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Ohio's urban districts cut services to provide busing to privately run charter schools

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Ohio's public school buses are traveling farther each year to pick up fewer kids, and it's costing taxpayers more money.

It's an unintended consequence of school choice. State officials have forced traditional public schools to crisscross their cities to pick up and deliver children to privately run charter schools, often while cutting transportation to their own kids.

The cost for the door-to-door service is significant: About 44 percent more per child, according to an analysis of statewide data.

A child attending a traditional public school and transported on a district bus cost on average \$4.30 per day in 2012. The average cost for a charter-school student: \$6.18, or \$1.88 more per day.

Since then, 22,000 more children have enrolled in charter schools, the state has stopped helping school districts buy new buses and other state transportation assistance has failed to keep pace with costs.

In effect, the cost for transporting kids to the privately run schools has come out of the pockets of local taxpayers.

Charter school advocates know it's a big expense for school districts, but there is little evidence that they have offered much support in the legislature.

"Transportation is probably the second or third largest issue for all public schools," said Ron Adler, president of the Ohio Coalition for Quality Education, a school choice and charter advocate. "It's a problem not only for charters but it's a problem for districts. In our view, whatever it is today, it's going to be worse next year because of the cost of fuel, because of the state funding."

"It's a financial juggling act for everybody," said Adler, who added that his organization has never calculated how many charter students get a ride to school or how many public school students must walk.

Charter schools can receive state subsidies to provide their own transportation. But the majority, 391 of 406 charter schools, prefer to push that obligation onto local school districts.

And school districts can't keep up with the demand for equipment and logistics software, so they're turning to private bus contractors. Districts don't have to buy buses, but they pay more per mile.

A private contractor on average charged districts \$5.45 per child to go to a traditional school and \$12 to a charter school. The difference is the distance: Charter-school kids on average must travel more than two miles, or twice as far.

When a school determines that a student's travel requirements are excessive, it can pay a stipend to parents. Those have tripled for charter-school parents since 2005, from 1,732 to 5,365 in 2012, but fallen by a third for children attending traditional schools, from 1,243 to 814.

Stipends are about \$233 each. Charter school advantage

In Akron, students who live within two miles of a school must walk. Even if a child enrolls across town in an Akron school, such as the Miller South School for the Visual and Performing Arts or the downtown science and technology middle school, parents must arrange transportation.

However, enrollment in a charter school (many of which advertise free transportation) usually guarantees a ride at the expense of Akron schools — a district that is attempting to economize by closing or merging school buildings.

Akron has closed 19 schools in the past decade as 21 charter schools have been added.

In Akron this year, for example, there was a direct relationship between the addition of busing for charter school students and the cancellation of busing for its own public school students.

Affected were 198 Akron freshmen who received Metro bus passes through a 37-year-old desegregation program. Their passes are being phased out, and the \$400,000 savings has been diverted to Petermann, a private bus company that is adding routes to accommodate nine new charter schools in Akron.

To bus more than 600 charter students last year, Akron paid Petermann nearly \$900 more per pupil than it cost the district to bus its own.

It's not that Petermann is less efficient. The Cincinnati-based company spends 12 cents less to transport a student one mile, but charter school children travel farther. The additional distance cost Akron \$551,018 in 2012.

Statewide ride

In contrast to shorter rides to and from traditional public schools, Ohio's bus fleet — district and privately owned — traveled 15,627 miles farther each day in 2012 because of longer routes for charter students. That equates to an added expense of \$84,817 daily (about the price of a new bus) and \$15,267,089 yearly (about what Akron, Canton and Youngstown spent together).

Because almost all brick-and-mortar charter schools are in urban districts, those districts are paying most of the price.

In the past, the state provided two types of assistance: One to replace aging buses, and the other to defray the costs of operating those buses.

The state, which at one time appropriated between \$9 million and \$33 million annually for bus purchases, zeroed-out that account in 2010.

From 2005 to 2012, state reports show total transportation costs jumped from \$620.6 million to \$730.6 million, about an 18 percent increase; much of the increase can be attributed to increased fuel costs.

About \$300 million of the total cost is paid by local schools, and the state has increased its support only 8 percent during that period.

Akron illustrates the mounting costs.

The district transported 770 charter school students last year; 167 on its own buses and the rest by hiring Petermann for \$1.5 million. The difference: Akron spent on average \$1,251 annually per child to bus its own and gave Petermann \$2,149 to bus a charter student.

That's an improvement from 2009 when Akron handed over all charter-school students and paid Petermann \$2.3 million because charter schools insisted their children be transported at a specific time. The company billed more than \$3,000 per student that year. The year before, Akron paid nearly double.

"They insisted on having time frames in which we could not meet," said Debra Foulk, business manager for Akron schools. "They all wanted to go with the same time my kids had to get there. So we moved them all over to Petermann."

And meanwhile, Akron must pay Petermann when it bills for higher fuel costs, but Akron can't bill the state for the same. The added expense drains general revenue funds that must be replaced by local taxpayers. ■