). There is no ridership data as this program only began in October 2019, though SacRT representative Devra Selenis stated the program was “extremely successful” due in large part to collaboration with the schools through card distribution (personal communication., July 8, 2020).

Results

Results vary from program to program in implementation, restriction, size, and cost. While a fare free program in Buffalo, New York serves approximately 10,400 students directly replacing the bus system with assigned routes per student and costs the School District \$8 million per year, a fare free program for high school students in Polk County has given more than 20,000 student rides in 6 months and costs the School District \$56,000 per year. The key difference being that Polk County uses free public transit as a supplement to the yellow bus transportation, not a replacement.

More accessible public transportation can help enrich a community by providing students transportation to recreational spaces, schools, jobs, medical facilities, and more. The most common reason for municipalities to implement a program like this, according to above research and personal interviews, is to combat chronic absenteeism in schools, which, as aforementioned, is a significant problem in Alachua County. The impacts of a fare free program on a community are far-reaching, allowing students to participate in extracurriculars and part-time employment. Even if the students use a free bus ride to a mall or to a part time job, they contribute to the local economy through cash circulation and taxes (Quintana, K., personal communication, June 15, 2020). Kala Quintana, the director of Fairfax County’s free public transit program for 5 years, described the results of their 7 year-long effort as “outstanding” and a “win-win-win on all sides.” Additionally, Fairfax County, VA recorded fewer car crashes in the first two years of this program, potentially correlated to less congestion on the roads (Quintana, K., personal communication, June 15, 2020).

More accessible transportation can strengthen ties to the community by increasing participation in recreation and making full use of the resources provided by the city (Austin, A. 2017). Another common goal of many of the above public transit programs including Fairfax County, VA; Sacramento, CA, and Austin, TX is to increase long term ridership loyalty so that students who benefit now will become paying riders in the future (Sacramento Regional Transit; Quintana, K., personal communication, June 15, 2020; Renshaw, S., personal communication, June 22, 2020). Greater public transit use increases business prospects by making it easier to get to businesses near frequently used bus lines, promotes economic activity by providing more opportunity to work without the worry of transportation, serves as “a source of community bonding and pride that also has helped local communities earn positive recognition” as more livable cities, and improves fuel efficiency by reducing idling time taken while collecting fares (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2012). Furthermore, it is environmentally friendly to increase bus ridership and decrease personal car use (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2012). Providing free public transit to K-12 students could be a pathway out of isolation and into the community of grocery stores, medical appointments, the laundromat, and more.

Fare free programs for University students are common throughout the country for the sake of convenience, environmental sustainability, and a sense of a more livable community in a college town or on a University campus not reliant on cars. According to Associate Director of Transportation Services and Director of Student Life respectively, it is for these reasons that the University of Florida and Santa Fe College both purchase bus passes for their students using tuition funds (Fuller, R. and Reeves, T., personal communication, June 10, 2020).

Of all the programs above, only Buffalo, NY has reported trouble with behavior typically at the more congregated rail stations and bus stops. This behavior often involves loud conversations and excitement but no crime (R. Jones, personal communication, June 1, 2020). Although this potential is real, it may be less likely in Gainesville because Buffalo public transit replaces yellow school buses completely and does not serve as supplemental transportation meaning a much greater population of students on the Buffalo public transit system than would exist in Gainesville. In some completely fare-free large municipalities there are more “problem riders” who may cause minor conflict (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2012). Because this plan would only be for students and not for all Gainesville residents, the likelihood of conflict may be lower than has been seen in programs where fare is made free for everyone. Furthermore, it has been shown that increased school attendance decreases crime because of time spent in school instead of free time and because it gives people greater incentive when analyzing cost and benefits of committing a crime (Bell, Costa, and Machin, 2018). A program like this could have a long-term effect on Gainesville’s community by increasing school attendance, decreasing dropout rates and crime (Dillon, 2009). “Frequent school absenteeism has immediate and long-term

negative effects on academic performance, social functioning, high school and college graduation rates, adult income, health, and life expectancy,” (Allen, Diamond-Myrsten, and Rollins, 2018). As transportation is frequently cited as a factor in chronic absenteeism, reducing absences in school can have extensive positive effects on a community.

While there are always advantages and disadvantages, the overwhelming consensus is that fare-free programs for smaller communities are successful in increasing bus ridership, overall community wellbeing (Perone, 2002), long term public transit loyalty, reducing school absenteeism, increasing economic opportunity for students to get part time jobs and reducing crime and school dropout rates.

Cost

The estimated cost of a K-12 fare free program in Gainesville, FL run by the Regional Transit System (RTS) would be \$130,000 for one year for 29,000 students to ride all operating hours, according to RTS. Funding for this program could come from a variety of stakeholders, as it will benefit a large variety of groups in Gainesville including the City of Gainesville, the Alachua County School Board, the business community, and the law enforcement community with less fare evasion crime or crime resulting from school absence. Funding could be a collaborative effort between organizations like Alachua County Children’s Trust, the City of Gainesville, and/or Alachua County School Board. As previously mentioned, Sacramento County’s fare free program for students is funded by a State grant and a partnership with local schools (Sacramento Regional Transit). Other programs like Austin, TX; Fairfax County, VA; and Leon County, FL have stated that, due to the buses already running, there is such minimal cost to add students that it has not even been reported (Renshaw, S., personal communication, June 15, 2020; Quintana, K., personal communication, June 15, 2020; Merzer Fleming, A., personal communication, June 18, 2020).

Recommendation

Gainesville For All focuses on solving systemic problems which contribute to socioeconomic segregation. The fare free bus program came about due to pockets of poverty around Gainesville and isolated areas which created transportation inequity. Gainesville For All recommends that a K-12 Fare Free program be implemented by the Gainesville Regional Transit System throughout the Alachua County Area to address this problem, increase school attendance and graduation, decrease crime, and create a healthier community.

Operating Considerations

After surveying the literature and interviewing public transit authorities, we have provided options that may be pursued to optimize feasibility of a K-12 fare free public transit program below:

Target Audience:

1) High school students

May provide more control for a pilot program.

2) Middle and high school students

3) K-12 with/without adult or older sibling supervision

Partnership/Funding:

1) Only within city/RTS

2) Partner RTS with Alachua County School Board and schools for payment and/or distribution

3) Children's Trust of Alachua County Grant

Regulation Options:

1) Opt- in or given to all students

Opt-in can provide RTS and the schools with more control and accountability over students as well provide data on the program for evaluation.

2) Permission slip with/without signature of parent or guardian

This may serve to increase accountability but it may be more realistic not to require a parent/guardian signature in the case that the student may not have a present parent/guardian and could miss a signature deadline and then be excluded from a program intended to help.

3) Acknowledgement of rules by students on paper

It should be known to the students that the same rules and consequences apply on public RTS buses as they do on school buses.

4) Consequences delivered by police/SROs/school administrators

Tool of accountability to prevent any behavioral issues on the buses.

5) Emergency Contact form

6) Passes distributed through school administration

7) Passes distributed each year or each semester

The above options for implementation of a fare free program may be helpful for the decision maker to choose, based on others' experiences, exactly how they want to pursue a fare free bus pass program. It has been highly recommended by other program directors that the schools and bus system have a partnership beyond funding to provide students their passes through schools and extend school bus rules to public transit to ensure good behavior. All programs above have had overwhelmingly positive experiences with a fare free program for students, emphasizing that it is best to begin with more control (Merzer Fleming, A., personal communication, June 18, 2020).

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