PEER MISSISSIPPI
Joint Legislative Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review

Analysis of Transportation Programs and Expenses in 50 Mississippi School Districts: A FY 2023 Comparative Review (Volume VI)

Report Highlights — August 13, 2024

CONCLUSION: A review of the transportation programs for 50 Mississippi school districts in FY 2023 showed opportunities for districts to strengthen their programs and increase efficiency. For example, 23 districts (51%) did not use formal guidelines for student seating, which can offer safety, discipline, and accountability benefits. There was also wide variance in the performance of districts in key areas such as cost per bus and cost per mile, suggesting that districts have room for improvement. Some districts have characteristics that naturally result in greater program efficiency (e.g., dense population of students in a small geographic area). As a whole, reporting districts performed favorably compared to regional peers in certain areas (e.g., cost per rider), while districts slightly underperformed regional peers in other areas (e.g., staffing for maintenance of buses).

BACKGROUND

In FY 2024, PEER received funding to contract with Glimpse K12 (an education technology company headquartered in Huntsville, Alabama) to conduct a comparative review of 50 school districts. This report focuses on one of seven areas of review—transportation (Volume VI). Other non-instructional reports include:

- Finance and Supply Chain (Volume I);
- Human Resources (Volume II);
- Information technology (Volume III);
- Nutrition (Volume IV); and,
- Operations (Volume V).

KEY FINDINGS

- **Of the 45 school districts reporting, 37 (82%) did not utilize routing software to manage their bus routes.**
  Bus routing software is intended to help districts achieve maximum efficiency. However, transportation program staff must be proficient in using the software.

- **23 districts (51%) did not use formal guidelines for student seating on buses.**
  Formal guidelines can offer safety, discipline, and accountability benefits.

- **School districts use various bus route methods. For example, 24 districts indicated that students from all grades in a geographic area ride the bus together and are dropped off at their respective schools, while 7 districts assign a bus to transport students exclusively to and from one school without additional routes.**
  No bus route method can be conclusively deemed superior.

- **19 districts (35.5%) did not have a sufficient number of substitute bus drivers to prevent occasional service delays.**
  Having a pool of substitute drivers can prevent bus service delays.

- **As a whole, reporting districts performed favorably on some key performance indicators as compared to regional peers and unfavorably on other indicators.**
  - Overall, districts spent less per bus, less per mile, and less per rider than regional peers.
  - Additionally, most districts were slightly less efficient in staffing for maintenance of buses than regional peers and slightly less efficient in transporting students than regional peers, as measured by the number of students per bus.

Cost Savings

At least eleven of the 45 reporting districts have the potential for cost savings either through bus route improvements or staffing adjustments. Of the districts reporting, annual projected potential cost savings could be up to $2.65 million for bus route improvements and up to $420,800 for staffing adjustments.

Exhibit 11 on page 29 provides a summary of projected potential cost savings from bus route improvements in eight districts and Exhibit 12 on page 31 provides a summary of projected potential cost savings from transportation staffing adjustments in six districts.

While the reported data suggests the potential for cost savings for these districts, each district's administration should carefully review the data and recommendations in light of the particular circumstances of the district.

Variance in District Performance on Key Indicators

- Of the districts reporting, the average annual cost per bus overall in FY 2023 ranged from approximately $15,000 for Itawamba to approximately $82,000 for Vicksburg-Warren, and the cost per rider ranged from $549 in Itawamba to $2,653 in Leake, suggesting districts could have room for improvement.

- Annual cost per mile ranged from $1.19 in North Pike to $15.72 in Prentiss, approximately three times the state median.

    - The cost per mile measure is driven by data reported by the districts, some of which appears questionable and should be reviewed by district administrators for accuracy.

- Data from three districts (South Panola, Lafayette, and Neshoba) indicates that they may have more buses than needed. Data from four districts (Jackson County, Marion, Lee, and Lincoln) indicates that their bus maintenance function may be understaffed.

Issues with Missing Data

Some districts did not provide all of the information requested for this report, which inhibited the assessment team's ability to conduct a complete analysis of transportation functions in the selected districts.

- East Tallahatchie and Pontotoc City did not provide any data or information for this report. Further, Lamar and Winona-Montgomery provided minimal performance data and no benchmarking information.

Without timely and accurate financial information, the districts' ability to manage costs and allocate taxpayer funds effectively is compromised.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISTRICTS

1. In FY 2025, each district superintendent, in consultation with the district's transportation program personnel, should review the information from this report and implement each of the relevant district recommendations to increase efficiency, improve service levels, and/or achieve cost savings. These include, but are not limited to:

    a. potential implementation of bus routing software;

    b. potential implementation of formal guidelines for student seating on buses;

    c. annual reviews of bus routes;

    d. identify potential opportunities for bus route optimization;

    e. evaluate approaches for addressing driver absences; and,

    f. assess mechanic staffing levels and spare fleet size.

2. District administrators should also use the information in this report to compare their performance to that of their peers in Mississippi, as well as regionally and nationally, to identify areas for potential improvement, and take action to improve in those areas.

3. For districts unable to provide benchmarking or performance information during this review pertaining to their transportation programs (or provided questionable data), relevant district personnel should take action to begin collecting and monitoring precise transportation data on an ongoing basis.

4. District personnel should provide an annual performance report to the district superintendent regarding the status of the transportation programs using the measures included in this review.

5. District administrators should use the information from annual performance reports to monitor their district's costs and efficiency in operating its transportation program.