

Transportation Pilot Program ESC of Central Ohio



Data, Results, & Summary

Fall 2025



**Department of
Education &
Workforce**

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Pupil Transportation Pilot Program

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly increased already present challenges in staffing pupil transportation departments and school bus drivers across schools and districts. This shortage led to canceled and delayed bus routes, which increased student absenteeism and negatively affected learning outcomes.

In response to these challenges, the General Assembly directed the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce to leverage federal COVID relief funds and establish two pilot transportation programs for the 2024-2025 school year. These programs were implemented at the Educational Service Center of Central Ohio (ESCCO) and the Montgomery County Educational Service Center (MCESC). The objective of the pilot programs was to explore solutions that could assist stakeholders in addressing pupil transportation obstacles.

House Bill 96 extended MCESC's Transportation Pilot Program through Fiscal Years 2026 and 2027, postponing the final report for MCESC until Sept. 15, 2027. Consequently, this report focuses on evaluating the ESCCO Transportation Pilot Program.

The pilot programs required the educational service centers to identify students facing transportation issues as reported by their resident districts and to arrange suitable transportation for these students. The programs also mandated the use of state-approved vehicles and ensured compliance with transportation requirements for students with disabilities.

Data and insights from the first of these two pilot programs were collected and analyzed to evaluate their effectiveness. The findings reported below from the ESCCO pilot program are intended to inform future strategies and potentially guide the development of comprehensive solutions to address ongoing pupil transportation issues. Data highlights include:

- Inaccurate and outdated student roster information from schools created additional work and delayed timelines.
- On average, participating students had improved attendance by more than 13 days over the previous year.
- The cost for third-party transportation contractors using 9-passenger vehicles was more than five times the amount received through state transportation funding.
- Non-school bus transportation proved effective and highly reliable. However, transporting a small number of students, such as nine or fewer per vehicle, was costly and not supported on a larger scale by the current state funding model.
- Family and community school participants were extremely satisfied with the pilot program.

Background

Exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and districts have had tremendous difficulty in fully staffing their pupil transportation departments. These school bus driver shortages affected many different schools and districts, regardless of size or typology. Additionally, driver shortages impacted student learning through canceling and delaying bus routes and increasing absenteeism.

[House Bill 33](#) and [House Bill 250](#) of the 135th General Assembly charged the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce to establish Pupil Transportation Pilot Programs for the 2024-2025 school year. Functionally, the two Transportation Pilot Programs described in legislation applied to the Educational Service Center of Central Ohio (ESCCO) and the Montgomery County Educational Service Center (MCESC). The pilot programs were meant to be one tool of many to assist policymakers, districts, schools, and stakeholders in determining how pupil transportation challenges might be mitigated. To that end, the Department entered into agreements with ESCCO and MCESC in August 2024 to conduct the required pilot programs.

[House Bill 96](#) of the 136th General Assembly continued MCESC's Transportation Pilot Program through FY26 and FY27, deferring the due date for the Department's report with respect to the MCESC Transportation Pilot Program until Sept. 15, 2027. For that reason, this report is limited to the Department's evaluation of the ESCCO Transportation Pilot Program. Data and conclusions may differ from the final report on MCESC's program.

Introduction

The Department was charged with establishing two Pupil Transportation Pilot Programs in coordination with ESCCO and MCESC. The two educational service centers were to provide transportation to students in lieu of the students receiving transportation from their resident school district.

The educational service centers were to identify students who were struggling with transportation issues, as determined by their resident districts. The educational service centers also were to arrange for the use of a sufficient number of approved vehicles to transport students from participating schools who qualify for transportation under section 3327.01 of the Ohio Revised Code and the district's transportation policy.

The Department was to deduct from the participating districts' state transportation payment and pay to the educational service centers the statewide average cost per student for each student transported by the educational service centers. The educational service centers were to comply with all transportation requirements for students with disabilities as specified in the individualized education programs developed for the students.

The Department was then to evaluate the pilot programs in which the selected educational service centers participated. The educational service centers submitted data and other information to the Department for the purpose of the evaluations.

Methodology

PARTICIPATING SCHOOL IDENTIFICATION

ESCCO collaborated with its nearby community schools and districts to create a list of participating schools and one district for its Pupil Transportation Pilot Program. ESCCO partnered with Columbus City Schools to provide transportation to students enrolled in the following community schools:

- The Graham School (TGS)
- Graham Elementary and Middle School (GEMS)
- Columbus Bilingual Academy

STUDENT IDENTIFICATION

ESCCO collaborated with Columbus City Schools to identify students who were struggling with transportation issues, as required by law. Those students were educated by community schools that enrolled students residing within Columbus City Schools for whom ESCCO would provide transportation during the 2024-2025 school year. The participating community schools had established daily start and end times and provided student rosters to Columbus City Schools identifying students in need of transportation. ESCCO based its routing on that provided information.

However, ESCCO determined that about 50% of the information on the original student rosters it was provided was inaccurate (students were no longer enrolled in the community school(s) due to moving or enrolling in different schools). ESCCO conducted re-routing once it was able to develop accurate student rosters. Currently, there is no uniform mechanism for community schools to report student information to school districts; community schools, parents, and districts vary in how information is submitted and collected, leading to missing, inaccurate, or mis-routed student information.

TRANSPORTATION MODELS

ESCCO built two transportation models that focused on supporting Columbus City Schools in transporting difficult-to-transport students.

1. One model focused on direct student transportation services using 9-passenger (or less) vans.
2. The second model used third-party transportation services to eliminate the need for traditional school buses.

APPROVED STUDENT TRANSPORTATION VEHICLE ACQUISITION

ESCCO was permitted to arrange for the use of a sufficient number of school buses or other authorized vehicles to transport students from the Columbus City Schools district. ESCCO did not use school buses and instead utilized other authorized vehicles for transportation of eligible students in its pilot program, including two vans (of 9-passenger capacity, not

including the driver) purchased by ESCCO, and vehicles owned and operated by a transportation contractor that fit nine passengers or fewer.

FUNDING SOURCES

This project was funded through two sources. First, the Department deducted from Columbus City Schools' state transportation payment and paid ESCCO the statewide average cost per student for each district student transported by ESCCO. The statewide average cost per student for FY25 was \$1,214.29. For students attending special education programs described in R.C. 3317.024(C)(1), payment was made according to that section.

Secondly, House Bill 33 (135th General Assembly) directed the Department to support the Ohio Transportation Pilot Programs using reallocated federal Emergency Assistance to Non-Public Schools COVID relief funds (GEER II SNS funds). Funding for the program was loaded into the electronic Comprehensive Continuous Improvement Plan (CCIP), the grants application and planning system used by the Department. ESCCO accessed the funding through this system for approved expenditures with a total funding available amount of \$500,000.

Data Findings

ESCCO submitted data and other information to the Department in quarterly progress reports for the purpose of conducting evaluations on the project as needed. Such data included accurate student transportation records (demographic information; identification of special education students; factors leading to student selection for the pilot; school start and end times; pick-up/drop-off schedules; and types of vehicles used) and compliance data (whether any students arrived more than 30 minutes late to school, were picked up from school more than 30 minutes after the end of the school day, or did not receive pupil transportation due to a vehicle not arriving, and whether any of these occurrences were due to inclement weather). Although the Department asked for reporting of out-of-compliance data, for purposes of the pilot program under the enabling legislation, any out-of-compliance instances were not treated as such.

EXPENDITURES

ESCCO spent funding in the following manner:

- Purchased two new 9-passenger (or less) vans at a total cost of \$127,405
- Purchased a service contract with a third-party transportation service to transport students using 9-passenger (or less) vehicles at a cost of \$313,610
- Hired certified, part-time van drivers (\$20/hour)

For the 2024-2025 school year, authorized modes of alternative (non-school bus) transportation included vehicles originally designed for nine or fewer passengers, not including the driver, such as minivans, SUVs, or sedans.

DIRECT SERVICE MODEL

ESCCO provided transportation for 15 students to and from school daily using two 9-passenger (not including the driver) vans and part-time employee van drivers (paid at a rate of \$20/hour). ESCCO provided this transportation to Graham Elementary and Middle School. Over the course of the 2024-2025 school year, ESCCO had a 100% route completion rate, with 100% of routes dropping students off and picking students up on time. Zero routes were canceled. Additionally, ESCCO reported no parent or other complaints regarding this direct transportation service.

THIRD-PARTY INDIRECT SERVICES MODEL

A contractor (EverDriven) provided transportation for a daily average of 43 students to two schools: The Graham School and Columbus Bilingual Academy. Over the 2024-2025 school year, 10,206 trips were provided with a 92.99% on-time pick-up rate. During that time, 16 complaints were made for a complaint rate of 0.15%. Substitute drivers were needed 0.40% of the time, or 41 out of 10,206 trips. Students were transported mainly using four-door sedan model cars. Through the contracted services, ESCCO averaged 2.26 students per vehicle per trip.

OVERALL NUMBERS AND COMPLIANCE DATA

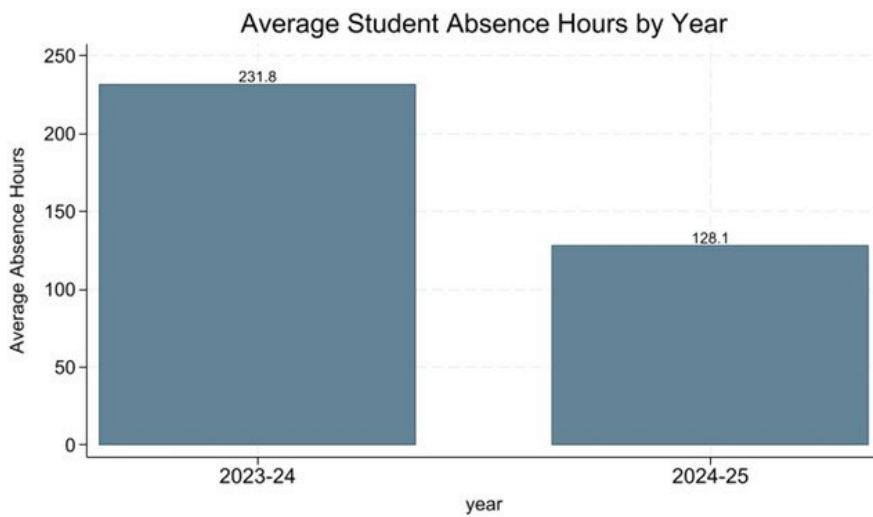
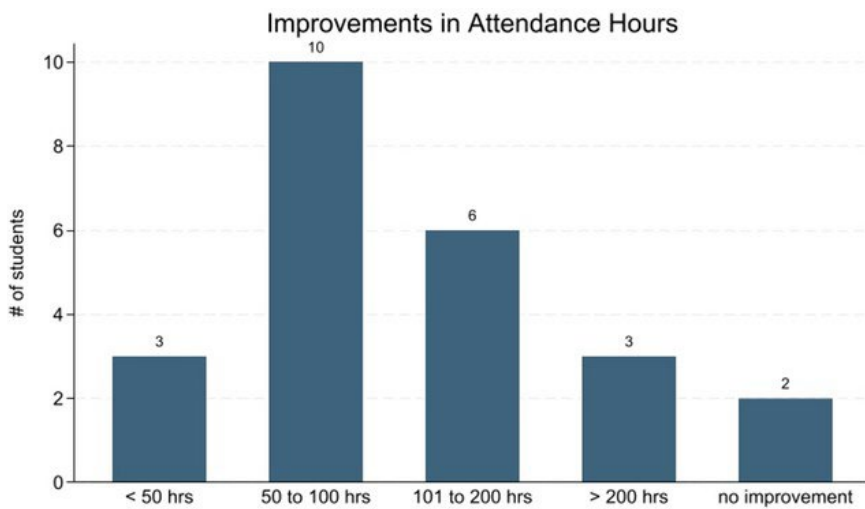
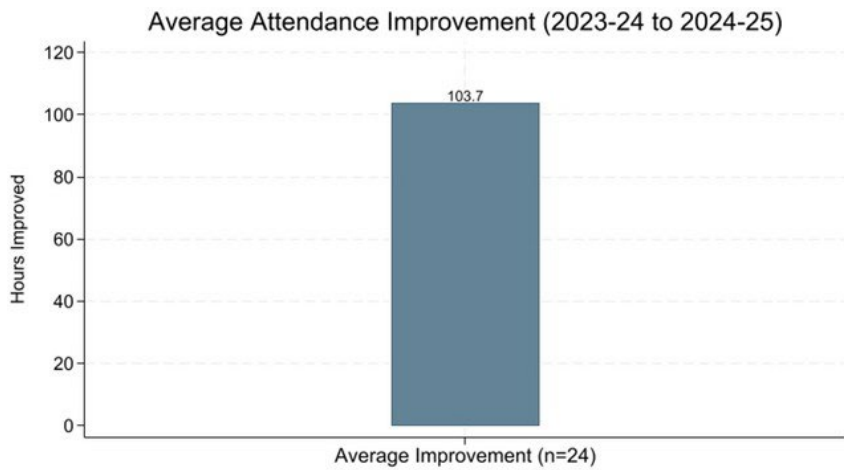
During the duration of the pilot, ESCCO transported 60-65 students daily using 9-passenger (or less) vehicles. ESCCO provided over 10,000 trips for students during the 2024-2025 school year. While extremely successful, this service came at a cost of over \$300,000. For the 2024-2025 school year, ESCCO's pilot program direct-service model reported a total of zero late arrivals. ESCCO's third-party indirect service model reported one failure of a vehicle to arrive on time, impacting one student. On two dates, schools were cancelled due to inclement weather.

STUDENT ATTENDANCE

Of the 48 students who were transported via the third-party contractor, EverDriven, 24 students had year-to-year comparison data. On average, students who participated in the ESCCO Transportation Pilot Program improved their attendance by 103.7 hours from 2023-2024 to 2024-2025. That is equivalent to over 13 days of school attended over the previous year.

Three students improved their attendance by over 200 hours (which equates to over 28 days of school attended over the previous year). Six students improved their attendance by 101 to 200 hours. Ten students improved their attendance by 50 to 100 hours. Three students improved their attendance by less than 50 hours. Two students' attendance did not improve.

This attendance data was reiterated in both administrator and family feedback.



STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

ESCCO collected feedback by interviewing the administrators in charge of transportation at The Graham Family School and Graham Elementary and Middle School and surveying families that participated in pilot transportation services. Overall, when asked to rate on a scale of one to five (one being the lowest and five being the highest), “How satisfied were you with the transportation pilot this year?” administrators unanimously gave the program a five, believing it was the reason some students were able to stay enrolled in school. Additionally, TGS and GEMs surveyed approximately 60 families requesting feedback on the service provided by both ESCCO and the third-party service provider, EverDriven.

While only four families responded to the survey, the results were positive. The families were asked six questions directly related to the program, ranging from attendance and academic performance to educational decisions. Below are the questions and an overview of family responses.

Survey Question	Response Rate	Results
Did the consistency of transportation while receiving it from the educational service center meet my expectations?	100%	Strongly Agree
Was transportation received from the educational service center an improvement from years past?	100%	Yes
Did the consistency of transportation from the educational service center have a positive impact on students’ academic performance?	100%	Agree or Strongly Agree
Did the consistency of transportation from the educational service center have a positive impact on students’ attendance?	100%	Agree or Strongly Agree
Did the availability of consistent transportation impact your decision to stay at the school your student attended?	100%	Yes

Both school administrators and families surveyed commented and responded strongly that student transportation is a deciding factor when it comes to school choice. According to school administrators, families change schools when transportation is not available. This sentiment was reinforced by the family survey feedback received.

Conclusion

The Ohio Department of Education and Workforce was charged with establishing Pupil Transportation Pilot Programs for the 2024-2025 school year. The pilot programs were intended to assist policymakers, districts, schools, and stakeholders in determining how pupil

transportation challenges can be mitigated. The data gathered in this report on the ESCCO Pilot Program highlighted several important findings:

- Inaccurate and outdated information caused additional time to be spent on correcting student rosters to ensure accurate student transportation.
- On average, students who participated in the ESC Transportation Pilot Program improved their attendance by more than 13 days of school attended over the previous year.
- Family and community school participants were extremely satisfied with the pilot program. When asked to rate on a scale of one to five (one being the lowest and five being the highest), “How satisfied were you with the transportation pilot this year?” administrators unanimously gave the program a five, believing it was a reason some students were able to stay enrolled in school.
- The cost for third-party vendor support utilizing 9-passenger (not including the driver) vehicles was more than five times the amount received through state transportation funding.
- Non-school bus transportation proved effective and highly reliable. However, transporting a small number of students, such as nine or fewer per vehicle, was costly and not supported on a larger scale by the current state funding model.

Recommendations

ESCCO provided over 10,000 trips for students during the 2024-2025 school year with a high rate of participant satisfaction. However, this service came at a cost of over \$300,000 for the 2024-2025 school year. With an average of 43 students being transported through a third-party vendor and receiving state funding of \$1,214.29 per student, the cost for third-party vendor support was more than five times the amount received through state transportation funding. In addition, inaccurate student data led to ESCCO expending time at the beginning of the school year to develop accurate data and conduct re-routing. For a larger-scale supplement to traditional, district-provided yellow school bus transportation to be viable, the following recommendations were proposed by the ESC of Central Ohio:

- (1) Develop a state-level clearinghouse of student data to create a uniform, current, and accurate basis for student transportation decision-making.
- (2) Update Ohio’s student transportation funding model to account for alternative transportation (non-yellow school buses with maximum passenger capacity of — under current law — 12 passengers, not including the driver).
- (3) Establish and fund a regional support system leveraging Ohio’s educational service centers. This system could initially be at a smaller scale, focused on non-district populations, and be supplemented with the use of third-party contracted services. As educational service centers invest in vehicles and drivers, the use of contractors could be phased out.