

CTS Research Brief

Student pass program provides educational, economic, and societal benefits

“We believed from the beginning that the Student Pass program would benefit students, schools, and Metro Transit. We’re pleased to have the data that explain and confirm the benefits.”

—Brian Lamb, Metro Transit general manager

Project Background

In August 2013, all transportation-eligible Minneapolis high school students began using public transportation instead of yellow school buses under the Go-To Student Pass Program. The program, a partnership between Metro Transit and Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS), enables students to take unlimited rides on regular-route buses and light rail from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily during the school year.

“Several other cities across the country have implemented similar cross-sector programs,” says Yingling Fan, associate professor in the Humphrey School of Public Affairs. “Their experience points to significant benefits, but solid research about the impacts of the approach has been limited.”

In a study funded by Metro Transit, Fan and research fellow Kirti Das examined the educational, economic, and societal impacts of the program.

Project Design

Three types of data were collected:

- **Focus Groups.** To gain a better understanding of the program, information was collected from five stakeholder groups: MPS high school students, MPS Student Pass program staff, Metro Transit staff, Metro Transit police, and MPS after-school program coordinators.
- **Surveys.** A student survey and a parent survey were issued. The surveys were completed by more than 2,400 students and about 500 parents during May–July 2015.
- **Existing data.** MPS provided student demographic, academic, and attendance data; Metro Transit provided ridership data. Both provided financial and routing information.

Fast Facts

- Student pass users attended school more regularly.
- Metro Transit ridership increased significantly; costs were almost entirely made up by pass revenues.
- Most student pass users were satisfied or very satisfied with the program.
- Most parents thought the program benefited their families.
- A higher percentage of female students reported concerns about safety.
- Mileage by yellow school buses and private vehicles fell significantly.
- Estimated annual vehicle emissions plunged.



Photo: Metro Transit



Photo: Metro Transit

Project Highlights

The analysis documented a range of benefits for students, families, Metro Transit, and MPS:

- Educational.** The pass not only helps students attend school more regularly—pass users had 23 percent lower absenteeism—it also provides access to after-school learning opportunities at and away from school.
- Economic.** Metro Transit ridership increased significantly: by March 2014, 103 additional bus trips were added to accommodate growing ridership (typically by increasing service frequency on regular routes). The costs of that extra service were almost entirely made up for by revenue from pass sales. For MPS, financial benefits totaled \$1,550,412 in 2013–2014 from reduced contracting and fleet expenditures.
- Transit perception.** Of the student pass users, 81 percent reported being “Satisfied” or “Very Satisfied” and 93 percent reported benefiting from the pass. Similarly, 80 percent of the parents reported being “Satisfied” or “Very satisfied” and 85 percent reported that the pass had benefits for their family.
- Younger rider base.** Students using the pass were more likely to report that they would use transit after graduation. This suggests that the program enables Metro Transit to tap into a young rider base and acclimatize them to transit use, increasing their chances of being transit users as adults.
- Mileage.** Annual reductions were estimated at 18,304 trips and 158,400 vehicle-miles traveled (VMT) from replacing yellow buses and 2,038,784 VMT from personal vehicles.

- Emissions.** Compared to the previous yellow bus programs, estimated annual emissions were 93 percent lower for nitrogen oxide, 89 percent for particulate matter, and 59 percent for CO₂.
- Equity.** Reported benefits and level of ridership were most pronounced for students eligible for free/reduced lunch and those who were Black, foreign-born, or belonged to single-parent families.

A higher percentage of female students reported negative perceptions related to safety while waiting for buses/trains at stops, walking to or from bus/train stops, and traveling on bus/trains compared to male students. Metro Transit and MPS are discussing these perceptions and considering potential solutions.

After program expansion in 2015—including a Summer Student Pass pilot—Student Pass ridership increased 12.5 percent from 2014 to nearly 4 million rides. Metro Transit continues to consider opportunities to expand the program in the future.

“The program demonstrates how public agencies can create mutually beneficial partnerships to deal with the complex issue of student transportation,” Fan says.

About the Research

Associate Professor Yingling Fan and Research Fellow Kirti Das were the project investigators. The final research report—*Assessing the Impacts of Student Transportation on Public Transit*—is available at cts.umn.edu/Research. Learn more about the Student Pass program at metrotransit.org/student-pass.