

CONCLUSION: A review of the transportation programs for 50 Mississippi school districts in FY 2023 showed opportunities for districts to strengthen their programs and increase efficiency. For example, 39 reporting districts (80%) did not use routing software to manage their bus routes, which can help districts achieve maximize efficiency. There was also wide variance in the performance of districts in key areas such as cost per bus and cost per mile, suggesting that districts have room for improvement. Some districts have characteristics that naturally result in greater program efficiency (e.g., dense population of students in a small geographic area). As a whole, reporting districts performed favorably compared to regional peers in certain areas (e.g., cost per mile), while districts slightly underperformed regional peers in other areas (e.g., staffing for maintenance of buses).



BACKGROUND

In FY 2025, PEER received funding to contract with Glimpse K12 (now Level Data) to conduct a comparative review of 50 school districts. This report focuses on one of six non-instructional areas of review—transportation (Volume VI). Other non-instructional reports include:

- Finance and Supply Chain (Volume I);
- Human Resources (Volume II);
- Information technology (Volume III);
- Nutrition (Volume IV);
- Operations (Volume V).

KEY FINDINGS

- **Of the 49 school districts reporting, 39 (80%) did not utilize routing software to manage their bus routes.**
Bus routing software is intended to help districts achieve maximum efficiency. However, transportation program staff must be proficient in using the software.
- **17 districts (35%) did not use formal guidelines for student seating on buses.**
Formal guidelines can offer safety, discipline, and accountability benefits.
- **School districts use various bus route methods. For example, 26 districts indicated that students from all grades in a geographic area ride the bus together and are dropped off at their respective schools, while 10 districts assign a bus to transport students exclusively to and from one school without additional routes.**
No bus route method can be conclusively deemed superior.
- **36 districts (73%) did not have a sufficient number of substitute bus drivers to prevent occasional service delays.**
Eighteen districts reported using alternative methods to having substitute bus drivers (e.g., merging routes or having transportation department staff provide coverage).
- **As a whole, reporting districts performed favorably on some key performance indicators as compared to regional peers and unfavorably on other indicators.**
 - Overall, districts spent less per bus, less per mile, and less per rider than regional peers.
 - Overall, districts were slightly less efficient in staffing for maintenance of buses than regional peers and slightly less efficient in transporting students than regional peers, as measured by the number of students per bus.

Cost Savings

Twenty-seven of the 45 reporting districts have the potential for cost savings either through bus route improvements or staffing adjustments. Of the districts reporting, annual projected potential cost savings could be up to **\$2.09 million** for bus route improvements and up to **\$595,000** for staffing adjustments.

Exhibit 11 on page 30 provides a summary of projected potential cost savings from bus route improvements in 20 districts and Exhibit 12 on page 34 provides a summary of projected potential cost savings from transportation staffing adjustments in 16 districts.

While the reported data suggests the potential for cost savings for these districts, each district's administration should carefully review the data and recommendations in light of the particular circumstances of the district.

Variance in District Performance on Key Indicators

- Of the districts reporting on key performance indicators,
 - average annual cost per bus overall in FY 2023 ranged from approximately \$16,500 for Richton to approximately \$92,000 for Tunica County;
 - cost per rider ranged from \$436 in Pontotoc County to \$3,462 in Tunica County; and,
 - annual cost per mile ranged from \$2.13 in Pontotoc County to \$22.51 in Greenwood Leflore.
- In terms of staffing, the number of buses per mechanic ranged from 8.5 in West Tallahatchie to 42 in Tupelo. Some districts' maintenance function may be overstaffed, while other districts' maintenance function may be understaffed.

Issues with Missing Data

Some districts did not provide all of the information requested for this report, which inhibited the assessment team's ability to conduct a complete analysis of transportation functions in the selected districts.

- The transportation department at Aberdeen did not provide any data or information for this report. Further, the departments at Jefferson, Kemper, North Bolivar, Petal, South Pike, and Webster provided a minimal amount of data.

Without timely and accurate financial information, the districts' ability to manage costs and allocate taxpayer funds effectively is compromised.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISTRICTS

1. In FY 2026, each district superintendent, in consultation with the district's transportation program personnel, should review the information from this report and implement each of the relevant district recommendations to increase efficiency, improve service levels, and/or achieve cost savings. These include, but are not limited to:
 - a. potential implementation of bus routing software;
 - b. potential implementation of formal guidelines for student seating on buses;
 - c. annual reviews of bus routes;
 - d. identify potential opportunities for bus route optimization;
 - e. evaluate approaches for addressing driver absences; and,
 - f. assess mechanic staffing levels and spare fleet size.
2. District administrators should also use the information in this report to compare their performance to that of their peers in Mississippi, as well as regionally and nationally, to identify areas for potential improvement, and take action to improve in those areas.
3. For districts unable to provide benchmarking or performance information during this review pertaining to their transportation programs (or provided questionable data), relevant district personnel should take action to begin collecting and monitoring precise transportation data on an ongoing basis.
4. District personnel should provide an annual performance report to the district superintendent regarding the status of the transportation programs using the measures included in this review.
5. District administrators should use the information from annual performance reports to monitor their district's costs and efficiency in operating its transportation program.