

## Modal

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**Project Title:** How to enhance student outcomes while strengthening transit? An Analysis of Los Angeles (LA) Metro's GoPass Fareless pilot program

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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 WAS 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 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. Los Angeles Metro (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 WAS OUR GOAL?

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

### WHAT DID WE DO?

To achieve the goals of the research, the research team first analyzed LA Metro's GoPass program to understand



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the usage of fare-based incentives and their contribution to ridership recovery. Secondly, the researchers surveyed California transit organizations to document existing free and discounted transit pass programs for students (K-12, post-secondary, and college) and to assess the impact of COVID-19 on these programs. This study was structured into five parts:

First, the research team conducted a literature review of free and discounted transit pass programs since 2000, building upon the work in, with a focus on their potential to increase transit ridership.

Second, to analyze student usage of the GoPass program and its contribution to LA Metro's ridership, the research team examined the travel patterns of enrolled students using boarding data provided by LA Metro (with the assistance of Ms. Deming). This dataset includes temporal (day and time) and spatial (latitude and longitude) information. Because students only tap their cards upon boarding (not alighting), and due to privacy restrictions preventing the tracking of individual tap cards, the research team only has origin information, not destinations. Therefore, our analysis of LA Metro's 2022 boarding data focuses on these origin points. While GoPass began in Fall 2021, limited initial ridership and the absence of a tap card requirement until January 2022 make the 2022 data the most reliable for analysis.

Third, to analyze GoPass usage (individual-level data were unavailable due to privacy restrictions), the researchers employed a generalized spatial model to explain GoPass 2023 bus boardings aggregated by census tracts, using a comprehensive set of explanatory variables. Recognizing that census tract boundaries are not necessarily relevant to bus users, the research team posited that boardings at a bus stop within walking distance of multiple census tracts are likely influenced by the characteristics of those surrounding tracts. Therefore, the research team anticipated spatial interactions between boardings in neighboring census tracts.

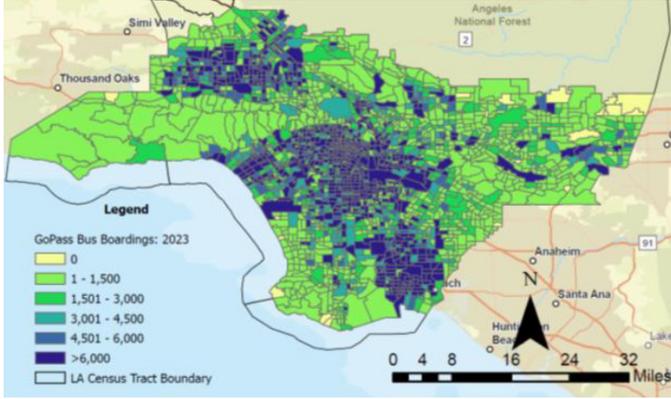
Fourth, to analyze the impact of LA Metro's GoPass

on student attendance in the Montebello Unified School District. After attempting several times for over a year, the research team could not get the attendance and graduation data from the Los Angeles Unified School District. Finally, the research team conducted a simple analysis using the Montebello Unified School District data collected through our contacts from the LA Metro for task 4. The research team gathered the Montebello Unified School District's weekly attendance data for 2022 and 2023 for elementary, intermediate, and high schools and their hourly GoPass Tap data for 2022 (November and December) and 2023 (January-December, except July) from LA Metro.

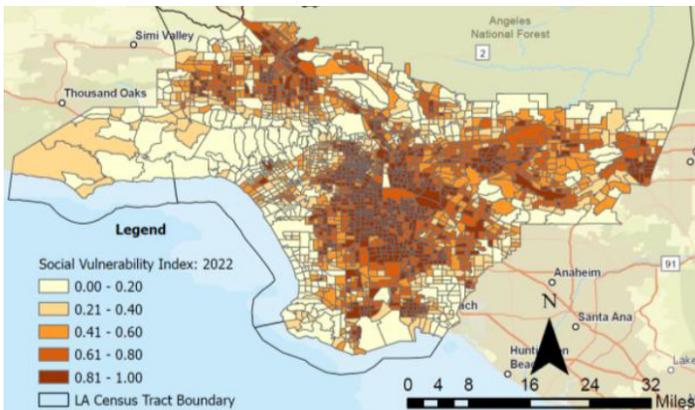
Fifth, the research team conducted a follow-up online survey of California transit organizations, based on the study in, to gather information about the existence and characteristics of current free/discounted transit pass programs for K-14, and college students. The research team also inquired about the impact of COVID-19 on ridership, recovery strategies, and measures adopted to aid in that recovery.

## WHAT WAS THE OUTCOME?

In 2022, GoPass represented 12.3% of LA Metro's bus boardings and 5.4% of train boardings. Weekday usage peaked during school commute times (7-8 am and 3-4 pm). A 2023 GoPass bus-boarding analysis confirmed strong spatial effects, validating the use of a spatial model. GoPass boardings positively correlated with nearby transit stops, varied land use, and proximity to participating schools. Conversely, boardings negatively correlated with cars per household, property crimes, multifamily housing, and population density.



**Image 1:** Image of distribution of GoPass bus boarding by census tract (January through December 2023).



**Image 2:** Image of a map of the Los Angeles area showing the social vulnerability index.

Montebello Unified School District schools showed improved attendance in 2023 compared to 2022, with intermediate schools showing the highest rates. High schoolers used GoPass most frequently, and their usage correlated with better attendance. Specifically, increased GoPass use positively correlated with improved attendance, especially for minority and economically disadvantaged high school students, suggesting the program reduces absenteeism. Elementary and intermediate schools showed mixed attendance results, indicating the program's impact varies by grade level.

A 2024 survey of 67 transit agencies (38 from the

2019 survey and 29 new participants) revealed a significant increase in FRFPs between the 2018-19 and 2022-23 fiscal years, particularly for postsecondary/college and K-12 programs. In 2022-23, 15 of 38 agencies offered free-fare programs, and 13 offered reduced-fare programs, with about two-thirds launched post-pandemic. Funding for K-12 student pass programs increased in 2023, with more agencies reporting dedicated funding. In 2023, these programs positively impacted ridership. Agencies reported an average 73% ridership decline during the pandemic and implemented safety measures to aid recovery.

These findings highlight the growing importance and potential of student free or reduced-fare programs in addressing transit ridership recovery and transportation equity post-pandemic.

### WHAT IS THE BENEFIT?

The research results show that the free or reduced-fare programs successfully increase the ridership and attendance in the Montebello Unified School District. High school students were the most frequent users of the GoPass. Interestingly, data suggests a positive link between using the GoPass and attending school, especially among high school students who are minorities or economically disadvantaged. Elementary and intermediate schools showed a less consistent connection between GoPass taps and attendance.

To align with the goals of the proposed Freedom to Move Act (sponsored by Rep. Pressley and Sen. Markey, advocating for federal investment in fare-free transit initiatives, especially for low-income communities), the researchers recommend making LA Metro's GoPass program permanent. For GoPass to be financially sustainable long-term, the research team suggests that participating school districts contribute more to the program's cost, estimated to be less than \$30 per student annually.

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# Research Results



## LEARN MORE

Link to the final report on the Repository and Open Science Access Portal: <https://rosap.ntl.bts.gov/view/dot/83373>

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