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CALTRANS DIVISION OF RESEARCH,
INNOVATION AND SYSTEM INFORMATION

Research Notes

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APRIL 2024

Project Title:
How to Enhance Student Outcomes
While Strengthening Transit

Task Number: 3468

Start Date: July 1, 2023

Completion Date: June 30, 2024

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How to Enhance Student Outcomes While Strengthening Transit? An Analysis of Los Angeles (LA) Metro's GoPass Fareless Pilot Program

Providing a better understanding of the contribution that transit can make to school outcomes (particularly graduating rates) via free transit pass programs.

WHAT IS THE NEED?

Effective and affordable transportation remains an obstacle for many low-income and students of color because high-performing schools are often located in more affluent neighborhoods, away from where they reside. As highlighted in a 2017 Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) report, transporting students is expensive, representing close to 3.5% of all K-12 expenditures for the 2017-2018 school year. As school budgets have shrunk, school districts have tightened eligibility requirements for free transport to school, shifting the transportation burden to parents. Although several cities around the world have adopted programs that provide students with free or discounted access to public transit, few academic studies have evaluated these programs. LA Metro's GoPass Fareless Pilot program for K-14 students, which launched on October 1, 2021, offers a golden opportunity to better understand some of the impacts of free transit pass programs on student outcomes.

WHAT ARE WE DOING?

This research project has four main goals. First, the researcher will analyze how (when and where) students use their pass. Second, the researcher will explore the socio-economic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, household income, race, Hispanic status) of the students who enroll in LA Metro's K-14 free transit pass program. Third, the researcher will quantify the impacts of free transit passes on various school outcomes, including attendance, and graduation rates. The researcher will work with selected participating schools in LA county, which includes the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). And fourth, building on



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the study conducted in 2019, the researcher will survey California transit agencies (with a focus on members of the California Transit Association) to understand what free or discounted transit pass they offer to K-14 students, the potential role of contactless payment mechanisms to enhance health, and what their plans are to boost ridership following COVID-19.

WHAT IS OUR GOAL?

Understanding the contribution that transit can make to school outcomes (particularly graduating rates) via free transit pass programs is critically important.

WHAT IS THE BENEFIT?

A study from the American Council on Education found that 90% of Americans without a high school diploma never earn more than \$40,000 a year (for reference, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the 2016-2020 median household income in LA County was approximately \$71,000). Moreover, data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that unemployment rates drop substantially with education. If this study can show that free transit can improve education, then perhaps this research (and LA Metro's GoPass program) could be used as a template for other school districts.

WHAT IS THE PROGRESS TO DATE?

The researchers will finish their paper explaining boardings based on the socio-economic characteristics of residents and the land use of the areas where the bus stops are. They started the survey of transit agencies in California to collect information about existing free and discounted transit pass programs for students. The research is slightly behind schedule due to the Los Angeles Unified School District not providing the required attendance and graduation data despite the agreement between them and LA Metro. LA Metro has repeatedly requested the data be sent to them or the researchers. In addition, the researchers had trouble getting crime data for the bus boardings model portion of the study. They are waiting for the outcome from a Freedom of Information Act request sent to the Long Beach Police Department.