December 4, 2003

Mr. Charlie Hood
Administrator, School Transportation Management
Florida Department of Education
1114 Turlington Building
325 West Gaines Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0400

Dear Mr. Hood:

I have the honor to submit to you Voluntary Public School Choice: An Analysis of Transportation Alternatives. The report is the product of extensive research and analysis over the fall months of 2003. School transportation is imperative to the success of educational systems in Florida. The system serves millions of students statewide and that number will continue to grow as the population of our state increases. A new innovation in school transportation will undoubtedly increase the support for and success of school choice programming.

My recommendation is that Florida should develop a school transportation voucher program to provide a more efficient alternative to the current system. This policy alternative was recommended based on the use of four evaluative criteria: number of students eligible, miles traveled per day, annual cost per student, and political feasibility. A transportation voucher program scores highly on number of students eligible, miles traveled per day, and annual cost per student. It does well on these three criteria because of the ability to serve a greater number of students while simultaneously drastically reducing annual costs. Political feasibility was found to score only moderately because of prior evidence denouncing a program requiring parents to provide transportation to and from school daily. It is felt, however, that the inclusion of financial assistance will increase parental and community support and therefore legislative support as well.

A transportation voucher system would allow for the development of a more comprehensive educational system in Florida. The other two policy options require either a tremendous amount of support or the development of a sophisticated infrastructure in order to perform at a peak level. Political feasibility, the only moderate score, would improve as the development and implementation get underway.
This recommendation has the potential to improve the overall transportation plan. Florida’s parents and students depend on the existence of an effective system to enhance educational opportunities. This policy would allow for additional funding to be placed on classroom-oriented costs and program development instead of supplemental services, while still providing assistance and incentive for parents to participate.

Respectfully,

Tracy J. Alston
Research Assistant
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Education is an essential and expected part of today’s society. Education reform has been a major political platform issues during both the Clinton and now the Bush administrations. With the introduction of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, President Bush proposed one of the biggest education reforms since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. With the implementation of changes across the board, supplemental educational services require attention as well.

Traditional transportation practices of neighborhood bus stops for routes transporting students to neighborhood schools is proving to no longer be the most adequate, efficient, and effective system. As the use of neighborhood schools becomes a practice of the past, school districts nationwide are being required to transport students over greater distances each day while still remaining a cost efficient and affordable service. With each passing day, this becomes a greater challenge for Florida’s school districts

Information for this report was collected using three methods. First, academic literature, governmental documents, and popular media were analyzed to provide background information and insight into the magnitude of the issues and history surrounding them. Second, structured and unstructured interviews were conducted with officials from the Voluntary School Choice Center and Center for Education Innovation at Florida State University to obtain information regarding current transportation systems and policies, as well as for statistical data regarding school choice reforms in Florida. The author also worked closely with the director of the School Transportation Management Office at the Florida Department of Education regarding the analysis of governmental reports and data. Officials at several school districts statewide were also contacted regarding the current status of transportation as well as suggestions for
improvement. Third, the author attended two school choice conferences where participants included national and state experts, as well as school district officials. These conferences assisted in the process of information gathering and provided an opportunity to discuss the criteria being used and their relevance.

This report presents three policy options for school choice transportation: Elimination of school choice transportation, Trunk/Depot Stop System and School Choice Transportation Voucher Program. Each option is evaluated against four criteria: number of eligible students, miles traveled per day, annual cost per student, and political feasibility.

Based on assessment of the alternative using the four evaluative criteria, the development of a statewide transportation voucher system is recommended. A transportation voucher system would be the most viable policy to provide alternatives to the current system. The other two policy options create slight negative impacts for multiple criteria, while the transportation voucher positively impacts a majority of the public based on the criteria. While a voucher program requires a tremendous amount of public and governmental support, the increase in the number of students that can served combined with a severe decrease in cost will yield greater support throughout implementation. A transportation voucher program would allow for an even greater success of education reform in Florida.
I. Problem Statement

Education has been a controversial issue around the United States since the 19th century. For more than a century Maine and Vermont have offered tax credit programs to students in areas with no public school access for religious based private schools. The options in those states have now expanded exponentially and include non-religious private schools, other public schools, and in some cases, out of state schools as well (Kafer, 2003). Since the implementation of these programs, 40 states and the District of Columbia have included school choice laws in their books. These laws and programs include everything from the development of charter schools to voucher and scholarship programs catered toward students who attend poorly performing schools or are in need of additional resources (Kafer, 2003).

The goal of many of the school choice programs is to increase the level of accountability placed on the districts, states, and nation as a whole regarding the education our students receive. In 2001, President Bush made education a top priority of his administration by proposing the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. This legislation was meant as a reform to the 1965 Act regarding Elementary and Secondary Education and aid in decreasing the performance gap between various students. The principles behind the program are to raise accountability, increase local control of education issues and policies, emphasize successful teaching methods, and to increase the amount of choices given to parents on the education for their children (US Department of Education, 2001).

As the research shows, many states and communities have jumped on the school choice bandwagon, and the programs are proving to be successful in many areas. As with any program, though, there are kinks that exist which negatively affect the overall success of such programs. Transportation is the main issue currently plaguing the success of Florida’s programming (JC
Bowman, Ph.D., personal communication, June 20, 2003). Orange County, for example has a $42 million budget for the 2003-04 academic year. The projected cost for the transportation of the 1,082 magnet school students is $1,000,040. This data projects an average cost of $924.25 per student. Based on this average, Orange County could provide transportation for 42,442 of its students with its $42 million budget. Due to this, the county recently decided it was necessary to eliminate that service beginning in the 2003-2004 academic year. With the implementation of voucher programs, comes the option to attend a school out of the zone in which they are assigned based on residence, therefore requiring transportation over a greater distance daily.

An additional issue presents itself for students receiving state Opportunity Scholarships for use at a private school. For the parents of the roughly 400 students currently exercising Opportunity Scholarship Program options, transportation is a personal burden (Reuben Vasquez, personal communication, October 13, 2003). If a parent chooses to exercise this choice option, district-provided services, such as transportation, no longer exist. This has the potential to decrease “choice” available to those families lacking the resources necessary to provide this independently. Also, when using the public school option, Hillsborough County Public Schools is a representative example of districts choosing to restrict the areas in which transportation is provided by designing specific zones or regions within the county. Students are eligible for transportation services if the school is located within the same region or zone as their residence. For those attending a school in another region or zone, the transportation burden and cost is shifted to the parent. This creates a situation in which the description of school choice is unique to each district based on the supplemental services available.

The purpose of this action report is to examine alternative solutions on how the State of Florida can reform the current public school transportation system and associated finances to
better fit the workings of the School Choice Programming. Ultimately, the report will provide an insight to the issues surrounding transportation and how they affect the implementation of school choice.
II. BACKGROUND & LITERATURE REVIEW

Background

Four key sources are examined in order to understand the background and significance of transportation as it relates to education: (1) the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), (2) No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), (3) 2002 Florida School Laws regarding Transportation and Financing, and (4) the recent condition within the School District of Palm Beach County, the Sarasota County School District, and the Gadsden County Public School District.

First, in an effort to revise and refine the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, created by Lyndon Johnson as a means to support disadvantaged students and to ensure that all students got equal educational opportunities, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was implemented. The ESEA includes issues such as additional financial support for disadvantaged children, class size reduction, and charter schools. The idea behind implementing a program such as NCLB is to increase the options available to students regarding the school they choose to attend.

Secondly, one of the purposes behind NCLB is to focus on the improvement of student achievement by raising the level of necessary accountability each district is responsible for. Similarly to that of ESEA, the overall mission behind NCLB is to improve educational quality for students. No Child Left Behind approaches that by working to increase the number of choices available to parents regarding the education their child(ren) receive.

Kafer (2003) indicates that forty states and the District of Columbia have included school choice laws in their books. As of April 30, 2003 Florida became the 13th state to become No
Child Left Behind compliant. Accompanying this compliance is three key areas of new district responsibility. The first is the responsibility of individual school accountability on the districts. The second requires that each district be charged with the responsibility of overseeing of all alternative education programs offered. The third states that the districts must provide services, such as transportation, that allow for successful choice options.

Thirdly, the 2002 Florida School Laws clearly define the statutory formula school districts must use to determine funding allocations for transportation costs. The formula is stated to be $T=B+EX$. $T$ is used to signify the total dollar allocation, $B$ the base allocation prorated based on district student membership, and $EX$ being the base allocation prorated for district disable student membership. The disabled student allocation does also take into account the additional cost associated with transporting these students. If the total allocation exceeds available funds, allocations are made on a prorated percentage basis in order to ensure funding to each district. The challenge lies, though, in the difference between the state funding allocation and the total cost accrued by the district. The total statewide cost of transportation expenditures including bus replacement for the 2001-2002 academic year was $722,179,287. To return to the Orange County example, according to the 2001-2002 transportation profiles provided by the Florida Department of Education, the total transportation expenditures were $52,110,329. The district received a state allocation of only $25,209,637, meaning that over 50% of the cost was left to local funding sources. The fourth source below will provide examples from three school districts regarding costs of transportation as school choice becomes more prominent and budgets become smaller.

Transportation itself is a multi-faceted issue. Although the cost of implementing this portion of public school service is only one facet, it is an extremely important one in the sense
that the available funding affects each of the others. The fourth source deals with the monumental actions taken by the 2003 Legislative Session on education reform. The current challenge arose due to the various budget cuts made across the board. The School District of Palm Beach County (2003) reported that following a proposed 5-9% budget cut, the 161,000-student district is left with $51 million. This is occurring simultaneously with student population increases that require new facilities, the need for salary raises, and the implementation of the class size reduction act.

Each district statewide spends anywhere from $300 to $800 per year for each “choice” student. The Voluntary School Choice Center at Florida State University currently oversees a Mentor District Grant Program in conjunction with the Department of Education. Each of the 14 district applications mentioned transportation and the extensive cost and planning required in order to continue to offer this service to each public school student. Due to private schools being classified as private businesses, they are not required to offer transportation to “choice” students. However, Palm Beach County for example felt that not offering this service would make the choice program inequitable.

The School District of Palm Beach County (SDPBC) has over 30,000 choice students eligible for district-sponsored transportation with just fewer than 25,000 students receiving services. With a combination of public school buses, Tri-rail (a multi county-wide public transportation system), and the Palm Tran county bus system, the average student travels 60 miles per day with the duration of the trip between 10 – 60 minutes. Using these average figures, SDPBC estimates an approximate annual average cost of $800 per student or $19.7 million total annual cost. With this cost taken out of the district’s total annual operating budget, they are left with $30 million to run a district of 161,000 students.
The Sarasota County School District (SCSD) illustrates another side of the transportation issue. SCSD has an operating budget of approximately $43 million annually. The district is known to have one of the lowest administrative costs in the state. According to the district’s Mentor District Project Grant Application, $360 per student is funded for transportation annually after the addition of 10 buses and an expansion of routes. This amount covers roughly 60% of the total cost the county accrues by offering free services to students living in an excess of two miles from their school. Sarasota County caters to just over 35,000 students, which is about 20% of the amount SDPBC deals with annually. Transportation funding however is roughly half. What this would initially indicate is that SCSD is in better shape than it seems. The literature does not indicate this, though. In an effort to offer transportation to each eligible student making a request, parameters had to be set that in fact are hindering this plan from being as equitable as possible. The current system is set up in a way that students may exercise their right for school choice anywhere in the district, however transportation can not be provided to a student residing in North County attending a school in South County and vice versa. Essentially, this is telling parents that if they cannot provide the necessary transportation for their child (which can average a 30-70 minute commute) their choices are then limited.

Gadsden County Public School District (GCPS) is another example of a county struggling with transporting students on limited funding. Historically, Gadsden County has a reputation of being the poorest county in Florida and according to data compiled by Enterprise Florida, Gadsden’s average annual income is roughly $10,000 less than that of the state average. With this in mind, it is reasonable to say that the public school operating budget is relatively low. Under the Voluntary School Choice Mentor District Project Grant, the district was requesting a funding amount of $150,000. They plan on using $20,000 toward transportation costs. Gadsden
County is a school district containing 15 schools, 8 of which received D or F grades for the 2002 school year and 2 others that received no grade. The county serves 7,500 students over a 518 square mile geographical area. The GCPS implemented a system in which the county was split in three zones and alternatives are offered based on that breakdown. Although a half dozen bus stops were set up county-wide, parents are still required to get the children to these stops. Based on the zone in which the child lives determines the schools in which their choice may consist of.

In summary, the four sources presented support the claim that in light of the increase of popularity among school choice programming, the current transportation system must be innovated. These sources also support three main alternatives to the current transportation system: a) the use of multiple transportation services, b) the addition of buses, and c) zoned choice options. Each of the districts currently using these alternatives continues to experience problems both in funding and the adequacy of the service. Analyzing the possibility of additional solutions will hopefully provide for a smoother transition to school choice programming as it relates to transportation.

**Literature Review**

The pertinent literature on this topic addresses two areas of interest for the possible continuation of district provided transportation in conjunction with school choice reforms. These include the elimination of transportation for choice students (charter and magnet) and the privatization of services in their entirety. This information is found in books, newspaper articles, and think tank publications.

Miron and Nelson (2002) defend the issues of cost in relation to the development of charter schools. Since the development of America’s first two charter schools in 1992, data
historically indicates that costs associated with the operation of charter schools are significantly less than that of the traditional public schools. One main reason stated by Miron and Nelson in their study of Michigan is that for all but a small percentage, transportation is not provided to students attending charter schools. This saved an average of $238 per pupil that can be reallocated to other facets of total educational costs.

Barr and Parrett (1997) discuss transportation in relation to the development of magnet schools. The section title within the chapter “Transportation: A Vexing Challenge” is a good indication of the feeling surrounding the issue. An administrator from a Midwestern school gives a personal account stating that “we could find no other school district in the country that had ever tired such a complicated transportation system to ensure parents that they could get their kids to the school of their choice” (Barr and Parrett, 1997, page 120.) The idea of adding the responsibility of transporting students to schools of choice in addition to the attendance zones already in use became a serious threat to the implementation of magnet schools. Studies show that transportation cycles are currently used more often.

Burr and Parrett also present examples of current systems in Los Angeles and Chicago. In LA, parents must apply for a Permit for Transportation. If they are not granted this permit, the child may still attend a choice school, but district transportation is not provided. In Chicago, the school board has a strict disclaimer on the transportation services. This disclaimer states “it may not be possible for your child to be enrolled in certain schools because it is not feasible to establish a transportation route for one or very few students” (Burr and Parrett, 1997.) Additionally, transportation is not provided for any public high school students.

Due to heavy budgetary debates within the Orange County Public School District it was decided by the board, that beginning with the 2004-2005 academic year, the $676,000 magnet
school transportation cost would be eliminated. Currently, the district is reimbursed for only 63% of the total annual cost, and although cuts have generally been kept from students and schools, “we can’t keep this up forever” (Blocker, September 19, 2003). This issue has sparked much debate by parents of students attending magnet program and some school officials fear a decline in magnet school participation. Although not the most politically savvy option among the parents, Orange County officials felt the actions were necessary.

The Mackinac Center for Public Policy and the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education focus on privatization of services as the solution to the transportation challenge. The Mackinac Center showed support of privatization as a response vehemently opposing the idea of cutting resources such as teachers in the wake of a financial crisis. The center very clearly supports outsourcing supplemental services as a means of saving dollars. The National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education at Columbia University presents a survey of superintendents nationwide regarding the use of privatization. This study also presents support for the move toward privatization (Belfield and Wooten, 2003.)

In Contract Out School Services Before Laying Off Teachers (LaFaive and Hunter, 2003), it is clearly stated that the Mackinac Center has a long history of encouraging privatization for supplemental services, such as transportation. This article was written as the Dearborn School District in Michigan prepared to lay off 12% of its teachers to overcome a multimillion-dollar budget deficit. In a 2001 non-comprehensive survey, the Mackinac Center reported that over 80 percent of the responding districts saved money by way of outsourcing (LaFaive and Hunter, 2003). This district is currently outsourcing its security services and is pleased with the results. A large issue stated in this article regarding the ability for school districts to privatize services is the union. Unions oppose the idea because it would compromise the job security of unionized
school employees. An argument made against outsourcing is that poor-performing companies get fired. This, however, is clearly stated in this article to be the exact benefit for outsourcing. The setup of a school employee union makes the traditional business process more difficult, leaving outsourcing a more appealing alternative.

The National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education conducted a survey of 6,000 school superintendents nationwide regarding their opinion of, experience with, and attitude towards privatizing education services. It focused strongly on privatization for instructional services, however supplemental service areas were also addressed. The data used resulted from the 2,318 responses. These responses indicated that just less than one-fifth of represented districts have participated in private contracting for instructional services, however supplemental services contracts occur more frequently (Belfield and Wooten, 2003). This type of business is widely accepted in the education, although many strongly oppose its use for instructional services. According to Belfield and Wooten, 32.2% of the respondents used private companies for transportation services.

In summary, the literature supports two alternatives for combating the cost associated with providing adequate transportation as well as provides evidence indicating a need for this. Due to the recency of this issue, the literature does not clearly support any given alternative. The present study builds on this literature by using specific criteria to critically evaluate four leading alternatives. A specific recommendation will be made to help policy leaders develop working alternatives for school districts statewide.
III. METHODOLOGY & EVALUATION CRITERIA

Methodology

Information for this report was collected using the following methods:

- Analysis of academic literature by way of FSU library databases: JSTOR, Eric 1967-present, Education Abstract, and Expanded Academic ASAP; DOE Requests for Funding Proposal application materials and district level government documents (n=three),

- Structured and unstructured interviews with Carl Miller, Director of Voluntary School Choice Center; JC Bowman, Director of Center for Education Innovation at Florida State University; School Choice Specialists and Representatives from districts statewide (n=six),

- Documentation provided by Charlie Hood, Administrator for School Transportation Management Office at the Florida Department of Education,

- Supplemental information provided by School Choice Specialists and Representatives from districts statewide (n=five) and

- Attendance at FSU Voluntary Public School Choice Center’s Giving Choice a Voice: School Choice Workshop (September 10th and 12th, 2003) and Leon County Public School Symposium on School Choice (October 3-4, 2003).

Academic literature (although minimal on the topic due to its recent implementation), and district school choice plans will provide insight into the current situations, policies, financials, and need behind providing adequate transportation options to choice students in Florida. Both state and federal funding information will aid in determining the actual financial need and current support for general operating costs for each district. Data regarding current transportation practices provide explanations needed to develop possible alternatives.

Expert interpretation of these issues was obtained from unstructured and semi-structured interviews with key players in the school choice arena both on the state and local levels. Interview subjects were known to the researcher and were contacted for information outside of a
structured interview. The researcher’s professional position allowed for easy access to numerous additional key players as well as documented research not cited as structured interviews.

Several limitations should be taken into account regarding this report. First, Florida currently has in excess of 2.5 million students spread over 67 counties. Due to the fact that a uniform set of transportation implementation guidelines does not exist, data had to be collected from state and district officials rather than parents. Secondly, Florida is a geographically diverse state making it virtually impossible for any two districts to use the same implementation plans. With that in mind, one district may deal with the challenge of having too many students, while another has the challenge of dealing with too much land. Finally, with massive movement toward extensive school choice programming being fairly new, very little literature currently exists on transportation. Therefore, the alternatives suggested in this report were developed through collaboration between school district choice officials and the author with little knowledge regarding the option’s potential success.

**Evaluative Criteria**

Four criteria were used to evaluate the proposed policy options: number of students eligible, miles traveled per day, annual cost per student, and political feasibility. Each criteria will be measured on a decision matrix with a ranking scale of 1 to 3 with 1 being minimal and 3 being high. Scores for each alternative will be summed based on the assessment of the extent to which the option meets the criteria (Patton & Sawicki, 1986).

- **Number of Students Eligible** consists of two distinct student groups. The first is the statutorily mandated rules regarding the students that are required to be transported. The law states that students who live more than 2 miles from their chosen or assigned school, have an unsafe walking path, or are classified as students with special needs are eligible for services.
The second group involves those students attending publicly funded educational programs, such as magnet or charter schools located outside the residential zone. Students attending magnet and charter schools are categorized differently for the purpose of this analysis since these students require additional planning and consideration. Both individual districts and FL DOE Transportation Management Office catalogue these data. A policy option rates low if it proves to be an insignificant portion of total students.

- **Miles Traveled Each Day** relates to both actual distance and time. The distance each bus is required to travel alters the cost associated due to increased gas and maintenance costs. This cost is derived from a formula that adds one-half roundtrip bus mileage with students to one-half bus route mileage without students. From the student/parent perspective, long travel times to and from school are not attractive incentives for school choice programming. Both the districts and the FL DOE Transportation Management Office provide these data. A policy option rates low if the miles traveled is not significantly affected.

- **Annual Cost per Student** is the total cost of transportation services divided by the total number of eligible students. This information includes factors such as maintenance costs, personnel, and labor costs. Combining all factors of total cost and dividing by number of miles traveled calculates this cost. These data are available through the FL DOE Transportation Management Office. A policy option would rate low if the annual cost per student remains unchanged or at a high amount.

- **Political Feasibility** is the effect the policy option will have on both the general public and the potential success of school choice program implementation based on the presented alternatives. Each of the alternatives will impact members of the community, government actions and the workforce. Due to the plethora of stakeholders involved, as well as the anticipation of educational reforms being implemented in years to come (Florida’s Class Size Reduction Act), it is essential that all stakeholders be addressed. A policy option would rate low if a negative affect is placed on too many factors.

The above-mentioned criteria were selected as representative of the factors considered in the analysis of school choice transportation alternatives. The significance of each factor was determined by way of FL DOE data analysis as well as recommendations of school district employees. Due to the wide scope of the issue and inability to generalize alternatives for statewide use, collecting data from parents proved to be an ineffective method for analysis.
IV. MANAGEMENT POLICY OPTIONS

In this section, three alternatives are examined: the elimination of district provided transportation services, the development of a depot/trunk stop system, and the implementation of a statewide transportation voucher system. The alternatives were evaluated by four criteria: number of eligible students, miles traveled each day, annual per student cost, and political feasibility.

**Option One: Elimination of Choice Student Transportation**

The elimination of district-provided transportation to choice students has potential to make school choice programs more cost effective. This is so because this option would cause all districts to completely discontinue this service to students choosing to attend a school outside their residential zone. It would become the sole responsibility and cost of the parent to provide this in order for the student to participate. In districts such as Orange County, Florida, just under $700,000 will be available for reallocation for the 2003-2004 academic year (Jason Powell, personal communication, October 13, 2003). Currently, many districts are struggling financially to provide adequate and necessary services while also providing basic instruction that meets the bar.

**Number of Eligible Students:** District provided transportation is a service many students and parents depend on as part of daily routine. According to data from the 2001-2002 academic year, Florida has almost 2.5 million students. Just over 1 million students overall take advantage of these services (Florida Department of Education, 2002). Based on information provided by JC Bowman, it is estimated that over 600,000 students statewide use some aspect of choice programming (personal communication, November 13, 2003). By eliminating transportation
services to those who exercise choice options, the state of Florida would essentially be telling roughly 25% of the student population to find their own way to and from school each day.

Orange County School District is a perfect representation of the magnitude in which this policy option would affect students attending magnet school programs. OCSD currently transports over 1000 magnet school students alone, and due to the almost $700,000 price tag, has been forced to eliminate this service beginning in the 2004-2005 academic year. The elimination of transportation to choice students would affect a significant number of students statewide and therefore rates low in relation to this criterion.

**Miles Traveled per Day:** The daily distance traveled for choice students tends to be much greater than that of students attending residentially zoned neighborhood schools. In Palm Beach County for example, students can travel up to 60 miles each way to attend a choice school. By eliminating this service from a district’s fiscal responsibility, daily wear and tear on the fleet is drastically reduced.

From the perspective of parents, students may spend less time traveling to and from school each day, as a vehicle making multiple stops along the route will no longer be the primary mode of transport used. Based on this, the option has potential to be more attractive to parents. It is important to realize, though, that this new appeal would be strictly based on the amount of time students will spend on the bus. The elimination of this district provided service means that parents will now be required to transport their students over the same geographical mileage to and from school each day.

**Annual Cost per Student:** Although, each previously stated criterion is distinctly different, they are essential factors of the annual cost the district incurs to transport each choice student for one year. As shown previously with Orange County Public Schools, the elimination of transportation
for one facet of choice program students will save the district just under $700,000. Based on 2001-2002 school district transportation data, the statewide average annual cost is $2.26 per mile. With district total annual mileage ranging from approximately 156,000 miles to over 27,000,000 miles, the elimination of services to students traveling an excessive amount of miles each day has potential to lower the average annual cost per student for the district (Florida Department of Education, 2003).

This criterion was defined as the total cost of the service divided by the number of students. Although certain aspects of the cost associated with transportation services is fixed and will occur regardless of the number of students using the system, the number of miles is decreased which will proportionally decrease the annual cost.

**Political Feasibility:** Eliminating transportation services to what was deemed in prior criteria as a significant number of students, seems to have an overall negative effect on choice programming and parents. As evidence has shown from Orange County’s experience, the choice to discontinue the transportation services was not well liked by parents and community members. One article in an *Orlando Sentinel* column argues that transportation services for magnet students is absolutely essential for the continued success of the district’s IB magnet program (Santelli, September 27, 2003). This argument proves to be two-pronged in the sense that it illustrates the negative impact on the parents and also alludes to the impact it is believed to have on the overall success of the programming.

In order for this option to be implemented statewide and prove to be a viable and successful option, the support of the community is needed. For any policy change of this magnitude to take shape, the support of the legislature is imperative. This becomes a problem if
public support is not there. Many legislators have a tendency to oppose law changes that their constituents do not want.

In relation to class size reduction, this option may be helpful. Although this new reform is on the books, many still wonder how it will be implemented. Broward County has asked its principals to propose suggestions for implementation. Among the suggestions made have been the redevelopment of enrollment boundaries and the busing of students from overcrowded schools into under-enrolled schools (Malernee & Hirschman, November 11, 2003). By eliminating transportation services to students exercising choice, a number of the buses in the districts fleet will become available, allowing these suggestions to have realistic possibility.

Another group of key stakeholders involved in the political feasibility of any option are the employees of the district. With the elimination of transportation services comes the obvious potential of running fewer buses in the fleet per day. This in turn would lead to a decrease in need for maintenance and the personnel associated with the performing of that maintenance. Additionally, fewer bus drivers would be needed to perform the necessary services.

In summary, the elimination of transportation services alternative scores highly on the number of students eligible. The effect, although negative, is significant in relation to this criterion. The miles traveled per day and the annual cost per student both rate moderately. Eliminating services is weakest as it relates to political feasibility. This alternative carries great potential to be fought both by community member and parents, as well as by the district staff that would be affected by the administrative change.
**Option Two: Depot/Trunk Stop System**

The depot/trunk stop system involves setting up public school transportation systems in a way similar to county or city public transportation. The change exists in where the students are picked up and dropped off by school buses each day. Currently bus stops are arranged by neighborhoods, meaning that several buses may have routes over a specified radius and all end up at the same final destination. The trunk stop system strategically places bus depots throughout the county. Students are assigned to a bus depot based on residential location and the school in which they attend. Multiple buses are then scheduled to pick up at the depot station for various routes and schools. Students travel on their respective buses from that location. An example of this type of transportation system exists in Escambia County.

As new as school choice reform is, changes in transportation systems are even more recent. Based on all research and interviews conducted, Escambia County is the only school district currently implementing this option. This does not include districts that may be using a plethora of various options in order to increase the efficiency of the system while also reducing the costs. The main advantage to the development of a depot stop system for school transportation is the increase in efficiency of the fleet members. The funding amount is based on a specified formula, as previously discussed. A major difference exists when a district is able to fill each running bus to capacity as opposed to having some run under capacity because they are transporting students to schools out of the area. A clear disadvantage lies in the fact that it becomes necessary for the district to construct the depot stations. For the short term, the level of necessary funding will remain high. Following the full development and implementation of the system, the funding needing will decrease and become more effective,
Number of Eligible Students: The development of a depot/trunk system can greatly increase the number of students a district is able to transport. The creation of this system allows for more congruent bus routes for elementary, middle, and high schools. Because of this, a greater number of buses are available for each rotation of transportation times, therefore freeing up additional resources.

A challenge this option presents, however is the need for parents to transport children to the bus depot in the event that it be located beyond reasonable walking distance. This problem would occur for those who lack the resources, time, and schedule flexibility, and could have greater negative impacts for afternoon drop-offs than morning pickups.

According to data from the 2001-2002 academic year, Escambia County (a current example of a depot stop transportation system) had a student membership of 44,648. The average number of students transported for the year was 28,336, almost 63.5% of the total population. This system is but a year old, and therefore data regarding the actual cost savings are unavailable. However, conversation with officials from the district indicates that preliminary data is showing a substantial cost savings. Additionally, officials feel confident that this information will hold true to the final statistics upon the development and release of that data (Leslie Travis, personal communication, October 3, 2003).

Miles Traveled per Day: This policy option has two major benefits as it relates to the miles traveled per day. The first is that the development of a depot stop system allows each bus to make fewer stops per school route. This reduces the time and distance the actual bus is traveling. Other factors to this are the reduction in time the bus driver travels each day and the reduction in necessary maintenance services to the bus itself. The second benefit is that by eliminating the
practice of buses making several stops per route, the students spend less time traveling to and from school each day.

This option presents negative aspects as well. Without the development of a facet of the system to include methods of moving students to and from the depot stops, it creates a situation where parents are needed to be on the road transporting students. Due to this, a system of this nature would not be fully supported in a large county such as Miami-Dade, as the goal of county officials is to reduce the number of parents on the road for the purpose of taking children to school. Officials have a desire to utilize the district bus system to the fullest extent possible (Dr. Carlo Rodriguez, personal communication, November 26, 2003).

**Annual Cost per Student:** An annual cost per student still exists, however the decrease in cost is directly proportional to that of distance traveled and students served. Added funding is necessary for the development of the depot stops. In order to provide the most adequate and safe facilities for the students, it is necessary to build a bus stop facility, similar to the working of most city public transportation systems.

An argument for this system, then, is that money saved on bus and labor costs, will be reallocated, but into another facet of transportation services. The short-term results, then, do not prove to be beneficial due to the necessary capital layout; however long term results have the potential to provide different results.

**Political Feasibility:** In theory, the setup of a depot stop system is a less complicated and more efficient plan for school districts. Having one central drop-off and pick-up location for specified geographic regions or zones allows the district to decrease the number of stops an individual bus must make along any given route. This also creates a situation in which the planning of bus routes each year becomes an easier task for planners.
Similarly to the other options presented, in order for this to be successful, community and governmental support is necessary. Two important factors become key in the development of this system: the funding needed to construct the bus depots, and the location and space for these projects. With regards to funding, city, county, and potentially state government needs to support the project. Due to the goal of implementing one system that would be uniform statewide, all three of these levels of government would have to work together. The state government would have a significant role in the allocation of funds to the school districts. Cities would play a role in determining the location of the depot stops and assisting in providing the land and perhaps the services to get the project off the ground. Since schools are run on the county level, the main decision making body, the school board, is also on the county level. Without the approval of this governing body, the successful implementation of a new plan would prove to be difficult.

In regards to the implementation of the Class Size Reduction Act, as cited for Option One, many wonder how it will in fact be done. The development of a more simple transportation system would undoubtedly increase the options available to each school district.

Another group of key stakeholders to consider are the employees of the districts’ transportation department. A decrease in time spent driving each route, would naturally reduce the pay received by hourly-wage bus drivers. A decrease in salary is not a welcome change to anyone. Therefore, this group would not be in complete support of the new system.

This option has both positive and negative effects as it relates to the final group of stakeholders – the parents. The discomfort of some parents may be eased due to the fact that the depot stop system creates a situation in which students are on the bus for a reduced time each day. As mentioned earlier, the challenge it creates is if the student’s residence is beyond walking
distance from the depot stop. In the development of this plan for statewide implementation, it would be necessary to plan for this factor. Therefore, the practicality of this alternative is not as glorious as the theory behind it. It will be imperative to plan for special circumstances, such as the one just mentioned, as well as students with special needs who are required by law to receive transportation services.

In summary, the ratings for this option are split between moderate and high. The number of students eligible and miles traveled per day both rate moderately. The annual cost and political feasibility both rate high. Overall, the option scores ten out of a possible twelve points.

**Option Three: Statewide Transportation Voucher System**

The implementation of a statewide transportation system requires a collaborative effort between the school districts, as well as the Florida Department of Education. As has been presented throughout this report, no two counties have the same needs, equal resources, or similar challenges. It is imperative that issues such as these are considered if a statewide program is developed. The state has data used to calculate the average cost of transportation both by student and by mile (the latest data available, 2001-2001 academic year, states the annual cost per mile to be $2.26; this average differs, however, for each district based on the number of buses the district runs on a daily basis). These averages range from $2.01 to $2.47 per mile. State allocations to districts for transportation are based on these figures. The statewide voucher would be calculated in the same way. Using equations and data from the Department of Education and Florida School Laws, this average would be recalculated without the inclusion of personnel and labor related costs. The new calculation would become the average cost per mile for both the state and each county based on fleet size.
Students who choose to attend choice programs and are eligible for transportation services based on statutorily mandated factors, would in turn be offered a transportation voucher. The purpose of this voucher would be to transfer the responsibility from the districts to the parents, while simultaneously partially compensating parents. Students wishing to take advantage of the program would be allowed to use the voucher in one of the following ways:

1) partial reimbursement to parent for cost of transporting student to school daily or
2) partial subsidy toward the hiring of private transportation service

The amount the voucher would be worth is equal to the calculated cost per mile spent by the district as stated above. The voucher would be paid directly to the parent on a quarterly basis and can be revoked if misused or the student fails to show regular attendance. Those participating in this program will be required to complete a supplemental intent form in conjunction with the choice program application.

The main advantages to this system relates to two of the criteria used to evaluate it: number of eligible students and annual cost per student. As will be discussed, by drastically reducing the financial burden on the state and each school district, far more students will be able to take advantage of the service. A main disadvantage to this system would be considered in relation to the criterion of political feasibility. As was mentioned as evidence for Option Two, the goal of larger school districts such as Miami-Dade is to reduce the number of parents on the road. This option would do the exact opposite of that, by requiring that parents of choice students transport their students.

On the surface, this alternative may seem to have similar arguments to that of Option One; however the primary difference exists in the fact that this option does not alleviate all funding for transportation services. The main purpose is to develop a system that is cheaper and
more efficient than what is currently being run, while not throwing the full burden on any one party.

**Number of Eligible Students:** The number of students eligible for transportation is essentially a fixed number in the sense that it is based on a statutorily mandated formula. This policy option has potential to either increase or decrease the number of students choosing to participate. In order to be considered eligible under this option, the student must be attending a choice school other than their residentially zoned school, must complete all necessary paperwork, and throughout the year show regular attendance. For parents feeling that the bus travel is too time consuming for their student each day, the development of this option may result in the decision to participate in the choice program when they ordinarily would not. By increasing the number of students likely to participate in choice programs, the group falling within the latter half of the definition of this criterion will likely increase as well.

The event of a decrease in participation could result from this option as well due to a school being too far from a student’s residence and a parent not being able to provide the transportation. Although the option of using the voucher to subsidize private transportation services is presented, the value of the voucher may not cover the total cost and therefore not making it a feasible option for all parents. Additionally, counties with larger populations also deal with a high level of diversity within the population on many factors, one being socioeconomic status.

In Miami-Dade County, for example, school officials must cater to students and parents ranging from extremely affluent neighborhoods to poverty-stricken areas where an automobile is very much a luxury. There is no way they could get away with complete elimination of transportation services even with a voucher system for financial subsidization. Due to this
critical demographical factor, the district does feel that in order to operate its transportation and programming at peak level, an equal number of programs must be made available in each transportation zone (Dr. Carlo Rodriguez, personal communication, November 26, 2003).

**Miles Traveled per Day:** By reducing the number of students the district is responsible for transporting, the mileage incurred by the district is drastically reduced. This in turn reduces gas and maintenance costs. Many of the fleet’s buses can now be available for other uses, such as transporting special needs students, transporting students without overcrowding bus capacities, and reducing stress of running schedules for elementary, middle, and high school start/end time schedules. In addition to the benefits this will have on the transportation fleet directly, substantial funds will become available for allocation to other areas, such as other supplemental services or educational programs and supplies. This system, then, has potential to bring benefits to many other areas of our educational system.

**Annual Cost per Student:** The vouchers offered to students exercising choice options will be valued at a per-mile cost lower than the current state calculation. The annual cost per student would now be calculated by using the state average (for example, the 2001-2002 average was $2.26) for transported students plus the newly calculated average for choice students. As described earlier, this average would include strictly the cost per mile after factoring out personnel and labor costs. Even after paying the transportation vouchers, the cost would still prove to be lower than the current costs.

**Political Feasibility:** The true affect this option would have on the general public is unknown, however based on the reaction to Orange County cutting transportation to magnet school students, it was made obvious that parents were unhappy with that administrative decision. An argument made by some was that if parents had to transport their children personally, the
enrollment numbers would decrease (Santelli, 2003). The idea of partially subsidizing costs to parents, however, was never touched on.

A significant amount of both community and governmental support is required for the success of this program. Parental support needs to be at a level high enough for the legislators and government officials to feel comfortable in supporting this alternative. The support of the legislature is essential due to the need to develop new regulations as well as implement a system statewide that would require a funding base. Additionally, it may be necessary for the Florida Department of Education School Transportation Management Office to be the governing body over the operations of this system.

In relation to education reforms such as the Class Size Reduction Act, the benefit school officials will have when transportation services are not as extensive are tremendous. As mentioned previously, some Broward County principals have suggested busing students from overcrowded schools into under-enrolled schools in order to achieve the new class size maximums. By running a transportation system in the county where only those students attending non-choice programs are transported, more buses within the fleet are available for an option of this nature.

Another key group of stakeholders to consider are the parents. By implementing an option such as this one, the burden, although not all, is being placed on parents. The providing of financial support is believed to positively affect the parents in the sense that the district is not essentially telling those exercising choice that it is just “too bad” (Carl Miller, personal communication, October 23, 2003). It does, however, require that parents either transport the student to school or contract out with a private transportation service. Due to the fact that the dollar value of the voucher is not guaranteed to fully fund private transportation, that may not be
an option for all parents. Additionally, in a county such as Miami-Dade, a tremendous amount of diversity exists socio-economically. By implementing a system of this nature, it is being assumed that all parents own a vehicle or have access to one (Dr. Carlo Rodriguez, personal communication, November 26, 2003).

In summary, this policy option was rated an 11 out of 12 possible points. It was determined that this alternative rates highly in relation to number of students eligible, miles traveled per day, and annual cost per student. It was determined that political feasibility rates moderately due to the amount of dependence the success has on the support of the legislative body.
V. CONCLUSIONS

The report presented three transportation policy alternatives to public school transportation in the wake of mass education reforms: 1) elimination of school choice transportation, 2) implementation of a trunk/depot stop system, and 3) the development of a statewide voucher system. Each policy was evaluated based on the number of students eligible, miles traveled per day, annual cost per student, and political feasibility. Table 1 summarizes the results.

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<th>Criterion Option</th>
<th>Number of Eligible Students</th>
<th>Miles Traveled per Day</th>
<th>Annual Cost per Student</th>
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Ranking Scale: High = 3, Moderate = 2, Minimal = 1

The elimination of transportation services to choice students (option one), although scoring the lowest, is supported by the literature. Data from a Michigan study indicated a savings of $238 per student at a charter school due to the lack of transportation services. This option rates high as it relates to the affect on eligible students. As shown by Orange County, the number of eligible choice students can exceed the 1,000 mark and does in many counties. This option rates moderate in relation to miles traveled per day. In regards to the wear and tear on the bus fleet, eliminating the transportation of students traveling distances that exceed those
associated with routes to neighborhood schools, is drastically decreased. Due to this, this criterion would rate high for the presented option. As seen in the literature from Orange County, the political feasibility of eliminating the transportation system for all choice students was minimal at best (Blocker, 2003). Without community support, governmental and legislative support is difficult to obtain, therefore this option rates low for the criterion presented.

The development of a depot stop system (option two) scored ten points based on the criteria, but is currently in practice in Escambia County. According to Leslie Travis of Escambia County Public Schools (personal communication, October 3, 2003), this alternative is proving to be a successful means of transporting students to and from school. The district is, however, still looking for alternative ways to implement its transportation system. The criteria of annual cost per student and political feasibility rate high due the fact that program is currently running successfully. The system has proven to be only moderately effective in regards to the number of eligible students and miles traveled per day.

The third alternative policy option is one that has not been tried, but in relation to each of the criteria used to evaluate the options, scores highest overall. In regards to the annual cost per student, the development of a new funding formula will provide for an amount based on fuel costs, drastically reducing the total from the current one. This will also in turn provide funding for a much greater number of students. The criterion of miles traveled rates high as well due to the fact that the district buses will only be transporting students with special needs and those attending schools locally to their residential area.

Assessment of the alternatives using the four criteria indicates that the implementation of a statewide transportation voucher system would be the most viable policy to provide alternatives to the current transportation systems involving school choice students. Therefore, this system is being
recommended. The author does not feel this report would be complete by simply stating a recommended policy option without a suggested way to implement a policy of this magnitude. The following paragraphs lay out the suggested plan behind the development of the statewide voucher program.

The dollar value of the voucher is determined by data collected by the Florida Department of Education. According to Government Expenditure Data, salary and benefits costs account for roughly 77% of total transportation costs per year (Florida Department of Education, 2003). In order to determine the cost of transportation if a voucher system was used, the 77% was subtracted from the state average of $2.26, making the new average $0.53. All school district funding is calculated based on the district cost differential, which accounts for differences in the cost of living per county. The final dollar value of the transportation voucher was calculated by using the average of $0.53 and multiplying the district cost differential for each county. Therefore, the actual voucher amounts range from $0.4861 to $0.5665 per mile. This data can be found in Appendix A of this report.

In order to participate in this program, each district must develop a plan for alternative transportation vouchers to be submitted to the School Transportation Management Office of the Florida Department of Education. Stipulations of the program include that the student must attend a choice school, fill out an intent form, and demonstrate regular attendance during the time in which the voucher is being used. Due to these stipulations, each districts' plan must include a list of the district's choice schools, the parental intent form the district will use for choice program applicants, and a working definition of regular attendance as determined by officials of the school district. Additionally, the plan should include a process for voucher disbursement, as the funding will be sent from the state to each district on a quarterly basis and must then be distributed to the parents.
The School Transportation Management Office would be responsible for the approval of these plans. Other responsibilities of this office will include data collection and annual reporting, promulgation of rules and regulations, as well as general oversight of the program.

Each district will be responsible for reporting necessary data to the School Transportation Office for purpose of funding allocation. At the close of the choice program application period, each district must report the number of students wishing to participate in the program and the number of miles the students will travel from their residence to the choice school each day. These data will determine the funding amount allocated to each district. It will then be the responsibility of each district to disburse funds to parents on a quarterly basis.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tracy Joy Alston (B.A., psychology, Florida State University; MPA, Florida State University) is currently a Research Assistant with the Voluntary Public School Choice Center housed at Florida State University. Her areas of interest include educational policy issues and she is considering further education in Educational Policy and Leadership.
## APPENDIX A

Table 2 – Calculated Values of Transportation Vouchers based on District Cost Differential

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## APPENDIX B

Table 3 – 2002-2003 District Cost Differentials
Florida Department of Education (2002, September)

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