

The requirement that public school districts provide student transportation strains the finances and the capabilities of some districts.

Public transportation of private school students was legislated in Ohio in 1965.

In the 1990s and beyond the Inception and expansion of voucher schemes, along with a bus driver shortage, has made it impossible for some districts to transport private school kids to the satisfaction of some private school operators. (In recent years, the state has been imposing fines on school districts that can't meet the demands of some private and charter school operators.)

A September 6, [AP article](#) by Julie Carr Smyth sheds light on how some districts are scrambling to comply with the law.

In the article, the anti-public school chair of the Senate Education Committee, from his lofty Senate chair, blames the public school districts for the problems the state has created.

Thousands of Ohio students left without a school bus ride as private school transport expands

By [JULIE CARR SMYTH](#)

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COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — A scramble is underway for some Ohio families over a staple of the back-to-school season: rides on the big, yellow school bus.

Public school districts canceled bus transportation for thousands of high schoolers again this year while in some cases still busing students to private and charter schools to avoid steep fines under state requirements. In Dayton, a stopgap effort that gives students public transit passes in lieu of school bus rides was temporarily restored by a judge last week. This came after the district sued, alleging the state illegally restricted the program.

The crunch for rides emerged as a [bus driver shortage](#) was compounded by Ohio's school transportation regulations and its expansion to a [universal voucher program](#) to help pay for students to attend private schools. Districts have been required for years to transport students with EdChoice vouchers, but disputes over how to do that intensified as the program added nearly 90,000 students over the past four years.

Public dollars for busing private students

Advocates for public education argue Ohio's transportation mandates are inflexible, vague and expensive.

It makes public school districts responsible for transporting K-8 students to their private or charter schools, even on district holidays or when buses break down. It also requires districts to extend whatever transportation service they offer to their own high schoolers to every high schooler at a private or charter school in the same area.

Some large districts responded by canceling bus service to high schools altogether, providing city transit passes where available or leaving public school students to find their own rides. And those districts still might have to bus private students if those students weren't notified within a certain timeframe.

"To know that they are having to take those public dollars to funnel into other entities is not a fair situation, and I don't think that it's right," said Ronnee Tingle, a Dayton mom whose 7th-grader rides the school bus and whose teens in public school have to take a city bus.

Her daughter Suelonnee Tingle, a senior, begins her mornings checking an app for when a public bus will arrive at her stop. Riding it is "not bad," but learning routes, catching connections and getting to school on time can be challenging as arrival times fluctuate, she said.

Dayton Superintendent David Lawrence calls it "madness" that the Republican-led Legislature diverted roughly \$2.5 billion in state education funding to the voucher program over the next two years — and still is still is requiring public districts to foot transportation costs for those students. His district runs 54 bus routes for its students and 74 for non-public students, according to data compiled by the Ohio 8 Coalition, representing the eight largest districts.

The Dayton district could easily provide bus rides for all of its public school students if the state ended some of the requirements about transporting voucher students, Lawrence said.

"If we didn't have to transport charter school and parochial students, we could transfer all of our students almost door to door from K through 12," he said. That would also help eliminate ancillary issues that arose with public high schoolers making their own ways to school, including disruptions on city buses and threats to their physical safety, he said.

Footing the bill

Republican state Sen. Andrew Brenner, a school choice advocate who chairs the Senate Education Committee, said he doesn't believe that financial hardship, logistical nightmares and driver recruitment challenges are creating a school transportation crisis in Ohio, as public education advocates contend.

"That's a completely inaccurate description," he said. "What they have done is they're excluding all the kids with school choice in many districts and they're doing everything they can to avoid transporting them."

Brenner said lawmakers provided districts with \$1,500 per student to cover the costs of transporting voucher students, and he accused districts of abusing a provision that lets them deem busing the voucher students "impractical" and make "payment in lieu" of transportation to

those families. The amount ranges from roughly \$600 to \$1,200 per student this year to offset the families' costs.

Public school districts argue that transporting both public and private students costs way more than the state provides for it, contributing to budget woes. For Ohio's largest districts, the gap can total millions of dollars.

Transportation burdens for parents

Cleveland paid families for 2,739 students it deemed impractical to transport to private schools this fiscal year, according to state data. Columbus was second on the list, paying for about 2,500. The state has sued Columbus schools, accusing the district of shirking mandates about transporting voucher students.

"Parents are being forced to [quit their jobs, rearrange their lives](#) and scramble for transportation, while the school board fails to meet its legal duties," Republican Attorney General Dave Yost said last year. The case is still pending.

Columbus defended the decision, arguing that folding those non-public school students into its operation — a sophisticated, software-driven enterprise whose buses transport more than 16,000 public and 3,400 non-public students along some 450 routes — was unworkable. Spokesperson Mike Brown said the district has \$75 million budgeted this school year for transportation, and another \$15 million budgeted for transportation-related fines.

Lawrence said Ohio's setup requires public districts to cover overhead for transportation systems. In Dayton, that includes buses that can cost more than \$150,000 each, a stable of \$66,000-a-year mechanics, a \$1.1 million maintenance division, and drivers who make about \$22 an hour with benefits on average. Those wages aim to offset the "Amazon effect" of drivers choosing [package delivery](#) over ferrying children for reasons including comfort, schedule flexibility and pay.

Brenner said he'd like to see more public schools explore the benefits of combining operations within counties to share resources.

The state's largest urban and suburban districts — the Ohio 8 — argue lawmakers could help solve the issue by updating "antiquated" laws and regulations to align with current realities.

A study group was created in the last budget but tasked with studying just one issue: how to get non-public students to school on days when public districts are closed. Its recommendations are due in June 2026.

Associated Press videojournalist Patrick Aftoora-Orsagos contributed to this report.

[JULIE CARR SMYTH](#)

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Smyth covers government and politics from Columbus, Ohio, for The Associated Press. She was part of the AP team honored as a finalist for the 2025 Pulitzer Prize in breaking news.

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