

November 2022

Worcester Education Equity Roundtable Position Paper: WPS Student Transportation & Worcester Education Ecosystem

Creating an education ecosystem in Worcester that removes obstacles to learning and maximizes the achievement of all students is the collective responsibility of community-based organizations, the Worcester Public Schools (WPS), higher education partners, and local cultural institutions. This requires coordinated use of the resources in the community to meet the learning, enrichment, and recreational needs of children and youth and childcare needs of families and ensure equitable access to the out-of-school services offered by various providers. This paper focuses on a key resource, student transportation, and describes current and past practices involving after school student transportation offered by WPS and the impact of those practices. It closes by listing policy positions and recommendations of the Worcester Education Equity Roundtable (WEER) on this issue.

Practices Prior to the COVID Pandemic

For more than a decade prior to the closing of schools during the COVID pandemic, WPS provided bus service for its students to attend many after school and out-of-school (ASOST) service providers in Worcester. Under this practice, students were transported to bus stops at or near provider sites.

Based on conversations with various ASOST service providers, there were no consistent pathways or procedures for arranging WPS after school transportation services. Some providers worked through the principals of the schools they served. Others worked through the WPS transportation department. Still others worked directly with the WPS Superintendent. The result was a variety of different arrangements. Some students were dropped off at the existing bus stops nearest to the provider. Other providers were able to have new bus stops on existing bus routes established at their sites. Still others were able to arrange for a new bus route specifically for their program.

It appears that the availability of afterschool bus service to provider sites was not communicated on the WPS website or otherwise communicated generally to ASOST providers or families. As a result, providers without regular connections to WPS were unaware of this service. Similarly, some families were able to work with their provider to arrange for transportation but others were not able to access after school services for their children because they were unaware of this service.

The websites of 10 other urban districts in Massachusetts (Boston, Brockton, Cambridge, Framingham, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, New Bedford, Newton, and Springfield) were reviewed to determine what they communicated publicly about their policies for transporting students to after school program sites. Seven of the districts had written policies on this issue on their website or in online guides provided to parents and caregivers. Of these districts, six provided transportation to after school programs in at least some cases.

Changes in Practices During the 2021-22 School Year

Although there were inconsistencies in the implementation of the WPS afterschool student transportation practices, the situation became much worse for Worcester students, families, and ASOST service providers shortly before the beginning of the 2021-22 school year. On August 29, 2021, Superintendent Binienda issued an announcement: *“Due to the shortage of bus drivers, WPS will not be dropping off students at after school daycare programs. Students will be picked up and returned to the same locations.”* This decision was made with no public input and no discussion with the ASOST service providers who had previously relied on the transportation service to provide Worcester students access to their programs. The announcement also came immediately before the beginning of the new school year and created significant disruptions for both families and providers.

Several ASOST service providers reached out to WPS principals or contacts in district offices in hopes of finding some ways to arrange student transportation after this new policy was announced. Even though some buses had space available for additional students and took bus routes that drove by the sites of some ASOST service providers, they were told that the district was requiring students to be dropped off at the same bus stop after school where they were picked up before school. The administrators being contacted by the service providers reported that they had no discretion to make alternative arrangements.

Given the continuing problems experienced by students, families, and ASOST service providers due to this change, WEER sought to discuss this issue with WPS leaders and sent a letter on March 17, 2022 to Superintendent Binienda requesting a meeting on this issue as soon as possible. The letter was signed by 26 Worcester organizations.

The requested meeting was held on April 5, 2022 and involved the Superintendent and several other district leaders, including the director of transportation. The district leaders agreed to work with individual providers to revise its policy and drop students at or near the provider sites if space was available on the bus and no changes were required in the existing bus routes. They also agreed to have further meetings to plan for the next school year.

None of the ASOST service providers interviewed for this paper reported any changes in the student transportation policy after the meeting. Several again reached out to principals or district contacts and were told that no policy changes had been communicated. Efforts to contact the WPS transportation office were also unsuccessful. No further meetings were scheduled by the district before the end of the school year to discuss plans for the next year.

Impact of Students, Families, and Providers

The change in student transportation practices had a significant negative impact on Worcester students, families, and ASOST service providers. In general, the change resulted in substantially reduced and more inequitable access, a reduction in programming, an increase in safety concerns, and disruptions in the lives of students, parents, and caregivers.

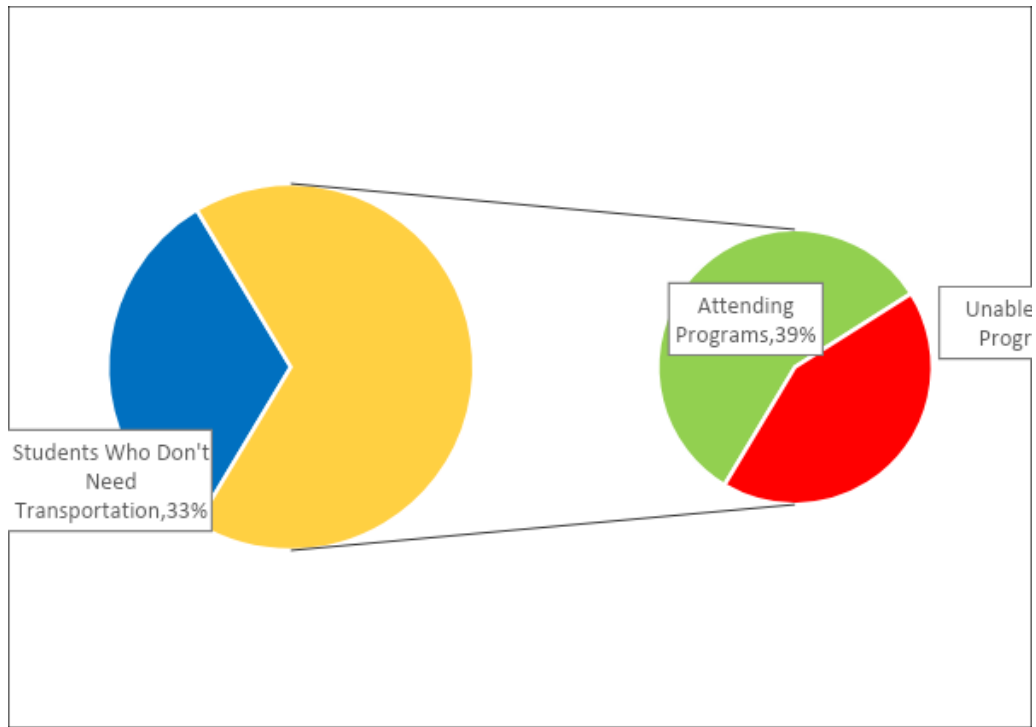
Fewer Students Served & More Inconsistent Participation. ASOST service providers reported that many students who had previously attended or registered for their programs were unable to attend due to the change in student transportation. A much larger proportion of their children and youth were affected by the change, even if they were able to continue to attend. The magnitude of the impact was substantial for some providers:

- African Community Education (ACE) reported that 90% of its students were affected by the change and that about one-third were unable to continue in the program.
- Boys & Girls Club Worcester (BGCW) estimated that half of their students who previously received WPS transportation (approximately 125-150) were affected.
- YMCA reported that 70 students from 11 different schools no longer had access to their programs due to the change. They also reported a waitlist for participation due to transportation.
- Girls Inc. reported that about 30 students registered for the program but could not attend due to a lack of transportation. Many had been active participants in prior years.

The impact was equally severe for students and families. According to one Worcester parent, “WPS insists on sending my child home on the bus but I need transportation to after school care. There is no one at home.” Lack of transportation meant that too many children were going home alone instead of going to a safe and engaging learning experience after school. This loss of access came at a particularly difficult time for many students who were struggling to adjust to in-person schooling after the pandemic and desperately needed the assistance that the afterschool programs offered.

Among students who were able to attend, some reported that their attendance became more inconsistent. In focus groups at Girls Inc, some girls reported that attendance was much more difficult now when the weather was cold or otherwise bad. Another girl reported that her attendance had become much more inconsistent because her mother couldn’t always bring her or because her mother had to take her sister to other after school activities.

The following chart highlights the magnitude of the impact. It presents data for elementary school students in four of the largest ASOST service providers in Worcester: ACE, Girls Inc., YMCA, and YWCA. According to the providers, elementary school students were most severely affected by the change in student transportation. The chart indicates that **two-thirds** of Worcester elementary school students either need transportation to attend one of these four ASOST programs or cannot attend because they lack transportation. According to this data, these four ASOST programs alone could increase the number of elementary school students served by at least 40% (about 200 students) if the transportation issue was addressed.



Student Transportation Needs for Select OST Programs

More Inequitable Access. Because pre-pandemic student transportation practices were inconsistent and relied on providers or families to initiate service requests, they contributed to some inequity of access to ASOST services. However, the change in practice last year substantially increased inequities across several dimensions.

Several providers identified specific schools that couldn't be served due to the change:

- Girls Inc. previously had ten buses dropping students at or near their site. Last year, only one bus (from a charter school) dropped students at the Girls Inc. site. As a result, more than half of the students served by the provider were from the single charter school.
- YMCA had vans that it used to supplement WPS student transportation. Last year, it had to both expand and adjust the schools served by the vans to focus only on those schools with the largest number of participants – in order to maximize their van trips. This meant that several schools previously served no longer had transportation services to the site.
- BCGW conducted walking groups from several nearby schools using their staff, as well as school staff, to lead the groups. However, they had to discontinue the group at one school because road construction eliminated the sidewalks and prevented students from traveling to the program safely.

Providers also shared examples of disparate treatment of different high-need and marginalized groups. Girls Inc. identified two students at one Worcester middle school who both wanted to attend their program. Both were high-need students – one with an IEP and the other DCF-involved. They were able to arrange transportation for the student with an IEP but not for the student that was DCF-involved. These inequities were enormously frustrating to the students, families, and service providers.

Hardship for Families. The providers cited many examples of hardships imposed on families due to the change in WPS student transportation practices. One Worcester parent commented that “I had to request to adjust my hours at work to be able to pick my child up after school, bring them to the program, and then go back to work. It’s causing me problems at work. I don’t know how much longer I will be allowed to do this.” Other parents reported shifting to working from home so they could participate in carpooling to get their children to a program. However, the providers reported that many parents lacked the flexibility to adjust their schedule and would risk losing their job if they tried to take time off for this purpose.

Parents also paid out of pocket to arrange for transportation to an afterschool program. Some paid for a car services. Others paid other parents to provide transportation. Parents reported that this was a definite financial hardship and some were only able to afford it for a limited period of time before they were forced to withdraw their child from the program.

Hardship for Students. Some older students chose to find their own ways to the afterschool programs by walking (often long distances) or riding their bicycles. Some even did this during bad weather or in the snow – which made the trip even more challenging. What was especially frustrating for some students was that they were backtracking along the route that they had just taken in the school bus.

Reduced Program Time for Some Students. Every provider reported that at least some of their participants took longer, in some cases much longer, to get to their sites. As one provider noted, this was time that the students could have spent receiving homework assistance, participating in enrichment activities, or playing with others. According to participants in Girls Inc., arriving late for programs also discouraged them from attending and led to some girls to drop the program entirely.

Increase in Safety Concerns. Several providers reported organizing walking groups to their site from nearby schools with staff walking with the student or splitting the walk with school staff. However, there were some safety-related concerns associated with this approach. Some female staff and students reported being verbally harassed by men during their walks – to the point that providers chose to send additional staff and/or male staff on these walks to provide more security. Students also reported seeing needles and similar items on the ground. In at least one case, a student actually found a gun.

Impact on Provider Staff and Resources. Many providers had to assign their staff to these walking groups or to drive vans to pick up students. This came at the expense of time that staff could have spent running programs for or otherwise working with students. This also came at a time when some providers were struggling to recruit staff.

Positions & Recommendations

WEER commends WPS for its recent efforts to develop plans that better meet the after school transportation needs of students, families, and ASOST providers. We particularly commend Dr. Monárrez on her emphasis on developing systems and protocols to guide district operations, including student transportation policies and practices.

WEER has established a small committee to focus on the issue of student transportation. The committee includes several ASOST service providers who were involved in this issue over the last year. We propose that this committee meet on a monthly basis with one or more representatives of WPS with responsibility for student transportation policies and practices. The purposes of these meetings are to collaborate on developing appropriate student transportation systems and protocols and to troubleshoot any problems that may emerge during the implementation of these systems and protocols.

WEER recommends that WPS design the student transportation system (and particularly the bus routes) with the afterschool program needs in mind and to complement any transportation services available from some of the ASOST service providers. Students' after school travel needs must not be an afterthought but must be a core consideration of the system.

WEER encourages WPS to proactively contact all Worcester ASOST service providers regarding the after school transportation needs of their participants. WEER commits to using its organizational network and contacts to assist WPS in that effort.

WEER proposes the development of a joint communication strategy with WPS to ensure that common messages regarding the student transportation plans are communicated by the school district and community organizations. This strategy should ensure that accurate information is transparently and broadly shared among all Worcester families and providers.

WEER recognizes that current student transportation capacity may limit the district's ability to meet after school transportation needs. We encourage WPS to prioritize expanding after school student transportation services as capacity increases.

WEER encourages WPS to schedule a community meeting once or twice each year to communicate and consult with families and ASOST service providers about the student transportation system, planned changes, and any issues that may arise.

About the Worcester Education Collaborative

The mission of the Worcester Education Collaborative (WEC) is to advance excellence and equity in education for all Worcester Public Schools (WPS) students. WEC envisions a transformational education community that enables all WPS students to achieve their full potential. WEC is committed to catalyzing, convening, and championing a wide variety of partnerships among families, schools, organizations, and businesses that enhance the quality of public education and drive progress toward our overarching goal of transformational, systemic change.

This position paper is supported by a grant from the Barr Foundation.

Worcester Education Collaborative
484 Main Street, Suite 300
Worcester, MA 01609
www.wecollaborative.org

©2022 by the Worcester Education Collaborative. All rights reserved