

- Industry News
- School Bus Security
- Seat Belts
- Clean School Bus
- Government
- 15 Passenger Vans
- Data & Statistics
- Position Papers
- Head Start
- Special Needs Trans.
- School Bus Contractors
- FAQ's
- Bus Maintenance
- States & Provinces
- STN Articles
- Industry Resources
- Hot Links
- Industry Contacts
- Calendar
- Child Passenger Safety

Special Report: *Changes Sought to 'No Child Left Behind' for Benefit of School Transportation, Too*

By Julie Metea

As President Barack Obama and the 111th U.S. Congress launch into governing a vulnerable nation, the public can only guess what programs and policies will survive in an unsteady economic environment.

Education costs taxpayers some \$500 billion a year. If you size that up against what's gone out the door in emergency funding, education funding is somewhere between the \$700 billion forked over to the banking industry last year and the \$300 billion that

President Obama vows to cut out of the public tax liability this year. That has left many in academic and school transportation circles speculating about the future of education. During his campaign, President Obama vowed to support education but also reform the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

"The current economic environment is a game-changer. Everything that costs money will come under scrutiny, and NCLB, if properly funded, would cost lots of money. NCLB is part of the Bush legacy and destined for reform," said Joseph DePierro, dean of Seton Hall

University's College of Education and Human Services.

President George W. Bush touted NCLB as one of his biggest accomplishments. For the first time, states receiving federal K-12 education funding were required to hold districts and schools accountable for the achievement of students, regardless of their income levels, special education status, or ethnic, racial, or native-language backgrounds.

Currently under NCLB, schools that don't make the grade lose money and could be shut down.

In addition, students may transfer from a low-performing school to well-performing school, if space is available. Students with disabilities may transfer into other regular schools, including a public charter school within the district. In these cases, the district must provide transportation and use Title I funds, if necessary.

"All of the studies suggest that less than one percent of kids have taken advantage of the transportation provision. Many don't qualify. And it's still very expensive for the school," said Encarna Rodriguez, Ph.D., assistant professor of education at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia.

She's joined by others who knock NCLB and its lack of funding, as it goes up for reauthorization this year.

"If you give students a school choice and no ride, then you haven't given them much of a choice. Transportation has to be a strong component. In rural areas, transportation is a big issue," said Linda Harrill, president and CEO of Communities in Schools of North Carolina, a community-based nonprofit organization to prevent student dropout.

Since the launch in 2002, Harrill has been critical of NCLB and how it relates to raising graduation rates and improving a child's day-to-day school experience.

Local-level groups feel politicians have ignored their grassroots views. Both teacher and parent groups have challenged the law due to the rigid and punitive mandates. A group of teachers launched the Web site noNCLB.org as a way to resist the law. The Newark Parents Association in New Jersey challenged NCLB in federal court on grounds that they received insufficient notice about their choices.

At first overwhelmingly supportive, many policy makers are now also pointing to flaws. Many point to NCLB's standardized testing, which is used to gauge schools' success. Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass) has led accusations that NCLB has been far too underfunded to succeed.

Other school and transportation leaders aren't holding their breath and instead are finding solutions to provide a better education and rides for

instead are finding solutions to provide a better education and rides for children. In California, transportation provider American Logistics Company has successfully worked with districts to lower costs by assisting cooperatives, Joint Powers of Authority (JPAs), Special Education Local Plan Agencies (SELPA) and other countywide organizations that implement NCLB choice.

“Every district takes kids to non-public schools and many districts end up transporting only a few kids great distances to get to the specialized schools. We group-load all the kids to the non-public schools and share the costs with all districts on an individual basis,” said Chris Thomas, American Logistics manager.

For example, the company had been transporting one student in Northern California more than 20 miles to school. A neighboring district also had one student that was going to the same school. After getting proper approvals, the company ended up transporting both students together. The total saved by both districts was \$28,800 for two students.

“Everyone in transportation is being asked to do more with less. That either breeds great creativity or great chaos,” Thomas added.

Another organization, SocialSmarts in Bellevue, Wash., believes in improving school performance by addressing social discipline, rather than emphasizing only standardized testing as the basis of school success.

“When you look at NCLB and all the complaints, they point at root cause of inadequate social skills and discipline,” said Corinne Gregory, founder and president of SocialSmarts. “Conduct on the bus reflects what goes on in the classroom. If they don’t acquire the skills, it won’t get any better on or off the bus.”

The organization assisted the Cascade Heights Public Charter School in Oregon by implementing a program called “The Polite Child.” The school felt it necessary to go above and beyond NCLB to set high academic standards.

“We knew it would be an excellent, systematic approach to preparing children for a global society who were polite, hospitable and kind. Children who are comfortable socially do better in school, feel better about themselves, and are confident in their relationships,” said Principal Holly Denman.

The school reportedly improved behavior and performance in both its classrooms and school buses, according to Gregory.

“We can’t allow the current economy to be an excuse on how we fail for our children. We need to work on effective education reform or die trying,” said Gregory.