



Auburn School District, Auburn, Washington

A Proactive Approach to School Transportation Costs

State Profile:

State Busing Statistics:

There are 10,600 school bus drivers driving 9,300 school buses in Washington State. Each day almost 500,000 students ride school buses a total of about 500,000 miles. The average per-pupil cost for busing in Washington State is approximately \$630.

State School Transportation Funding:

The state provides \$233,892,887 in funding for school transportation, representing 65.6% of the total cost on average across the state. The state only provides funding for students living more than a mile from school, even if students living closer to a school are bused due to traffic hazards that prevent the student from walking and bicycling.

The formula for how Washington State reimburses transportation costs is based on a “unit cost” allocation. The state legislature sets a weighted student allocation rate each year, and each school district then receives assistance based on the rate multiplied by the student count, number of trips per day, and a distance factor. The State Legislature is currently considering changes to the funding formula that would build in incentives for efficient transportation and provide more predictable levels of state pupil transportation funding.

School District Profile:

Number of Schools: 22 schools, serving the towns of Auburn, Algona and areas in unincorporated Pierce and King Counties. The school district covers approximately 60 square miles.

Total School Enrollment: 14,559 students

Total Students Bused: 7,485 (51.4% of all students)

Local School Transportation Costs:

The school district spends \$5,871,335 on school transportation, which represents 4.82% of total school district expenditures of \$121,735,088. Approximately \$4 million of that expense is wages and benefits for transportation personnel, including mechanics, drivers, and supervisors.

The total school transportation cost per student is \$784. Washington State reimburses local school districts for transportation of students that live outside of 1 mile of school. For Auburn, this state reimbursement represents \$2.7 million, which is approximately 46% of their school transportation budget.

Auburn School District runs 52 school bus routes for students living less than a mile from school due to hazardous conditions for walking and bicycling. These hazard bus routes cost approximately \$275,000 annually, which is entirely at the school district's expense.

In addition, Auburn School District provides specialized busing to bring 50 children from around the district to a gifted program located at one elementary school. This costs approximately \$45,000 per year, also entirely at the school district's expense.

Cost Savings from Safe Routes to School:

Back in 1995, the Auburn School District began discussions about increasing walking and bicycling to school to curb transportation costs and address rising rates of childhood inactivity. The school district formed a citizens committee to develop an initial district-wide plan for safe pedestrian routes and to develop safe walking route maps for every school.

Since then, the effort has grown and become formalized. Each of the 22 schools has a Safe Walking Committee made up of parents, community members, and school personnel. These committees review the situation around the school, revise the walking maps, and make recommendations on needed safety improvements. These committees also spearhead walking and bicycling programs at the school, including incentive programs to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through bicycling and walking to school. Each school's committee recommendations feed into a city-wide District Safety Committee, made up of elected officials, law enforcement, public works officials, and representatives from each school. The committee reviews each school's recommendations to prioritize solutions.

The city of Auburn is a true partner in this effort. It uses some of its municipal funds to make some improvements around schools, such as signage, traffic calming, sidewalks, and paths. The city also writes grant applications for programs like Safe Routes to School to secure additional funding to make larger-scale upgrades and improvements. In addition, in support of these efforts, the City of Auburn now requires all developers to install sidewalks.

The city's efforts have paid off. Thus far, the school district and city have received nearly \$500,000 from federal and state Safe Routes to School grants from the Washington State Department of Transportation to build sidewalks, bike lanes, shared-use paths, and crosswalks and to hire a bicycle safety officer to monitor children on their way to and from school. Overall, the improvements made now mean that twenty percent of students (2,800 children) live within safe walking areas and no longer need to be bused to school. These reductions in "hazard" bus service are saving the transportation department a total of \$240,000 each year in personnel and fuel costs.

The school district is currently waiting to hear if they will receive additional Safe Routes to School funding to address a hazardous walking area within a mile of an elementary school. If the grant is received, fifty children who are currently being bused less than ten blocks will be able to walk and bicycle to school—which will allow the school district to eliminate an additional two bus routes and save approximately \$15,000 annually in busing costs.

Lessons from the Auburn, Washington experience show that parent involvement and buy-in is critical. When parents and community members have input into ensuring the safety of children walking and bicycling, they are more likely to be supportive of cutbacks in bus service. In addition, the Auburn experience shows the value in having strong partners with the city public works and law enforcement personnel. Auburn's proactive approach is bringing health benefits to children walking and bicycling to school while saving the city and school district on transportation costs.