DC School Connect Working Group Report

May 2025

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

This report was developed in partnership with members of the DC School Connect Working Group, listed below, along with input from students, parents, school staff, advocates, and experts.

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- **Students** from Statesman Academy PCS and E.W. Stokes PCS

Education Commission of the States produced a landscape scan on innovative state and district transit options.

The report also benefitted from contributions from staff at the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME), including Clara Haskell Botstein, DeAndra Brooks, and Hillary Desir.

Executive Summary

This report provides an in-depth analysis of the DC School Connect (DCSC) transit program designed to address student safety during their commutes to and from school. DC School Connect was launched by the Department of For-Hire Vehicles (DFHV) in the 2021-22 school year with American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding in Safe Passage Priority Areas[1] in Wards 7 and 8 in response to community concerns about student safety.

The Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Support Act (BSA) established a multi-agency Working Group to develop recommendations for finding a new agency to house DCSC (D.C. Code § 38–197.01; DC Law 25-217). The group considered program performance, the recommendations of the School Safety Enhancement Committee,[2] potential uses for program vehicles and assets, and potential new models. The Working Group consulted with students, families, and school and local education agency (LEA) staff to understand stakeholders' needs and inform recommendations.

The Working Group convened from October 2024 through January 2025 and learned from stakeholders about the successes of the programs and the opportunities for improvement. Ridership in the program has almost doubled from serving 219 students in the 2021-22 school year to serving 429 students in the 2023-24 school year. The program also improved its efficiency over that time, with the cost per ride declining from $117.50 in 2021-22 to $84.62 in 2023-24.[3] The Working Group also heard from stakeholders that the program model helped reassure parents who hesitate to let their children travel alone on public transit and created a safer experience for young people.

Based on the Working Group's discussions and consultations with stakeholders, they issued the following ideas on possible future approaches for DCSC:

- **Option 1: Continue to operate the current program model with operational efficiencies**: Strengthen the program's existing structure by refining eligibility criteria, optimizing routes, and further reducing costs to expand coverage.
- **Option 2: Expand the current model to include scope changes**: Supplement core shuttle routes with targeted, on-demand solutions for students experiencing acute safety threats or for those requiring short connections between Metro stations and schools.
- **Option 3: Consider converting to a grant program**: Offer grants to local education agencies (LEAs) to design and operate tailored solutions that meet communities' needs.

With each recommendation, the Working Group considered the competencies needed to operate the program and implications for what DC government agencies would be well-suited to take on this work (see p. 20). The Working Group ultimately concluded that pursuing Option 1 and maintaining the program at DFHV is the best approach for this important safety initiative.

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[1] For more information on Safe Passage Priority Areas, please see https://safepassage.dc.gov/page/safe-passage-priority-areas-2024-2025.

[2] Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, *Strengthening School Safety in Washington, DC,* March 2025, dme.dc.gov.

[3] Committee on Public Works & Operations, Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Recommendations, p. 85, lims.dccouncil.gov/downloads/LIMS/55149/Committee_Report/B25-0785-Committee_Report8.pdf?Id=195424.

Introduction

Background on the DC School Connect Working Group

The Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25) Budget Support Act (BSA) required the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) to establish a Working Group to explore the future of the DCSC program. The BSA required the group to consider program performance, the recommendations of the School Safety Enhancement Committee, potential uses for program vehicles and assets, and a recommended agency within the Education or Public Safety cluster under which the DCSC program could be housed and operated if it is to continue beyond the 2024-25 school year. The BSA required representation from DFHV, DME, the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice (DMPSJ), the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Operations and Infrastructure (DMOI),[4] and agencies under each Deputy Mayor as each Deputy Mayor deemed appropriate. For the Working Group, this included representatives from the District Department of Transportation (DDOT) and the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE).

The Working Group met four times between October 2024 and January 2025. Meetings were livestreamed and open to the public and information on the meetings is available on the DME website. Meeting dates and topics were as follows:

- October 17, 2024: The group discussed trends and data on student safety, shared background on DCSC, discussed the purpose and goals of the Working Group, and considered the group's data collection and analysis needs.
- November 14, 2024: The group reviewed a landscape scan of transportation initiatives in other states and districts, discussed potential use cases for DCSC based on stakeholder feedback, and considered additional data collection needs.
- December 12, 2024: The group shared data collection updates, including the results of a parent satisfaction survey developed by DFHV, and considered initial recommendations for the future of DCSC.
- January 16, 2025: The group discussed and approved final recommendations.

During this period, the Working Group conducted interviews and focus groups with stakeholders to better understand the needs of students, parents, and schools and to take stock of transportation models operated by public charter schools. A full list of acknowledgements is included on page 4 and information on the learnings from the Working Group's engagement can be found starting on page 10.

Transportation within DC's System of Public School Choice

The District's **open-enrollment model** for public school selection allows families to enroll in their neighborhood DCPS school or to enter into a lottery where they may be matched with other DCPS citywide or neighborhood schools or a DC public charter school. While suburban districts or systems with less choice are more likely to operate universal busing programs, the District's context, with a multi-modal public transit system and highly mobile population, makes it inefficient to operate door-to-door buses across the city. However, the District leverages a variety of programs and partnerships to address student transportation needs.

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[4] This office was restructured in July 2024 and the Working Group included a representative from the Office of the City Administrator to fulfill the spirit of this requirement.

- **Kids Ride Free (KRF):** Established in 2013, KRF allows DC public and public charter school students to board Metrobus and Metrorail services at no cost to the student. To improve uptake, DDOT worked with WMATA to pilot a mobile application that streamlines the distribution of KRF passes, removing the need for students to keep up with physical fare cards and making it easier for students to access public transit benefits. While cost relief is a significant asset for thousands of students, students can face long commute times, safety concerns while traveling, and issues with service reliability. As of February 19, 2025, over 59,000 KRF cards had been issued.
- **OSSE-DOT (Division of Transportation):** The OSSE-DOT program supports students whose Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) specify a need for specialized transport. Eligible students are picked up from their residences and transported to and from school each day. Parents may also opt to self-transport eligible students and receive stipends from OSSE in exchange for providing this service. Approximately 4,120 students were served by OSSE-DOT in SY24-25 through December 31, 2024.[5]
- **Funding Transportation for Homeless Students (McKinney-Vento Act):** Under the federal McKinney-Vento Act, homeless students must have access to education comparable to that of their housed peers, including transportation to and from school. In Washington, DC, this often translates into distributing Metro passes or rideshare credits to eligible students, including their families if students are too young to travel alone.
- **LEA-Operated Transportation:** In addition to citywide services, some public charter school LEAs independently offer transportation solutions. These range from after-school enrichment shuttles (often deployed to help students remain on campus for extended-day programs), point-to-point service (e.g., a bus picks up students at a stop in one neighborhood and transports them directly to school), and door-to-door transport for vulnerable populations, including at-risk youth or those requiring specialized support. Some LEAs contract with private bus or van companies, while others hire and train their own drivers or opt to pay for rideshare services.
- **MOUs with Various Agencies:** To support students with specific transportation needs, DFHV has had Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with some District agencies. For example, DFHV previously had an MOU with Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) to provide school transportation for students in the agency's care and has had MOUs with OSSE to provide transportation for students participating in the Advanced Internship Program and Advanced Technical Center.
- **DC School Connect:** DCSC is the latest contribution to the District's student transportation offerings. More information on DCSC is included in the following section.

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[5] Office of the State Superintendent of Education, "Responses to Fiscal Year 2024 Performance Oversight Questions," p. 276, Committee of the Whole -Performance Oversight Hearing - DC Council Hearings Management System.

Context on DC School Connect

Background on DCSC

Washington, DC has prioritized student safety in multiple ways, including by establishing the Safe Passage program designed to improve safety for students on their way to and from school. For Safe Passage, the District has identified priority areas, based on data, where contracted community partners staff designated routes with employees who can help prevent and de-escalate safety incidents. During the pandemic, many neighborhoods—particularly in Wards 7 and 8—experienced an uptick in community violence, deepening parents' fears about letting their children navigate public transit independently. As part of the District's broader strategy to resume in-person learning safely, District leaders recognized that reliable, secure transportation options were important for restoring families' confidence and ensuring consistent attendance in the wake of pandemic disruptions.

District agencies collaborated to reinforce safety measures, which included deploying trusted adults along designated corridors, expanding the presence of crossing guards, and establishing safe walking routes through business and community partnerships. DCSC is designed to complement these efforts by providing shuttles to and from school and protecting students from the threat of violence or unsafe travel conditions in historically underserved neighborhoods.

Wards 7 and 8 include the highest numbers of District youth. Students living in these wards travel over three miles on average to school (versus approximately two miles for students in Wards 1–6) and Metro Rail stations in these wards are less densely spaced than in other parts of the city. Based on commuting patterns, Ward 7 and 8 students often have to transfer between buses or walk through high-crime areas, which can negatively impact students' feelings of safety and their attendance rates. For more information on students' perceptions of safety outside of the school building, the DME's report *Strengthening School Safety in Washington, DC* offers additional perspectives.

Initial Design and Evolution

Budget: DCSC was launched in the 2021-22 school year as a COVID-19 era pilot program. In FY2022, Mayor Bowser dedicated approximately $6.2 million of federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to start DCSC, focusing on shuttle service for grades K–12 in Safe Passage Priority Areas in Wards 7 and 8. DCSC was sustained with federal funds through the FY2025 budget, at which point federal pandemic recovery funds expired and the Mayor sustained her investment with local dollars, requesting about $7.2 million to continue service. This request was reduced by $2 million by the DC Council. In FY25, the program served 27 schools.

Route design and signups: Operating a transit in a system of school choice creates distinct challenges compared to a standard school bus fleet or a public transit route. The program is designed so that micro-stops are located no farther than 0.3. miles from each participating student's home and relies on routing software to optimize routes based on the home and school locations of participating students at the start of the school year. DCSC originally relied on referrals from schools located in Safe Passage Priority Areas in Wards 7 and 8 to prioritize high-

risk students for shuttle spots. As the service evolved, it adopted a first-come, first-served online enrollment that, while still focused on Wards 7 and 8, was no longer limited to schools in Safe Passage Priority Areas. This expansion of eligibility criteria led to increased participation and growing waitlists of 319 students that emphasize the demand for the program. Utilizing routing analytics, DFHV refines microstop locations each year, attempting to reduce walking distances for families and increase routing efficiencies.

Fleet management: Vehicles range from vans to minibuses, typically seating 6, 10, and 14 passengers, which gradually lowers the cost per ride by using smaller vehicles more efficiently. Vehicles remain in storage outside of peak travel times. By focusing on short, targeted routes and grouping riders effectively, DCSC offsets some of these overhead costs. However, the midday vehicle downtime still drives up per-hour and per-ride expenses.

Staffing: DCSC uses contracted motor vehicle operators that specialize in student transportation, and DFHV ensures that drivers undergo strict background checks, child supervision training, and drug and alcohol random testing. Some routes are equipped with Transportation Assistants who help ensure the students' safety. Administrative services are conducted in-house which includes the units of Routing & Scheduling, Dispatch and Yard Communication, Fleet Maintenance, Data & Compliance, and Yard Operations.

Cost per Ride and Student Trends

Early in the program, per-student and per-ride costs were very high due to limited ridership and startup overhead. In School Year 2021–22, the cost per ride was about $117.50, reflecting the small scale and fixed costs of the new service. As ridership grew, efficiency improved – the cost per ride dropped to approximately $108.85 in SY 2022–23 and further to about $84.62 by SY 2023–24.[6] This represents an overall reduction of roughly 28% in the cost per trip over three years. Similarly, the annual cost per student served fell from over $15,000 in the first full year to roughly $7,500 by the 2023–24 school year as more students enrolled. These trends indicate DCSC is moving in the right direction in terms of cost-efficiency, with higher utilization spreading out the expenses. The chart below shows the DCSC costs over time.

DC School Connect Program Costs Breakdown

Fiscal Year	SY 21-22	SY 22-23	SY 23-24
Cost per Student (Actual Spend)	$15,931	$16,220	$7,520
Cost per Student (Budgeted)	$31,399	$17,366	$17,083
Cost Per Ride	$117.50	$108.85	$84.62
Total Spend Budget	$3,489,162.50	$5,953,115.35	$4,859,811.22

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[6] Committee on Public Works & Operations, Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Recommendations, p. 85, lims.dccouncil.gov/downloads/LIMS/55149/Committee_Report/B25-0785-Committee_Report8.pdf?Id=195424; cost per ride is calculated as total spend divided by the number of rides.

Number of Rides	29,695	54,691	57,431
Number of Students Served	219	367	429

DC School Connect Program Costs Breakdown (Including Additional Data)

Note that SY24-25 data runs through February 28, 2025.

Learnings from Stakeholders

From October 2024 through January 2025, DME staff met with students, families, and school and LEA staff to better understand the impacts of the DC School Connect program and opportunities to improve service delivery in the future.

Student Feedback

Convenience: Students described DCSC as faster and more comfortable than their former commutes, which often involve multiple public bus transfers or, for some, lengthy walks. Several noted that traveling by dedicated shuttle reduces stress, since they no longer need to track tight connections or navigate potential delays on Metro routes. One student recalled how, before DCSC, they had to wake up much earlier to catch two different buses and still risk arriving late; now, with a single, predictable ride, they can plan their morning more reliably.

Safety: In addition to speed and convenience, students emphasized the sense of safety the service provides. Many students expressed relief at avoiding public bus stops in high-crime neighborhoods or routes with insufficient lighting. This comfort was especially pronounced among those who previously had no alternative but to walk up to 20 minutes through areas where they felt unsafe. However, a smaller subset of students reported that DCSC itself can sometimes run behind schedule, causing minor lateness. Others mentioned that while the shuttle's pick-up/drop-off spots are more convenient than a distant Metro station, they may still

require a 5-to-10-minute walk—a significant improvement, but not a complete elimination of travel hurdles.

Supervision and Adult Support: Student comments about supervision tended to focus on the friendliness and courteousness of drivers. Many expressed that DCSC drivers greet them by name, exhibit patience when students are running slightly late, and maintain a calm environment during the ride. This personal interaction contrasts with the sometimes-impersonal nature of city bus travel, where operators do not typically engage with young riders. In some instances, students highlighted that an attendant or assistant will walk them from the shuttle to the school building, creating an even safer transition. However, these aides are not uniformly deployed across all routes. Some students mentioned they walk themselves from the vehicle drop-off point to the front door, while others benefited from a designated adult to ensure they enter the building safely.

Student Behavior and Incident Reporting: While DCSC is widely regarded as a safer commuting option, student behavior on board can still be an issue. Occasional disruptive behaviors—from rowdy conduct to minor peer conflict—were mentioned, and students noted that information about such incidents does not always reach school administrators or parents. Some drivers focus on operating the vehicle and might not intervene extensively in discipline matters, leaving resolution to the students themselves. The lack of a formal mechanism to report misbehavior can pose challenges, especially if ongoing issues escalate. Many students suggest that clearer communication between drivers, DCSC program staff, and schools would help prevent small incidents from turning into bigger problems.

Parent Feedback

The Working Group gathered parent feedback through a survey and through a focus group of over 30 PAVE parent leaders.

In November 2024, DFHV fielded a survey for parents of current DCSC users and yielded 45 responses. Responses offer concrete insights into parent satisfaction and their experiences with the program.

Sixty-six percent of DCSC users say they are satisfied or very satisfied with the service, and 71% rate its safety as excellent or good. Safety is the driving factor behind enrollment; 30% of parents named it the top reason for signing up, though other families indicated they signed up due to convenience or cost. This data point, as well as other stakeholder feedback, speaks to the shift from targeting students based on greatest need to a first-come, first-served approach that should be revisited (see the discussion beginning on p. 15 on the need for greater targeting). Additional responses from the parent survey can be found in the Appendix.

Table: Key Parent Survey Findings on DC School Connect

Survey Aspect	Metric / Response	Result / Percentage
Overall Experience	Satisfied or Very Satisfied	66%
Safety Rating	Rated DCSC Safety as Excellent or Good	71%

Top Reason for Using DCSC	Cited "Safety Concerns" as Primary Factor	30%
Comparison to WMATA	Believe DCSC is Safer than Bus/Rail	80% (Yes)

In the focus group, parents endorsed DCSC as a safer alternative to Metro and public buses, particularly in Wards 7 and 8 where long commutes and community violence are concerns. The idea of a supervised service geared toward children resonated strongly with families who felt uneasy about letting students ride regular WMATA buses, and some parents shared stories about their children being the victims of crime while commuting to school by WMATA rail or bus.

Parents also shared a desire for clearer information about sign-ups, eligibility, and waiting lists. During the initial rollouts, some families reported learning of the program only through word-of-mouth, leading to confusion about whether their student qualified. Others asked for a more transparent waitlist system, so they would understand how close their child was to securing a seat.

School Leader Feedback

In multiple focus groups with school leaders from Wards 7 and 8, participants unanimously identified DCSC as a safe and reliable option to support students' travel to and from school. Among the top ten schools with the highest numbers of students eligible for DCSC services, nine were charter schools. Working Group members conducted focus groups with school leaders from three charter schools and one DCPS school and interviewed the leadership team at an Opportunity Academy that had previously expressed a need for transportation services. School leaders engaged by the Working Group expressed a desire to sustain, and even expand, DCSC to serve more students. They noted that when students do not have to endure dangerous, stressful commutes, they arrive better prepared to engage in learning. Many leaders recounted incidents of students who missed classes entirely after witnessing or experiencing violence while commuting. Others shared how students are better able to concentrate in class when they are not arriving at school after experiencing a dangerous and stressful commute. They see DCSC as part of a broader solution to chronic absenteeism and engagement.

A prominent theme across responses was the need for greater operational flexibility. Some school leaders recommended purchasing or leasing their own vehicles to gain enhanced control over route scheduling and service expansion.

Communication and coordination emerged as another area of focus; many administrators want to play a larger role in identifying students and families in the most need of transportation support. They believe that if schools had direct oversight for notifying parents of route changes, collecting updated addresses, and setting priority lists, DCSC enrollment and route management might become even more efficient. In their view, DFHV's centralized management works well but can lead to fragmented messaging without better coordination.

Leaders also highlight a range of student populations who would benefit from flexible or on-demand transit options. Youth who transfer mid-year—including those exiting juvenile justice placements or transitioning from group homes—often face logistical hurdles in rejoining their enrolled schools without a stable commute. Students experiencing housing insecurity similarly struggle to maintain consistent addresses for pick-up or drop-off, making the current fixed-stop

model challenging to implement. Educators confirm that safety concerns directly impact attendance for these vulnerable student groups. School leaders advocated for more adaptive, on-demand transit options that could better accommodate the unique needs of these student populations.

Additionally, several administrators pointed out that pick-up and drop-off locations sometimes exposed students to additional risks, such as long walks in the dark or navigating busy, congested streets. Inconsistencies in staffing levels across DCSC buses emerged as a notable area of potential growth. Some buses were equipped with two staff members, allowing them more flexibility to escort students safely to the front door of their school buildings. In contrast, other school leaders reported buses with only one staff member on board limiting their ability to walk with their students.

In short, principals and administrators saw DCSC as a valuable safety lever, but hoped to see more flexibility in the program to accommodate students experiencing mid-year transitions, students moving between wards, and students those whose living situations fluctuate.

National Landscape Scan for Targeted Student Transportation

DCSC is a unique program, with few comparable programs focused on student safety in targeted geographic areas. However, some states and LEAs have experimented with innovative transportation models for targeted student needs. These models provide insights and considerations for DCSC.

State Models

Arizona: In 2022, Governor Doug Ducey introduced a first-in-the-nation "Transportation Modernization Grant" initiative, administered by the nonprofit A for Arizona. [7] This effort allocated approximately $20.75 million through nearly 65 grants to promote creative, community-based strategies that address the persistent challenges of driver shortages, rising costs, and safety concerns. In the third year of the grant, a total of $11.06 million was awarded across 15 grantees serving a total of 25,525 students.[8] Under the initiative's competitive application process, LEAs, nonprofits, and public-private partnerships were invited to submit proposals detailing their plans to manage student transportation in a safe, innovative, and cost-effective manner.

The grantees proposed a variety of operating models, including developing electric bus charging infrastructure, providing stipends to CDL drivers, funding rideshare and in-house transportation models (including options for school and for extracurricular and internship opportunities), and developing a carpool platform.

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[7] A for Arizona, "A for Arizona Announces Arizona Transportation Grant Awardees," press release, November 8, 2021, https://aforarizona.org/2021/11/08/a-for-arizona-announces-arizona-transportation-modernization-grant-awardees.

[8] A for Arizona, *Arizona Transportation Modernization Grants Awardee Snapshot*, October 2023, available from https://aforarizona.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Cycle-3-Transportation-Grant-Awardee-Snapshot_final_digital.pdf; author's calculations.

Arkansas: Arkansas' LEARNS Act created a $5M Transportation and Modernization Grant program to be used to reduce chronic absenteeism, identify efficiencies, reduce ride times, address personnel shortages, and incentivize solutions such as rideshare programs, neighborhood carpools, and resource sharing. Applications will consider factors including student safety, cost-effectiveness, innovation, and demand.[9]

Local Models

Adams 12 (Colorado): This district leveraged a $1.2 million state grant to provide transportation via HopSkipDrive for students living in the boundaries of five schools to reduce barriers to school choice options.[10]

Chicago: Chicago Public Schools (CPS) dramatically reduced yellow bus services in recent years, now providing buses mainly for students with disabilities and students experiencing homelessness. To address this gap, parents are turning to the mobile app "PiggyBack Network" which coordinates parent-organized carpool service. Rides cost about $0.80 per mile[11] and drivers earn credits toward rides for their own children.

Denver: Denver Public Schools (DPS) operates two "Success Express" shuttles that operate in a loop in two neighborhoods and provide students with flexible transportation options that are not tied to a specific school. Shuttles are limited to students and operate for several hours in the morning and afternoon. Each shuttle is staffed by a driver and attendant who monitor students' safety and support students to safely board and disembark at the correct stops.[12]

Los Angeles: Los Angeles County launched a pilot to transport foster youth to and from school. The pilot served 1,131 students and cost $4.6 million and primarily leveraged rides from HopSkipDrive (the rideshare platform served 89 percent of students and used 87 percent of the funding During this time, HopSkipDrive served 1,004 students and provided more than 75,000 rides, with an average cost per ride of $44.[13]

These examples provide insights on how other states and districts approach student transportation beyond the traditional yellow school bus.

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[9] Arkansas Department of Education, "ADE Launches Transportation Modernization Grant Program," December 3, 2024, https://adecm.ade.arkansas.gov/ViewApprovedMemo.aspx?Id=5686.

[10] Nicole C. Brambila, "Free Denver program helps bus transfer students from Adams County," *The Denver Gazette,* May 20, 2023, https://denvergazette.com/news/ride-share-for-students-around-denver-adams-county/article_6c3b0fc6-f68d-11ed-98a0-f3c97e75c305.html.

[11] "As schools cut back on bus service, parents are turning to rideshare apps," *The Associated Press,* December 16, 2024, https://www.abcactionnews.com/news/national-news/as-schools-cut-back-on-bus-service-parents-are-turning-to-rideshare-apps. https://stnonline.com/wire-reports/chicago-students-left-without-school-transportation-get-piggyback-rides-to-school/

[12] Denver Public Schools, "Success Express Shuttle," https://transportation.dpsk12.org/o/transportation/page/success-express-shuttle.

[13] Sara Tiano, "Los Angeles Leaned Hard on Rideshare to Keep Foster Youths in School of Origin," *The Imprint,* August 20, 2019, https://imprintnews.org/news-2/los-angeles-leaned-hard-on-rideshare-to-keep-foster-youths-in-school-of-origin/37108.

Recommendations

The following section outlines key recommendations for optimizing and improving the operations of **DC School Connect**, ensuring efficiency, sustainability, and alignment with the District's student safety goals. Each recommendation is structured to describe the option, outline the benefits, tradeoffs and operational considerations of each option, identify the competencies needed for government to implement the option, and name agencies within the District government that may have those competencies.

Option 1: Continue Current DC School Connect Program with Targeted Improvements

Under Option 1, the DC School Connect initiative would maintain its existing structure while implementing operational efficiencies, such as better identifying eligible students for service and reducing costs. The core DCSC mission remains unchanged: offering students a safer alternative to travel to and from school in communities with limited transportation options. By keeping the program "as is" and focusing on improvements, Option 1 preserves the successful elements of DC School Connect and strengthens its effectiveness without a major overhaul.

Program Structure and Scope

- Maintain current funding levels
- Maintain the current service model (e.g., shuttle service in Wards 7 and 8 with stops no more than 0.3 miles from a student's home)
- Eligibility criteria would be determined by DFHV in partnership with DCSC stakeholders and would narrow eligibility from first-come, first-served to a model where students in Wards 7 and 8 who would most benefit from the program would be identified in partnership with their schools.
- The agency would identify opportunities to reduce the overall cost-per-ride.

Operational Considerations and Trade Offs
- Narrowing eligibility would reduce the number of students on the waitlist but would exclude some current users.
- Program staff would need to determine eligibility criteria (e.g., living in a Safe Passage priority area, identified as at-risk, high absenteeism in the prior school year).
- Program staff would need to determine how to allocate slots in a system where school staff identify students (for example, each school gets a set number of slots; slots are proportional to the overall student population).
- This option allows the greatest continuity of service but would still take time to transition if it were to move outside of DFHV.

Implications for Possible Receiving Agency Competencies

- Experience with operations and transportation, especially for students.
- Experience with family engagement and communication.

- Experience working with government contractors (bus drivers and attendants).
- Experience developing and launching a tracking app.
- Fleet management, storage, and maintenance expertise.
- Relationships with DCPS and PCS.

Option 2: Continue Current Program with Surge Capacity Enhancements

Option 2 expands the existing DCSC structure by continuing its current shuttle services and adding two critical enhancements: **targeted "surge capacity"** for students with acute needs, and **"last-mile coverage"** linking major Metro stations or transit hubs to school campuses where there are safety concerns. In this model, the core of DCSC's program model remains unchanged while adding capacity to be more responsive to some of the unmet needs identified by stakeholders. The surge capacity and last-mile coverage options are discussed in the sections below.

Surge Capacity

School leaders shared how DCSC's current model, which requires families to register over the summer and which fills up by the start of the school year, means there is no extra capacity when students arrive in the system mid-year or experience acute challenges mid-year. For example, students experiencing housing instability, entering the system mid-year from a juvenile justice setting, students subject to involuntary transfers, or other students experiencing acute safety needs could benefit from additional coverage.

Program Structure and Scope

- With additional funding, add capacity for short-term, temporary coverage (either through vetted rideshare options like HopSkipDrive or by expanding in-house capacity to provide individual student transportation) for students who need transportation coverage after sign ups. With flat funding, reduce some of DCSC's current capacity for transportation to students throughout the school year in order to add short-term, temporary student transportation coverage.
- Add administrative capacity to manage school requests for short-term, temporary student transportation.
- This approach could be modeled on previous MOUs between CFSA and DFHV (where DFHV provided transportation for students in the care of CFSA) and between OSSE and DFHV (where DFHV provides transportation for students in OSSE's Advanced Internship Program).

Operational Considerations and Trade Offs

- DFHV has or has had MOUs with agencies like CFSA and OSSE to transport individual students via taxis and could expand coverage or bring services in-house.
- Additional driver and attendant training may be needed to serve vulnerable students.
- Providing individual student transportation could require changes to the current fleet structure (e.g., adding smaller vehicles to the fleet) or contracts with taxis/ride sharing groups.

- Adding a second program model would increase administrative overhead.
- Adding a second program model without additional funding would reduce levels of service for the current DC School Connect model.

Implications for Possible Receiving Agency Competencies

- Experience supporting students with acute needs (e.g., recent arrivals, youth returning from juvenile justice settings, students with acute safety concerns).
- Experience with operations and transportation, especially for students.
- Experience with family engagement and communication.
- Experience working with government contractors (bus drivers and attendants).
- Relationships with key agencies such as CFSA, DHS, DYRS, and with DCPS and PCS.

Last Mile Coverage

Last-mile coverage would provide short shuttle loops or vouchers to assist older students[14] in bridging the final stretch of an otherwise lengthy or unsafe commute. In these cases, a shuttle service between the school and the metro could improve student safety in transit and while offering more flexibility. Several stakeholders addressed this as a need and said that some high school students are less inclined to use DCSC but might be more likely to use a high school loop if they could ride with their friends. Additionally, if the model followed Denver Public Schools' "Success Express" model and ran loops for several hours afterschool, this could address gaps in coverage for students who want to participate in afterschool programs but may not feel safe doing so if they have to travel long distances alone afterschool.[15]

Program Structure and Scope

- With additional funding, add capacity for neighborhood loops or other Metro-to-school shuttle coverage.
- With flat funding, reduce some of DCSC's current capacity for coverage during the school year in order to add neighborhood loops or other Metro-to-school shuttle coverage.

Operational Considerations and Trade Offs

- Providing service between the Metro and schools would better target high school students who may have more acute safety concerns.
- This approach could significantly increase the reach of students served, albeit for shorter distances.

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[14] According to DFHV's analysis, 25% of SY23-24 DCSC users were high school students, while 44% were elementary students and 27% were middle school students.
[15] As part of the DME's School Safety Report, DME conducted focus groups with multiple groups of high school students who shared reflections like "Once we're off school grounds, near school, en route to Metro, a lot of students can get hurt," "Traveling afterschool is not safe," and "We had an incident where our basketball team was harmed going to the station, and it really affected our community."

- This option could provide multiple PM shuttles which could address safety concerns for students participating in afterschool activities.
- The current fleet may not be aligned to this program structure.
- Verifying which students should be on the bus could be difficult and could introduce safety concerns (including non-student riders or students from different high schools mixing; not all high schools necessarily distribute student IDs or students could lose them).
- Adding a second program model would increase administrative overhead.
- Adding a second program model without additional funding would reduce levels of service for the current DC School Connect model.
- Adding capacity after school hours (beyond the current DCSC service hours) would create additional cost considerations.

Implications for Possible Receiving Agency Competencies

- Experience with **operations and transportation**, especially for students.
- Experience with **family engagement and communication**.
- Experience working with government contractors (**bus drivers and attendants**).
- **Fleet management, storage, and maintenance** expertise.
- **Relationships** with DCPS and PCS.

Option 3: Operate a Grant-Based Model

Transitioning DCSC from a centrally managed transportation service into a grant-based model would allow Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to apply for funding to design and potentially operate their own student transport solutions. This approach is modeled on the A for Arizona grant program, which allowed each participating LEA to design transportation solutions in a way that best needs the needs of their unique school community. LEAs would have the flexibility to lease or purchase vehicles, hire drivers, or contract with private providers. In doing so, DCSC's oversight would shift from direct operation of a transportation program focused on student safety to a grantmaking, technical assistance, and oversight role.

Program Structure and Scope

- Grant program for LEAs to competitively apply for funding to operate their own models or to apply as a small consortium of LEAs to operate student transportation (e.g., LEAs located in the same area operate Metro-to-neighborhood shuttles).
- District government would need to determine the award limits, design the program model, and determine eligibility criteria (e.g., by Ward, by targeting of specific student groups).

Operational Considerations and Trade Offs

- LEAs would assume full responsibility for transportation, from route planning to daily operations, which can allow more flexibility around afterschool routes, weekend

pickups, mid-day routes for specific programming purposes (e.g., to an Advanced Technical Center, institution of higher education, or experiential learning opportunity).

- The District (would no longer act as a mircotransit operator, but rather distribute grants and monitor compliance through performance reviews, audits, site visits, and reporting requirements.
- Abrupt termination of DCSC could leave currently participating families without service if their LEA is unprepared, highlighting the need for a phased transition and technical assistance.
- Administrative burdens would grow for LEAs, and smaller charter operators in particular may struggle with grant applications, logistics, and compliance, creating equity concerns unless robust support is provided.
- Keeping the current budget, we would only be able to serve a small number of LEAs, creating concerns around access to the program; this shift could result in serving fewer students without the benefit of economies of scale.
- Ensuring alignment of school calendars and the District's fiscal year can be challenging; LEAs might need to float costs until reimbursement arrives, unless the grant model addresses timing issues.
- Existing DCSC drivers and attendants face job uncertainty unless absorbed by LEAs.

Implications for Possible Receiving Agency Competencies

- Competencies in **grants management** (allocating funds, ensuring financial compliance, tracking outcomes).
- **Program monitoring** (site visits, data-driven performance reviews, auditing utilization and safety standards).
- **Technical assistance** provision, especially for smaller LEAs unfamiliar with transport logistics (procurement, background checks, route optimization).
- Strengthened relationships with **DCPS and PCS** to coordinate local needs and ensure equitable coverage across wards.
- Familiarity with **reallocating program assets** (vehicles, staff contracts) from centralized DCSC to decentralized LEA control.

Transition Considerations

The timeline and impact of any transition are important to consider when thinking about changing home agencies or programmatic structures. Ideally, a transition period would give time for a planning phase, with time for community engagement, a pilot phase, and a full-scale rollout. District leaders should consider the financial and opportunity costs associated with any transition, including logistical challenges (e.g., transferring MOUs, transferring lease agreements for parking lots, subcontractor relationships), staff onboarding and offboarding, training, and family and school communication and engagement.

Considerations for Where to House the Program

With each of the options, the Working Group considered which agencies possessed at least some of the critical competencies listed above and then identified which agencies' work was most closely aligned with each of the options and their ability to successfully implement programming. Some agencies partly met the competency by having previous experience but not necessarily aligned subject matter expertise; for example, an agency may have overseen a transit program but not one focused specifically on students, or may have administered a grant program but not one focused on transportation and operations. The alignment to the programmatic competencies and capacity to implement are categorized as follows:

- **High (green)**: The organization demonstrates proven expertise, resources, and a successful track record.
- **Medium (yellow)**: The organization has some relevant experience but requires additional support or capacity.
- **Low (gray)**: The organization lacks the expertise, resources, or readiness to fulfill the function.

	Option 1 – Keep As Is With Efficiencies	Option 2 – Expanded Functionality	Option 3 – Grant Program
DFHV	High – Has effectively established and expanded DCSC since its 2021 launch and built relationships with families and LEAs. **(Recommended)**	Medium – Has operated DCSC since 2021 and has or has had MOUs with relevant agencies such as CFSA but does not have the capacity needed to expand.	Low – Does not operate grant programs, provide technical assistance, or perform program monitoring.
DDOT	Medium – Has experience contracting DC Circulator operation and administering the Kids Ride Free Program, but the agency no longer administers the DC Circulator and has not specifically focused on student transportation.	Medium – Has experience contracting DC Circulator operation and administering the Kids Ride Free Program, but the DC Circulator sunset and DDOT has not worked with key agencies like CFSA or DYRS.	Low – Does not operate grant programs focused on transit operation, provide technical assistance, or perform program monitoring.
OSSE	High, with caveats – Operates the OSSE-DOT program focused on transportation for students with disabilities, but the program is currently subject to a lawsuit and it is not recommended they absorb additional programs during litigation.[16]	Medium – Medium – As noted under Option 1, operates OSSE-DOT but is party to a lawsuit; additionally, they are operating with a staffing shortage and do not have the capacity needed to expand.	Medium – Operates grant programs and offers technical assistance to LEAs, but these initiatives are not focused on transportation or logistics.
DME	Low – Has strong relationships with families and LEAs but does not have any relevant experience operating transit programs.	Low – Has strong relationships with families, LEAs, and key agencies but does not have any relevant experience operating transit programs.	Medium – Has experience with grant programs and technical assistance that efforts are not focused on transportation; outside of the OST Office, the DME does not have grantmaking authority.
DMPSJ	Low – Has relationships with LEAs through programs like Safe Passage but does not have any relevant experience operating transit programs.	Low – Has relationships with LEAs through programs like Safe Passage and with key agencies like DYRS but does not have any relevant experience operating transit programs.	Medium – Has experience operating grants programs and performing program monitoring but these efforts are focused on public safety and not on transportation specifically.

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[16] OSSE is currently a defendant in *D.R., et al. v. District of Columbia* arising from the alleged failure of OSSE to provide appropriate transportation to students with disabilities; while the Working Group recognized that OSSE otherwise demonstrated many of the competencies needed under Option 1, they did not recommend that OSSE operate DCSC due to the ongoing litigation.

Additional Considerations

Through the Working Group's engagement with stakeholders, several other themes and suggestions for the future of DCSC emerged. While the Working Group was unable to directly address all of these suggestions and all would require additional funding beyond the program's current scope, they are included below to give voice to the perspectives of students, staff, and families and to provide ideas for future transportation support.

- **Weekend Service for Students in Residential Schools:** Some families and educators observed that students in residential public charter schools who live on campus during the school week but travel home on weekends do not have safe or consistent transport options. School leaders and staff identified a lack of transportation from home to school on Monday mornings as a barrier to school attendance.
- **Transportation to ATC/Dual Enrollment/CTE Programming:** A growing number of DC students pursue advanced coursework (e.g., at the Advanced Technical Center or at college campuses for students participating in dual enrollment). These programs often run during the school day. This approach could be designed in such a way that would not conflict with regularly scheduled morning and afternoon routes.
- **PK3/PK4 Coverage:** Another area of consistent parent interest was transportation for PK3/PK4 students. Some families indicated they would be more likely to use DCSC for their older children if their PK3 or PK4 students could also ride, which some families referred to as "sibling routes." The Working Group discussed the staffing and logistical challenges of such an approach, including the need to install car seats and have additional support from attendants.

Conclusion

The Working Group took an expansive approach to considering agencies that could potentially operate DCSC in the future and identifying new functions and structures to respond to stakeholder needs and reflect lessons from other transit models. This report represents the culmination of the Working Groups discussions and the learnings from the students, families, school staff, advocates, and experts who shared their perspectives with the Working Group. In today's constrained budget environment, adding new services may not be possible, but the recommendations could inform future deliberations on student transportation.

Through the Working Group's deliberations, it became clear that retaining DCSC in its current home at DFHV – with more targeted eligibility criteria and a continued push for operational efficiencies – is the only viable option for continuity of service and alignment to agency competencies (Option 1). DFHV has built the internal capacity to operate the program, is reducing the cost per ride year over year, and has partnerships with other agencies to offer for-hire vehicle coverage for specific groups of students with transportation needs. As it stands, there is no agency better positioned than DFHV to manage this popular program, and a transition would come with costs and challenges.

A near-term move toward the other two options—either expanding the model to incorporate additional surge capacity and last-mile services (Option 2) or transitioning to a grant-based system managed by LEAs (Option 3)—have compelling aspects but come with significant tradeoffs that would risk disrupting DCSC's operations and the experiences of participating students and families. While we do not see a compelling rationale for a wholesale transition of the program to a new agency or programmatic structure at this time, these ideas could be explored in the future.

Budget constraints and ongoing safety concerns point to a clear conclusion: Option 1 minimizes agency disruptions and allows the District to continue to deliver on a critical and in-demand investment in student safety.

Appendix

DC School Connect Parent Survey Table: Key Results

The following table consolidates selected survey data from the meeting slides, illustrating how parents perceive DCSC service quality and why they choose to use it. Each question indicates both the **raw number** of responses and the **percentage** of the total respondents for that particular question.

Survey Question	Response Options	Count	Percentage
Type of School	DC Public Charter School	29	64%
	DC Public School	16	36%
How Long Has Your Child Used DCSC?	Less than 1 year	21	47%
	1-2 years	11	24%
	More than 2 years	11	24%
	Exactly 1 year	2	4%
Grade Level	3rd	8	18%
	7th	7	16%
	2nd	6	13%
	5th	5	11%
	6th	5	11%
	Other entries (multiple grades not listed)	14	31%
Overall Experience	1 - Very Satisfied	19	42%
	2 – Satisfied	11	24%
	5 - Very Disappointed	8	18%
	3 – Neutral	4	9%
	4 – Disappointed	3	7%
How Would You Rate the Safety of DCSC?	1 – Excellent	23	51%
	2 – Good	9	20%
	3 – Fair	7	16%
	5 - Very Poor	6	13%
	4 – Poor	0	0%
Rate Timeliness of Pick-up/Drop-off	2 – Good	15	33%
	1 – Excellent	13	28%
	5 - Very Poor	8	17%
	3 – Fair	7	15%
	4 – Poor	3	7%
Rate the Professionalism of the Drivers	1 – Excellent	22	49%
	2 – Good	9	20%
	3 – Fair	9	20%

	5 - Very Poor	5	11%
	4 – Poor	0	0%
Rate the Professionalism of the Transportation Assistants	1 – Excellent	20	44%
	3 – Fair	11	24%
	2 – Good	7	16%
	5 - Very Poor	7	16%
	4 – Poor	0	0%
Top Reasons for Using DCSC	Safety concerns for my child traveling to and from school	29	30%
	Convenience of transportation service	24	25%
	Lack of other reliable transportation options	17	18%
	Cost savings compared to other transportation methods	16	16%
	Recommendation from school or community	11	11%
Is DCSC Safer Than WMATA Bus/Rail?	Yes	36	80%
	Not sure	6	13%
	About the same	2	4%
	We don't have service	1	2%
	No	0	0%

(Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% for each question if respondents skipped items or if data were rounded.)

DC School Connect Transition Timeline: Option 3

Phase	Timeline	Key Activities
Planning and Development	Approximately 8 months	- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Conduct meetings with LEAs, parents, and transportation providers. - **Grant Framework Design:** Develop eligibility criteria, funding formulas, and compliance requirements. - **Resource Assessment:** Evaluate DC School Connect assets (vehicles, staff, contracts) for potential reallocation. - **Budget Planning:** Allocate funding for both DC School Connect and the new grant program. - **Regulatory Approvals:** Obtain approval from the DC Council and other governing bodies.
Pilot Implementation	Approximately 8 months	- **Request for Applications (RFA) - if changing programmatic structure:** Open application process for LEAs interested in piloting the program. - **Application Review & Awarding Grants:** Select LEAs for participation. - **Capacity Building:** Provide training and technical assistance on transportation management. - **Pilot Service Launch:** LEAs begin operating transportation services while DC School Connect continues for non-pilot schools. - **Monitoring & Evaluation:** Collect feedback, assess performance, and refine the program.
Full Implementation and DC School Connect Phase-Out	Approximately 2 months	- **Program Expansion:** Open grant applications to all LEAs based on pilot program insights. - **Resource Transition:** Transfer DC School Connect resources (vehicles, staff) to LEAs or reallocate as needed. - **Ensure Service Continuity:** Maintain uninterrupted transportation services throughout the transition. - **DC School Connect Sunset:** Officially phase out DC School Connect by **August 2026**. - **Post-Transition Support:** Continue assistance for LEAs to ensure long-term success.