Ride at your own risk: Is public transportation a means of last resort for students commuting to school?

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Rationale

As a teacher in Washington, D.C., I have encountered challenges with teaching my first-period classes because students are frequently late to school. At first, one may think it is because students simply overslept. But students say that they are late because of a combination of issues using public transportation. Students may face issues with safety, reliability, and accessibility. For example, there is a rising number of cases where students are caught in the middle of violence walking through the neighborhood or trying to get to the subway system. There are also issues with reliability. Students must wait for several buses before they can get to school. Public transportation is also not accessible. At some schools, especially Wards 7 and 8, there are no bus stops. As a result, students must find other means to school once they get off the subway system. If they choose to walk, there are no sidewalks or bike lanes. These challenges often lead to negative outcomes in the classroom. Students are frequently tardy or absent, which over time, can impact their academic success. Moreover, students may also decide not to participate in afterschool activities because there is no access to safe transportation. In this paper, I try to answer how we can make public transportation safer, more reliable, and more equitable for DC students.

Literature Review

DC students are traveling longer times and distances to get to school. Delia Goncalves, a reporter for WUSA9 TV station, found that “39% of DC students who attend public school travel up to an hour or more to and from school” (Goncalves, 2019, para. 1). The long commutes negatively impact attendance. According to researchers from the Urban Institute,



“…kindergarteners and sixth-grade students that travel far (75th percentile) on average miss one additional day of school compared with those who do not travel far … Similarly, controlling for student demographics and school characteristics, ninth-grade students who live farther from school are absent two or more days a year than those who live closer to their school” (Blagg, Rosenbloom & Chingos, 2018, p. 16).

Abamu (2018) interviewed educators who directly attribute the cause of student absences to public transportation(issues). Administrators from charter schools testified for the DC Council that “public transportation is the leading cause of absenteeism at our schools.” Kyle Jones, the chief of staff at DC Scholars said that “the majority of absences happened because parents do not have the time or money to chaperone their kids to school” (para. 5-6).

Parents and educators are not the only ones who recognize that there are problems with the District’s public transportation system. In the DC Metrobus Report Card, the WMATA (Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority) bus system earned a D for quality and efficiency. Only 60% of all bus stop arrivals were on time and only 64% of all bus stop arrivals respected their scheduled headways. Headways are two sequential bus arrivals at the same stop arriving three minutes apart (Cort & Hill, 2019). Some other problems with the bus system are that old bus lanes have not been updated to reach newly developed areas and that there are not many dedicated bus lanes in the District. Hence, the buses are stuck in traffic and move slowly. The average speed of a bus in the District is only 10 miles per hour (Mason et al., 2018).

Not only may public transportation be unreliable and inaccessible, but it also may not be safe. Students are caught in violence occurring between gang members, local schools, and/or neighborhood disputes. Stein (2019) reported that students say that they feel unsafe when traveling to school. A student named Mia, who attends KIPP Public Charter School, said that a classmate was stabbed on the subway system trying to defend a friend in 2019. Because Mia feels unsafe, she takes Ubers to the metro station or school (Stein 2019). In general, students who are Black or Hispanic, or who live in urban areas, tend to report higher rates of fear than their white or suburban counterparts (Robers et al. 2015). Unfortunately, DC students have a right to be worried. Wise & Melgar (2019) reported that, “during the 2016-2017 academic school year, 84 schools experienced gunshots within 1000 feet” (para. 5). There has also been a steady increase in homicides since 2008. Hermann (2019) found that homicides have been the highest they have ever been in a decade. There were 166 homicides, 12 of which were school-age children and teenagers (Hermann et al., 2019).

Data /Tools /Process /Methodology

92 parents and teachers from the DC community completed an online survey; 59 responded. Of those who responded, 52.5% were parents and 40.7% were teachers. 22% live in Ward 4, 16.9% live in Ward 7, 15.3% live in Wards 1 and 5, and 11.9% live in Ward 8. When given 5 choices and asked to rank their problems with public transportation from most important to least important, 27.6% of those surveyed decided that the greatest problem with DC public transportation was that the bus did not run on time. 23.6% surveyed selected that the metro did not run on time. 21% selected that it was not safe to commute on the metro or bus. 14.4% selected that the fares are not affordable. Finally, 13.15% selected that the least important problem with DC public transportation was that there were no bus or metro stops in their area.

Recommendations

The Safe Passage Program (SPP) should be expanded to include more schools and more ‘Safe Spots’ in every Ward. Safe Spots are areas where participating local businesses will allow students to enter their store to call the police and use it as a haven until the police arrive. The SSP should be modeled after the Safe Passage Program in Chicago so violence disrupters work directly with school communities and one agency such as the DME’s (Deputy Mayor of Education) office, will oversee the coordination of the program. The next recommendation is to double the frequency of buses on the nine most frequented routes. The DC Council and Mayor should provide WMATA the resources it needs to ensure the buses can consistently arrive on time and meet their headway goals. Another suggestion is the DME should create a shuttle service that is available only to DC public school students. It should have a limited number of stops and circulate during the morning and evening rush hours. Next, a discounted ride-sharing program should be created to provide a safe commuting option for students who finish afterschool activities late. To make public transportation more equitable, a low-income fare program for parents of elementary school students should be implemented. Finally, the District Department of Transportation (DDOT) should make infrastructure improvements to the bus system. For example, more bus stops should be built in areas with the highest need, specifically in Wards 7 and 8. These improvements should also include the installation of bike lanes, pedestrian lanes, traffic signs, and speed signs. Third, Queue jumps should be built so buses will have the right of way in traffic at intersections.

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