

# Parents' Perceptions of the Rural School Bus Ride

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*This article reports findings from a study of the perceptions of parents about the experience of long bus rides on their children. Twenty-six parents, whose homes were located on the longest bus route in a rural Midwestern school district, provided interviews regarding the experiences of a total of 37 students. In the analysis of the interview data, three themes emerged: (1) atmosphere on the bus, (2) length of the bus ride, and (3) safety. Notably parents expressed concerns about the fact that long bus rides exposed their young children to the unsuitable language and behavior of older students*

## Background

The busing of children to public schools is something we now take for granted, but not too long ago it was introduced as one of several reforms positioned to modernize the schooling that children received. Along with school consolidation, standardization of requirements for teacher credentialing, and various other efficiency measures, school busing enabled schools to become larger, more uniform, and more easily monitored by state regulatory agencies (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998). From the time of its introduction into the daily experiences of children, school busing as a technique for consolidating and modernizing schools has hardly been studied. Nor have its effects on children been systematically examined.

When busing of students has been at issue in school districts, administrators and policy makers have been obligated to reach decisions without being able to draw on a body of empirical research to help them determine the likely impact of busing policies on children. Too often, in the absence of systematic research, school leaders consider only the practicalities of bus rides rather than considering the effects of bus rides on students' school performance and home lives.

In 1869, the State of Massachusetts initiated the first program to provide public funding for school transportation. This program was limited in that it did not supply adequate funding to all public schools in the state (Hennessey, 1978). At that time, of course, transportation technology was limited to horse drawn wagons. The Massachusetts' initiative was a starting point, however, and several states followed Massachusetts' lead, using public funds in a similar manner. Nevertheless, it was not until 1919 that all of the United States were offering some form of funding for school transportation (Hennessey, 1978).

Whereas the provision of transportation to schools certainly gave greater numbers of children access to educational opportunities, at the same time, it enabled

policy makers to gain greater control over schools that had originally been organized and supported by local families (Henderson & Gomez, 1975). Without the introduction of busing to move students greater distances than could be traversed on foot, centralized "district" schools may not have come into existence. Former president of the National Education Association, Donald Morrison, stated "busing was perhaps the most significant factor in the transition from the one-room schoolhouse to the consolidated school" (Morrison cited in Hennessey, 1978, p.39).

According to Henderson and Gomez (1975), consolidated schools were attractive to many local rural leaders and residents. Some rural leaders believed that centralized schools would provide opportunities for rural residents to improve their standard of living by broadening educational opportunities. They perceived one room schools to be inadequate in comparison to centralized schools: "A one room school was considered a reproach to the community that tolerated it" (Henderson & Gomez, p. 17). Relinquishing local control of schools appeared to some policy makers to represent a fair trade. The benefits of consolidated schools were seen to outweigh the costs associated with the loss of local control.

Nevertheless, as consolidation efforts continued, larger and larger "districts" were created. And because they had already given up control of their local schools, residents of rural communities often had limited opportunities to influence policies and practices in the larger, more remote district schools. Ironically, as districts grew in size geographically, the loss of local control and of local support caused difficulty for school leaders (Pugh, 1994). Moreover, policy makers also believed that larger schools would reduce educational costs overall (Killeen & Sipple, 2000). Focusing on economies of scale, policy makers concluded that fewer schools of larger size would be less expensive to operate than more schools of smaller size, such as those serving many rural communities. Because policy makers focused on the benefits of school consolidation, however, they tended to overlook its drawbacks. In

particular, they ignored possible consequences of moving schools out of students' home communities. The busing of many children to one centrally located school was one of these consequences. And a corollary was the incursion on children's time – for farm work, family life, or leisure pursuits -- that long bus rides implicated (Fox, 1996).

Research addressing the practice of school busing and its effects on children and families is quite limited. Even though approximately 60% of public school students in the United States ride buses to and from school, there is very little research examining the impact of this experience on students' health, family life, course choices, involvement in extracurricular activities, school performance, or academic achievement (Zars, 1998).

Some investigators, however, have collected anecdotal data as a way to increase public awareness of the difficulties faced by many rural riders of school buses. Two researchers in West Virginia (Spence, 2000a, 2000b; Zars, 1998) gathered information from children and parents about how children and families were being affected by long bus rides. Several of the reports provided to these researchers suggested that children who experienced long bus rides tended to participate in fewer after school activities. Children with the longest rides also reported little time to do homework, especially when compared with children who walked or had short rides. Furthermore, children who experienced the longest rides over rural roads described the physical exhaustion that resulted from those rides (Spence, 2000a; Spence, 2000b; Zars, 1998).

Adding to evidence provided in these anecdotal reports are findings from a very small body of research on the impact of school bus rides on children. One study based on interviews with 1100 principals in five states, explored the differences between the bus rides experienced by rural and suburban students (Howley, Howley, & Shamblen, 2001). The researchers found that the physical challenges imposed by bus rides were greater for rural students than for their suburban counterparts. In addition, students in rural schools were more likely than those in suburban schools to experience rides of 30 minutes or longer.

Despite increasing interest in conditions that influence students' academic performance, only one study to date has examined the association between the length of students' bus rides and their academic achievement (Lu & Tweeten, 1973). In this study, researchers used data collected from students in 27 Oklahoma school districts. Students completed a standardized achievement test as well as a questionnaire eliciting information about the length of their bus rides, their participation in school activities, and their study habits. Lu and Tweeten concluded that there was a small association between length of students' bus rides and their academic achievement. These findings, however, were challenged by Zoloth (1976), who questioned Lu and Tweeten's sampling procedure and survey design.

Focusing on consequences for family life, Fox (1996) provided a more recent study of the effects of bus rides on

children. The study focused on the effects of long bus rides on children's home experiences, including the amount of sleep they got, the time they had for homework, the time they had for play, and the family activities in which they were involved. In the Ontario school district studied, Fox found that length of ride did have an impact on these features of children's lives and was a consideration when families made decisions about what activities to engage in. Fox reported that students with long bus rides chose to participate in fewer in-home and out-of-home activities.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The present study adds to the small body of empirical research that focuses on the effects of school bus rides on students. It provides a perspective not yet explored in the research literature, namely that of parents. Although parents' perceptions of their children's experiences of busing have been recorded in anecdotal reports (e.g. Spence, 2000a; Zars, 1998), their views have not been studied systematically. This study, therefore, expands on the anecdotal evidence, contributing a more systematic analysis of parents' perceptions. Its specific objective was to examine parents' perceptions of the effects of long bus rides on children's in-school and out-of-school experiences. In other words, the study answered the question: What are parents' perceptions of the effects on their children of long school bus rides?

### **Methodology**

This study used a structured interview protocol to collect and record parents' perceptions of the effects on their children of long school bus rides. The researchers interviewed parents on the longest bus route in a rural Midwestern school district. Twenty-six parents were interviewed, providing data about the rides experienced by a total of 37 children. Parents who had more than one child riding the bus were asked to respond to the same set of questions about each of their children's experiences because the researchers realized that different children in the same family might experience the bus ride differently. For example, a child's age, gender, or disposition might influence his or her experience of the bus ride.

Structured interviews with parents were based on an interview schedule including 13 items: nine items pertaining to each school aged child in the home who rode the bus at least half the time and four open-ended items pertaining to parents' perceptions of their children's experiences on the bus.

The structured interview method was selected in order to increase the likelihood of parent participation and decrease possible bias introduced by the interviewer's preconceived beliefs (Babbie, 1990; Fowler & Mangione, 1989; Government Accounting Office, 1991). Following procedures recommended for structured interviewing, the

interviewer adhered to a strict set of criteria when asking questions and recording responses. When parents responded to the prescribed questions, the interviewer acknowledged their responses and recorded them on a form that provided blank spaces for answers. Every effort was made to keep from assessing, and thereby influencing, the responses parents made, either verbally or with body language (Houtkpoop-Streenstra, 1997).

The use of a structured interview allowed parents to provide sincere responses to questions specifically focused on their perceptions of their children's bus rides (Government Accounting Office, 1990). These questions were placed early in the interview before the study's focus became apparent. Later questions were objective in nature, addressing demographics and not perceptions. Asking the subjective questions early helped to eliminate the possibility that the interviewer might lead parents to provide the sorts of answers that the research team was looking for. The practice of using follow-up questions, which is common in less structured interviews, might have given the interviewer opportunities to lead parents' responses. The structured interview procedures, therefore, reduced social desirability bias as well as assuring the greatest possible objectivity in collecting information from respondents (Fowler & Mangione, 1989).

The researchers obtained permission to pursue the study at a regular public meeting of the school district's board of

education. One of the researchers then met with the school district transportation supervisor to identify the longest bus route and obtain a map of the route, including (1) a list of pick-up and arrival times at homes and at the school and (2) a list of the addresses of students on the bus route. Interviews were conducted at the parents' homes, usually during the late afternoon on weekdays or on Saturday afternoons.

The researchers used a systematic process of content analysis to examine the data collected from structured interviews (Neuendorf, 2002). This approach enabled the researchers to identify generalizations, or themes, evident across the data set (Krippendorff, 1980). In order to complete this analysis, the researchers grouped responses referencing the same issue into "meaning units". The frequency of each "meaning unit" was calculated as a percentage of the total number of responses. Then the researcher drew characteristic phrases from the data set to illustrate each theme.

### Findings

Interview responses were categorized, revealing three major concerns: (a) atmosphere on the bus, (b) length of ride, and (c) safety. Table 1 lists these concerns and the proportions of responses categorized under each theme.

Table 1.

*Proportion of Responses to Themes*

| <u>Concern</u> | <u># of Responses</u> | <u>Proportion of Total Responses (80)</u> |
|----------------|-----------------------|---|
| Atmosphere     | 36                    | 45.0%                                     |
| Length         | 35                    | 43.7%                                     |
| Safety         | 9                     | 11.3%                                     |

Each concern (or theme) encompassed a variety of responses. Table 2 lists each theme and the responses that elucidated parents' concerns.

Table 2.

| <i>Responses Within Each Theme</i> |                     |           |                      |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------|----------------------|
| Theme                              | Response            | Responses | % of Total Responses |
| Atmosphere                         | Diverse Ages        | 10        | 12.50%               |
|                                    | Driver              | 6         | 7.50%                |
|                                    | Language Content    | 6         | 7.50%                |
|                                    | Profanity           | 5         | 6.25%                |
|                                    | Overcrowded         | 4         | 5.00%                |
|                                    | Student Conflicts   | 3         | 3.75%                |
|                                    | Too Loud            | 2         | 2.50%                |
| Length                             | Too Long            | 23        | 28.75%               |
|                                    | Too Early           | 5         | 6.25%                |
|                                    | Home Late           | 3         | 3.75%                |
|                                    | Boring              | 2         | 2.50%                |
|                                    | Long Day            | 1         | 1.25%                |
|                                    | Affects Performance | 1         | 1.25%                |
| Safety                             | Rough Roads         | 3         | 3.75%                |
|                                    | Weather             | 2         | 2.50%                |
|                                    | Supervision         | 2         | 2.50%                |
|                                    | Driver              | 1         | 1.25%                |
|                                    | Other Cars          | 1         | 1.25%                |

As these data suggest, themes relating to “atmosphere” and “length of ride” predominated, and the theme relating to “safety” was less evident in the data.

When they mentioned specific “atmosphere” issues, parents focused primarily on the consequences of the fact that students of diverse ages (6<sup>th</sup> grade through 12<sup>th</sup> grade) all rode the bus together. One parent commented, “There are many age groups, and [my child] is exposed to fooling around. It’s a negative environment.” Because younger children were required to ride the bus with older students for relatively long periods of time each day, parents were concerned about the influence the older students would have on the younger ones. As one parent noted, “there are too many other bad kids ... [and] not many good influences.”

Parents also reported that they were concerned about their younger children being exposed to the more “adult” topics discussed among the older children. They mentioned profanity and the sexual content of the language used by older children as the most objectionable behaviors of the older students. One parent explained that with “lack of supervision ... [her children] experienced sexual and physical harassment by many other [students].” Another discussed the fact that her children had been exposed to “vulgar language” and explained that they routinely were “being picked on [and] called names.”

Overcrowding (sometimes three children to a seat), noise, and conflicts between students were other concerns expressed by several parents about the atmosphere on the bus. One parent reported that because the ride was too long, “it gives her [the daughter] a headache. The bus is too loud.”

According to another, the bus ride is unpleasant for her child because of “personality conflicts with other students.” Another parent was a bit less specific, explaining that her child had “difficulties with the other students.”

These concerns were linked to comments about the bus driver. With the overcrowded conditions and diversity of ages, parents felt the driver could not do all that was needed in order to monitor and control students’ behavior. Several parents noted that “lack of supervision” made the bus an unruly place. This issue was of particular concern because the route traversed hilly secondary roads, requiring the driver to concentrate closely on road conditions. One parent explained that because of the difficulty of the job, the “driver is erratic and sometimes irritable.”

Parents reported ride length as another significant concern. In fact, in the interviews with those parents who commented on ride length, this concern was always the first mentioned. According to one parent, the “roads take too much time in bad weather. [Children are] getting home late ... after dark.” Another noted that “the too-long ride hinders [the child’s] performance. He is worn out and sleeps a lot in class.” Several other parents also voiced concerns about early departure times (e.g., a 6 am pick up time when school didn’t start until 8 am) and late arrival times after school (e.g., a 5 pm arrival time when school ended at 2:55 pm). In addition, parents commented that long rides were boring. As one parent noted, “it’s too long. [My children] do not like assigned seats.” Another said, “They get restless.” According to another, children were expected to read during the long bus ride, but her child “hates to read.”

Safety was another theme, but it was mentioned less frequently. Parents' concerns focused on rough roads (mountainous and twisting), adverse weather conditions, and the capability of the driver to handle the situation. According to one parent, "the former bus driver drove too fast on country roads. Safety [was] not a priority [for that driver.]" One parent described the problem caused by other drivers speeding on rural roads. She described a situation in which "cars are rear-ending the bus on hills. People drive too fast on the road." The parent elaborated by explaining that speeding drivers created a dangerous situation for the bus when it stopped to pick up children just over the crest of hills or around tight curves.

### Interpretation and Implications

This study's findings correspond with several of the themes reported by Spence (2000a, 2000b). The themes she reported called attention to the plight of families in which children experience long and arduous bus rides. Problems associated with the length of bus rides, such as early morning departures, late evening arrivals, boredom, and fatigue, were reported in the present study as well.

In addition, the present study detailed parents' concerns about atmosphere on the bus, and these concerns were also similar to those reported by Spence (2000b). The West Virginia parents quoted in Spence's report expressed concern about young children riding buses with older students as well as concern about student conflicts during long bus rides. The problems associated with student safety and student conflicts were made worse when drivers were forced to focus on driving the bus under demanding conditions (Spence, 2000b). Atmosphere issues including diverse ages, driver supervision, inappropriate language, and student conflicts were, as discussed above, also reported by parents in the present study.

Even though safety issues were reported less frequently than concerns about ride length and atmosphere on the bus, parents in the present study did make points about bus safety that were similar to those recorded by Spence (2000b). Spence reported that parents worried about mountainous terrain and winding roads, especially in adverse weather. Parents in the present study reported nearly identical concerns about terrain and weather, adding, in one case, concern for motorists who drive too fast on rural roads.

Findings from this small-scale study as well as from related reports and studies suggest that the impact of long bus rides on school children is not a trivial concern and, therefore, deserves the attention of educational researchers and policy makers. Nevertheless, research to date has hardly been definitive. Additional research—including studies with larger samples and studies that examine associations between bus ride conditions and various relevant outcomes (e.g., homework time, family time, student achievement, extracurricular participation)—are clearly needed.

### Implications for Practice

Funding restrictions and the propensity of many states to push for the consolidation of small schools and school districts are creating longer bus rides for many rural students. This study focused on only one bus route in one rural school district, and there are several implications for practice pertaining in particular to that district. These implications, however, are illustrative of the sorts of practical approaches that other similarly situated districts might want to consider.

Given evidence about the unhealthy social environment created on buses that traverse long distances with students ranging in age from early childhood through late adolescence, district officials might want to consider adding supervisors or monitors to buses with the longest rides, most difficult driving challenges, or most overcrowded conditions. These personnel could help maintain a better atmosphere on the bus by providing greater supervision than a lone driver is capable of providing. The additional supervision made possible by the use of monitors would allow the bus driver to focus fully on driving the bus on difficult roads under variable, and sometimes hazardous, weather conditions. Another modification the school district might consider would be the addition of bus routes. By dividing up long bus routes into several shorter routes, rides for children could be shortened.

Of course, under-funded rural districts might want to find ways to accomplish these changes without incurring additional expenses. Asking parents or "foster grandparents" to volunteer as bus monitors might be one inexpensive option. Furthermore, where bus drivers are paid for a half-day of work, dividing routes might be workable without incurring additional expenses for salaries.

Some rural districts have been able to limit school consolidation, and these districts may turn out to be fortunate. An accumulating body of evidence on small schools (e.g., Howley, 1996a, 1996b) shows the academic benefits associated with this policy decision. Findings about bus ride length—including those reported here—suggest that decisions about consolidation may also have an impact on children's physical and emotional well-being.

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