

# **Low-Income Student Bus Pass Pilot Project Evaluation**

## **Executive Summary**

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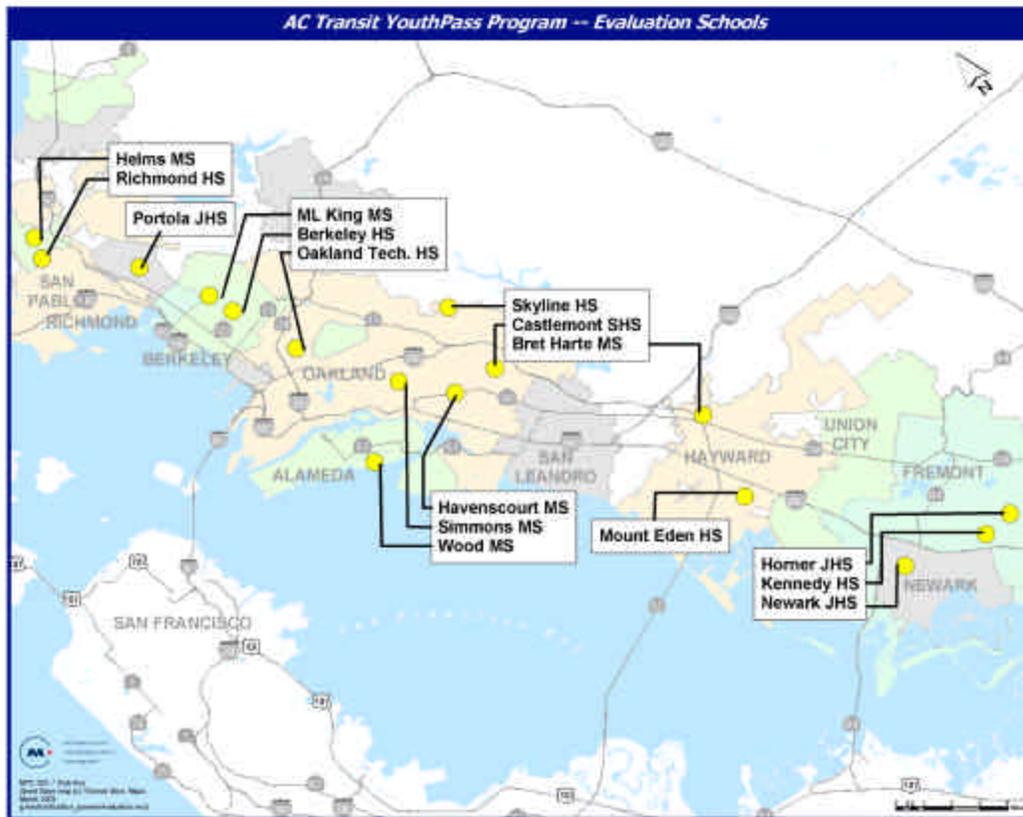
In August 2002, AC Transit began offering free bus passes to low-income middle and high school students. At the same time, the agency reduced the cost of its monthly youth pass from \$27 to \$15. This dramatic reduction in costs for student riders resulted from a grassroots advocacy campaign that successfully focused local political attention on school transportation in an area where school busing had largely been eliminated for middle school and high school students. The creation of the program drew together state and local elected officials, youth advocates, schools, and transportation agencies. Across these diverse groups, there was a wide range of goals. Some of the primary goals for the program were improving social equity by lessening the financial burden on low-income families and increasing opportunities for low-income students, improving school attendance rates, increasing participation in after-school and weekend enrichment programs, and improving bus operations by converting students to passes.

The two-year demonstration project began in fall 2002 with funding from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) Low Income Flexible Transportation (LIFT) program as well as from the transit operator and several nonprofit organizations. Financial shortfalls in the AC Transit budget led to a mid-course restructuring of the program. At the end of the first year, the AC Transit Board eliminated the free bus pass for low-income students; the remaining LIFT funds will be used to support a \$15 monthly pass for all youth.

MTC contracted with the Institute of Transportation Studies (ITS) at UC Berkeley to evaluate the impacts of the program on youth, families, schools, and transit providers. Research focused on five areas: attendance, after-school participation, youth travel patterns, program implementation, and impacts on AC Transit. The remainder of this section summarizes the research findings in each of those areas. The remainder of the report contains detailed results for each topic.

The study design used multiple methods to assess the impacts of the program including: attendance and grade data from school districts, surveys of over 1,000 students; interviews with school administrators, bus pass program coordinators, truancy officers, and after-school program coordinators; focus groups with students and parents; and financial and operational information from AC Transit. Resources did not permit us to survey all participating schools and students, a set of evaluation schools representative of the geographic, ethnic, and economic diversity of the AC Transit service district were chosen (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Map of Bus Pass Program Service Area



Previous research suggests that one year is too short a time period to assess the impacts of this program on travel patterns, school attendance, and achievement. Each is affected by many variables, only one of which is cost. It is therefore unlikely that we can fully determine how free transit impacts students. For example, attendance patterns develop over time; a free bus pass may not change the attendance patterns of a high school senior but it might prevent a 7<sup>th</sup> grader from developing poor attendance habits. To see the full effects of the pass on attendance, it would be necessary to monitor students over many years. Long term monitoring was not possible with this program.

### Program Statistics

Across the AC Transit service area nearly 25,000 free bus passes were distributed. At the evaluation schools, the percentage of students receiving the free bus pass varied from 2 to 61 percent (see table 1). Overall this equates to nearly two-thirds of the students enrolled in free or reduced lunch receiving a free bus pass.

**Table 1: Free Pass Distribution, 2002-03 School Year**

District	School	Grade	Enrollment	% Free Bus Pass	% Free Reduced Lunch
Alameda	Wood (Will C.) MS	6-8	785	26%*	36%
Berkeley	Berkeley HS	9-12	3,221	16%	17%
	King MS	6-8	805	20%	33%
Fremont	Horner (John M.) JHS	7-8	959	2%	12%
	Kennedy (John F.) HS	9-12	1,314	2%	18%
Hayward	Bret Harte MS	7-8	614	20%*	29%
	Mt. Eden HS	9-12	2,334	4%	29%
Newark	Newark JHS	7-8	1,078	10%	25%
Oakland	Castlemont Sr. HS	9-12	1,723	39%	64%
	Havenscourt MS	6-8	738	61%	78%
	Oakland Tech HS	9-12	1,818	50%	53%
	Simmons (Calvin) MS	6-8	1,036	53%*	81%
	Skyline HS	9-12	2,226	47%	44%
West	Helms MS	6-8	1,405	60%	77%
Contra	Portola JHS	6-8	1,049	40%	51%
Costa	Richmond HS	9-12	1,833	23%	59%

Source: California Dept of Education, AC Transit

\* estimated by AC Transit (i.e. not reported by school)

## Findings

### *Attendance and Achievement*

Neither attendance nor students' grades significantly changed with the implementation of the free bus pass. These findings are not surprising given the body of research showing student attendance develops over many years and in response to a variety of factors. A single-focus policy therefore faces great difficulty in changing student behavior, particularly over a short period of time. The attendance data do show that students who received a pass were not absent more than their peers prior to program implementation. These data suggest that the program may not have effectively reached the audience it intended to serve.

### *After-school participation*

After-school program coordinators reported increasing participation by students during the year of program implementation. While they were unable to directly attribute this to the free bus pass program, nearly all coordinators reported that a fair share of students ride the bus home from after-school activities, and describe a significant proportion of participants as eligible for the free pass. Many coordinators reported safety concerns about the bus stops closest to their sites, particularly after dark. These concerns reinforce that cost is not the only critical factor in encouraging low-income students' participation in after-school programs. Nevertheless coordinators unanimously recognized that transportation is one of the most important factors in building a successful program.

### ***Youth travel patterns***

Surveys and discussions with students and parents suggest that the overall proportion of children riding public buses to and from school and after-school activities has remained relatively constant since the introduction of the free bus pass program. While the overall proportion of students riding buses has remained constant, certain populations have changed their behavior.

- Students receiving the free bus pass report using the bus more for school trips in 2003 than 2002.
- Low-income students are making more weekend trips on the bus.
- High school students with the bus pass are using on the bus to get better after-school jobs.

Research also showed that there are three different segments of student riders, each with different knowledge about AC Transit and different travel needs. The first group relies on AC Transit to get to school and other destinations. They are some of the heaviest users of the free bus passes. The second segment uses AC Transit occasionally and sees the bus as an important backup system. Even with the free bus pass many of these students do not use the bus regularly. Instead their parents report being happy that their children always have a way to get home, particularly if they cannot pick them up. The third group does not use the bus and is unfamiliar with the system. Discussions with parents showed that safety concerns were a reason that some students are not allowed to ride the bus or only allowed to do so under certain circumstances, e.g. daylight hours with friends.

### ***Program implementation***

Distribution of free bus passes varied greatly from school to school. Some schools were able to distribute passes in September; others did not issue their first passes until January. This variation reflects the need for school personnel to review applications to qualify students for the program. At schools with large populations of low-income students, this was time consuming. It is also indicative of varying levels of familiarity with the program. Some districts notified parents about the program before the school year started. Other districts took longer to assign responsibility for the program to school staff and to notify parents. It also proved problematic to rely on school IDs as the pass medium. Many schools, particularly middle schools, issued IDs in the late fall and many had trouble replacing lost IDs. Future implementation of a program like this should:

- Develop clear, standardized materials to notify students, schools, and parents about the program and how it works;
- Not rely on school IDs as the pass medium; and
- Link the bus pass program to the FRL program to reduce administrative burden and paperwork (this will require a legal opinion on school's ability to share FRL information within the district).

### ***Impacts on AC Transit***

When the free bus pass program began, it was unclear how it would affect bus ridership and revenues for AC Transit. Using data provided by AC Transit, it appears that bus ridership and route operations were not strongly affected by the free pass program. However, several AC staff members were involved with the implementation of the program and devoted significant time to the program. AC financial data shows a decline in revenues from youth fares which is the result of the introduction of the free pass *and* the decrease in the price of the monthly youth pass from \$27 to \$15. Because these two programs were introduced simultaneously, it is difficult to untangle their effects. Beyond transit operations and revenues, it is possible that the most important impact on AC Transit will be improved lines of communication with the school districts which will allow them to be more efficient in serving schools and work jointly to develop creative solutions to youth travel problems.

### **Conclusion**

Increases in discretionary and non-discretionary bus ridership among pass holders, as well as reported increases in after-school participation among all students, support the claim that AC Transit's bus pass project broadened academic and cultural opportunities for low-income students in the service area. However, our findings after one year of program implementation indicate that the bus pass program has not uniformly affected bus ridership, attendance or program participation for pass holders. Rather, varying changes in ridership among pass holders indicate that the effect of the bus pass program significantly depends on its interaction with other demographic or cultural factors. Ridership after school among pass holders residing in the denser, more transit-accessible northern portion of the AC Transit service area rose significantly with the introduction of the pass. Yet low-income students in the southern school districts decreased bus ridership after school hours. Similarly, ridership patterns varied across low-income students of different racial and ethnic groups, suggesting that bus ridership extends beyond the issue of cost and incorporates larger cultural interpretations of safety and independence.

Just as ridership is affected by the interaction of many factors, interview findings and attendance analysis support previous findings that student attendance is a complex issue demanding comprehensive, long-term policies to affect significant change. After-school coordinators repeatedly mentioned that transportation is crucial to after-school participation, but neighborhood safety is an obstacle for bus ridership that is not addressed by the availability of a free pass. Truancy prevention coordinators stressed the multitude of factors contributing to chronic absenteeism, and the need for transportation elements in a broader attendance policy.

It is clear from this analysis and previous research that a multi-year research design is needed to understand the full impacts of this program, and that these results will vary considerably given the broader cultural, environmental and academic factors in place.