

No More School Run

Proposal for a national yellow bus scheme in the UK

The Sutton Trust
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Acknowledgements

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Foreword

I had my first experience of yellow school buses when I moved to Boston in the Seventies. You couldn't miss them as they ferried pupils to and from school every morning and afternoon. Initially, as a motorist, I confess that I was a little irritated when the bus stopped, a flashing indicator came out from the side of the vehicle and traffic in both directions came to a standstill – a sort of mobile traffic light.

But, years later, as I joined the school run as a London parent, those Boston memories flooded back. I decided to take another look at those distinctive American icons. I rode school buses in New Jersey and joined schoolchildren on a British trial run in suburban London. Then, the charity I chair, the Sutton Trust, commissioned a study of school travel by the Boston Consulting Group, which we used to start making the case to policymakers.

This report examines the evidence for the introduction of a school bus network in the UK. It argues that there should be a big expansion of home-to-school transport, and that its expansion should be through the widespread introduction of dedicated school buses to Britain. I believe this is something which should appeal to politicians, parents and teachers, because it addresses so many of their concerns. Dedicated school buses are safer than travelling to school by any other means, including family cars, bicycles, public buses and walking. They are better for air quality as they reduce the number of vehicles on the road. They result in savings in terms of parents' and other road users' time, as well as vehicle running costs. Importantly for the Sutton Trust, they can also help deliver increased school choice, especially to poorer families. In short, this policy would be good for equity, good for education, good for the environment and good for the economy.

The School Transport Bill announced in October 2004 – which did not make it to the statute books before the General Election – was a step in the right direction. It would have freed local authorities to move towards new and imaginative ways of

managing the journey to school, including through the provision of yellow buses. Importantly – and most controversially – the bill would also allow local authorities to charge for school travel on an ability to pay basis. The fact that some families who now enjoy free school transport may have to pay for this in the future is always going to attract criticism. But, as this study shows, the current system is far from equitable and – as is so often the case – it is the least affluent who are disadvantaged most. It should be a priority for the Government to reform the system beyond the proposals of the 2004 School Transport Bill and to provide school buses to all pupils, free for those from the poorest homes.

I would like to thank the Boston Consulting Group for their help with the analysis, and Conor Ryan for his assistance in writing this pamphlet. I am also grateful for the support of both the Social Market Foundation and Policy Exchange – the issue of school transport cuts across political boundaries and I am delighted they are helping us to make the case.

Sir Peter Lampl
Chairman, The Sutton Trust

June 2005

1. Introduction

Nearly 20 percent of traffic on UK roads during the morning rush hour is on the school run¹ and it is increasing every year. The number of children travelling to school by car over the past 20 years has doubled.² Recent research has shown that trips to and from the school gates waste thousands of hours of parents' and other road users' time. The school run leads directly to as many as 40 deaths and 900 serious injuries a year, and contributes over two million extra tonnes of harmful carbon dioxide annually to the atmosphere.³

These problems are significant and getting worse, and the extension of choice of school in England as both the Labour and Conservative parties propose, will exacerbate the situation. Allowing or even encouraging parents to look further than the school at the end of the road is almost certain to result in more children travelling longer distances. While encouraging walking and cycling is part of the solution to the problem, neither provides an answer for parents concerned with safety, nor are they practical for those children travelling further to attend school.

To tackle the problem head on, this paper argues that we should introduce a dedicated school bus network of the type used in North America. There, over half of children go to school on a yellow bus, compared with just 6 percent of pupils in the UK. In the US free bussing is, with a few exceptions, available to all pupils who live over one mile from school; in this country the threshold for free travel is currently set at two miles for young children and three miles for older students.

This report also looks at the educational, environmental and social benefits that would result from the introduction of a network of dedicated school buses in the UK. These include reduced atmospheric pollution and the illnesses associated with it; cuts in truancy and crime, as children are less likely to get into trouble if they are taken directly home on the school bus; and, with evidence from the US indicating that school buses are over 100 times safer than walking, and far safer than a family

car, dedicated school buses are by far the safest forms of transport, with safety a key consideration for parents.

For the Sutton Trust – which aims to help children from non-privileged backgrounds – the most significant benefit is the effect that a network of school buses could have on social inclusion. Although in theory all parents can currently choose which state school they want their children to attend, in reality affordability is a major barrier to choice. Choice is only available to more affluent families, with the time and resources to transport their children to schools further afield, or to move into the catchment areas of good schools. Dedicated school buses would break down these barriers and help extend choice to everyone.

Cost should not be regarded as an obstacle to the introduction of such a scheme, since our analysis shows that the benefits to the economy of introducing yellow bus provision to primary school pupils would outweigh the costs by a factor of two-and-a-half to one. The benefits to parents in terms of lower vehicle costs and time savings are estimated at around £350m a year, and the savings to the rest of society – based on safety, environmental improvements and time saved by other road users – are estimated to amount to another £100m a year. The £184m costs could be reduced by £60m if existing travel subsidies were maintained, leaving a requirement for £124m of new funding a year, or £83m if families contributed just 50 pence per journey, with potential for these funds to be found from within the current education budget. Further, in the US, school start times are staggered allowing dedicated school buses to make multiple journeys in both the morning and afternoon, making them more cost effective still. We believe that similar benefits would result from a network of buses for secondary schools, and we urge the Government to look into this as a matter of urgency.

The Government's School Transport Bill of 2004, which is likely to be incorporated into the new Education Bill, allows local authorities to adopt new and novel approaches to home-to-school transport, but stops short of a national network accessible by all who need it. The pilots currently being run in areas up and down the country have demonstrated the effectiveness of yellow buses in lowering levels of congestion and improving the

local environment. But progress needs to be quicker and tough decisions – such as who should and should not pay – need to be made.

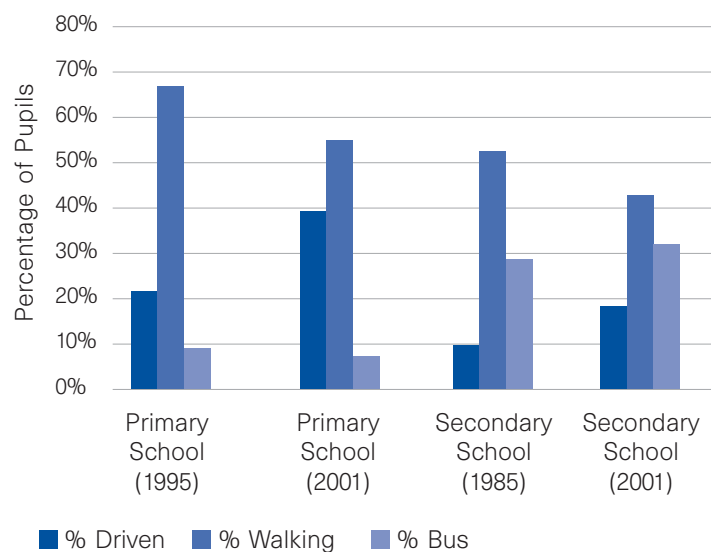
We believe that the Government should act to implement the proposals contained in this paper in England and Wales, and the principles should be applied across the UK, to Scotland and Northern Ireland. It is time for politicians of all backgrounds and nationalities to lead the debate.

2. Off the buses: school transport in the UK

The extent of the school run

More of our children than ever before are being driven to and from school. Our towns and cities become clogged for up to an hour every morning and afternoon, as parents drop off or collect their children from the school gates. Pupils are less likely to walk to school now than twenty years ago, and comparatively few take a bus.

Modes of transport to school, 1985–2001



As the chart above shows, in 2001, 39 percent of primary schoolchildren travelled by car to school, up from 22 percent in 1985. Over the same period, the proportion walking to school fell from 67 percent to 54 percent. Only six percent of primary school pupils used a bus in 2001, a drop from nine percent in 1985. Among secondary pupils there was a similar pattern, with the proportion walking falling by nine percent to 43 percent,

while the proportion being driven rose from 10 to 18 percent. Although over this period bus usage did increase a little – from 29 percent to 32 percent – the majority of that was travel on scheduled services rather than dedicated school buses. Of the 32 percent of secondary pupils travelling by bus, 23 percent are on scheduled services and just nine percent are on private contract buses or dedicated school buses.⁴

The House of Commons Transport Select Committee has said that school run traffic accounts for one in ten journeys between eight and nine o'clock in the morning, and the proportion rises to one in five by 8.50am. The Committee also reported that the average length of a school-run journey has risen, from 1.7 miles in 1985-1986 to 2.7 miles in 2002.⁵

Motivation for using private transport

The mushrooming of the school run is often attributed to parental over-protectiveness, but this is an overly simplistic view. While security and safety are a concern, more complex factors are at work which we need to understand and address if we are to propose workable solutions.

First, the regulations governing the provision of free school transport are in need of modernisation. The system rests on a law which is largely unchanged since the 1944 Education Act. It states that children are entitled to free transport only if a 'suitable school' is not available within a certain distance – two miles for children under eight, and three miles for older children. However, this law was introduced at a time when choice of school was minimal, the roads were safer, working patterns differed, and many mothers walked with their children to and from school. Britain has changed significantly since the immediate post-war era, and rules created to regulate home-to-school transport 60 years ago no longer meet the needs and circumstances of today's parents and pupils.

Under the current arrangements, apart from catering for children with special needs, free buses are often limited to rural areas or to those attending denominational schools. It is up to local education authorities (LEAs) to decide whether a school is 'suitable' for the purposes of providing free transport, rather than parents,

and the basis for making these decisions is not always transparent nor the outcomes necessarily equitable. For example, a Catholic schoolchild might be entitled to free travel to the nearest Catholic secondary school some five miles from home, but a non-religious parent wanting their child to attend the nearest specialist language college a similar distance away would not normally have the same entitlement, if places were available at the local comprehensive. To confuse matters further, spare places on buses offering free travel to those with a legal entitlement are also often made available, at a cost, to others exercising school choice: Hertfordshire County Council, for example, charges pupils between £84 and £158 a term for spare seats, depending on the distance travelled.⁷

Given the nature of the current system, it is no wonder that the House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee has noted that “existing school transport legislation...is generally perceived to be out of date and unsuited to the modern world.”⁸

Second, parents are not necessarily happy to let their children make their way to school alone. A research study for the Department of Transport in 2002 reported that safety and security were the principal reasons why parents continued to rely on their cars, rather than allowing their children to walk or take a public bus. Parents of both primary and secondary age pupils were concerned about personal security and the risk of road accidents, and perceived driving to be safer than other modes of travel.⁹

But these were not their only reasons – others were time, children’s preferences, convenience and cost. The research found that parents tended to have a ‘low regard’ for existing school buses, complaining of overcrowding, lack of seatbelts, poor value for money, and the poor attitude of drivers. These problems would need to be overcome if there is to be a better take-up of home-to-school buses.

The evidence suggests that the issue of travel to school needs to be treated separately from the encouragement of walking and cycling. Health experts would certainly argue that a two mile walk or cycle twice a day would play a significant role in reducing childhood obesity, and these can be attractive options if there

are dedicated cycle lanes, or ‘walking buses’, where adults supervise groups of children walking to school and pick up others en route. But where such healthy and safe alternatives are not available, parents will quickly resort to their cars. Providing a safe and practical alternative is a prerequisite to reducing the billion car trips parents make on the school run each year.¹⁰

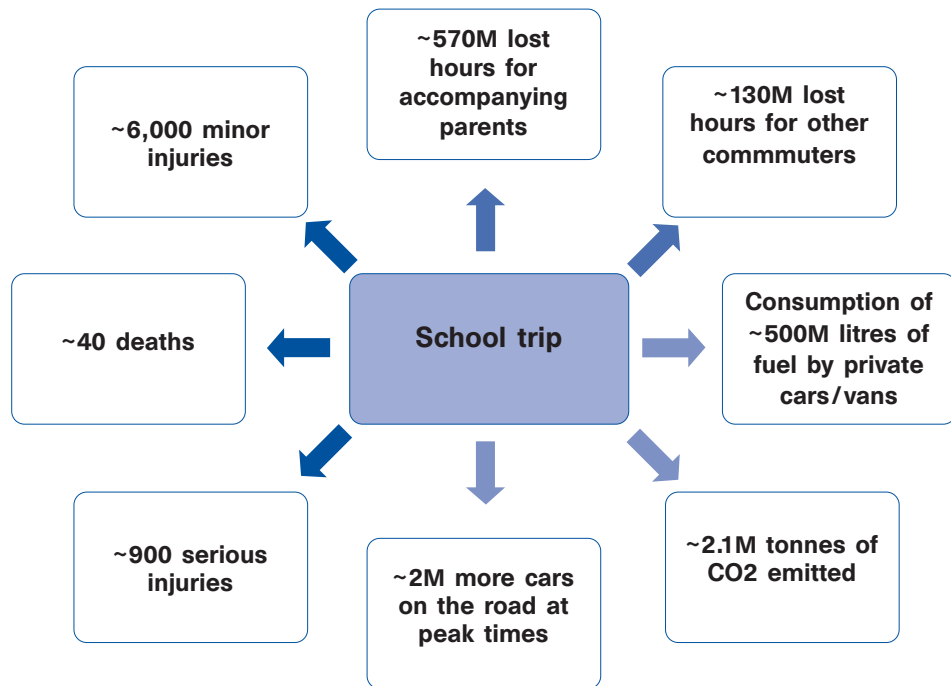
Economic costs

Local and national government in England spent £662 million on home-to-school transport in the 2002–2003 school year, itself an eighteen percent increase on expenditure two years before. Many buses are provided by private operators, and the surprisingly large increase reflected the higher costs associated with renewing contracts in 2003. Under the current system, the House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee reported that the average cost for a single trip by a child on a private bus was £1.50, compared to an average cost per passenger on public transport buses of 63 pence.¹¹

However, these figures need to be disaggregated. Around half of the spending on school transport goes on providing for the transport needs of around 70,000 children with special educational needs (SEN), at an average daily cost per child of £20. The cost of providing transport for children without special needs is therefore considerably less than the overall average of £1.50.

The cost of providing school transport at present (£662 million) is easy to measure and represents a direct cost to local and national taxpayers. However, the school run imposes a number of indirect costs too, for which it may not always be possible to calculate a financial equivalent. The Boston Consulting Group (BCG) has assessed the scale of these over the course of a year:

The annual cost of the school run



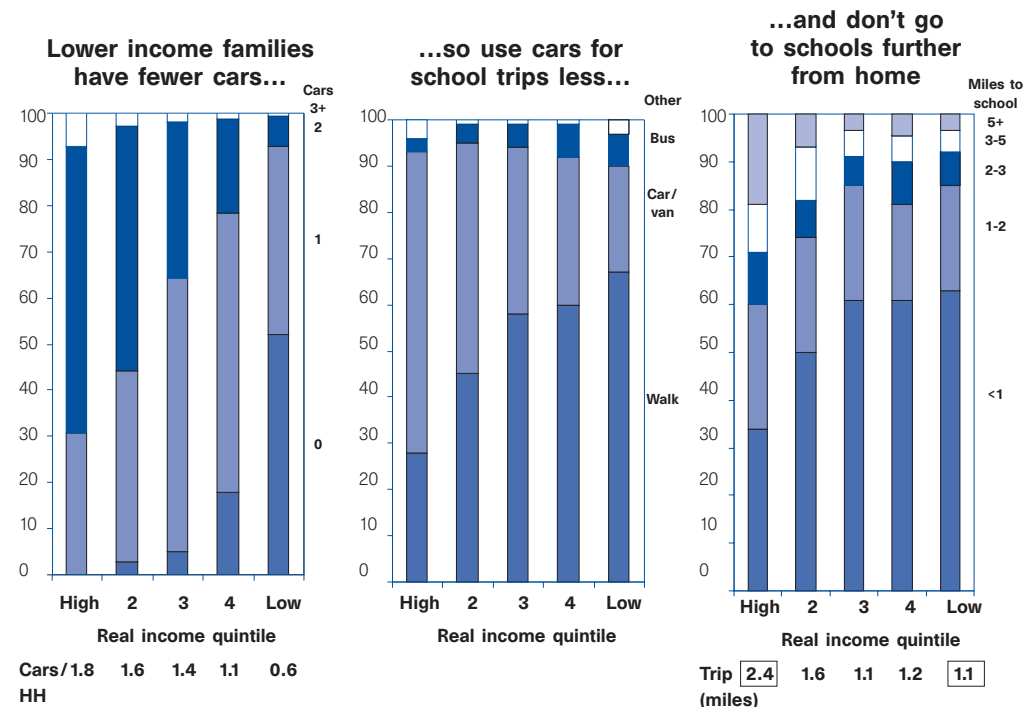
As well as emitting over two million tonnes of carbon dioxide into the air and causing hundreds of injuries and 40 deaths each year, the school run results in millions of lost hours for parents and other commuters caught up in the jam. Moreover, there are also the costs of running the extra cars which take pupils to and from schools, including some 500 million litres of fuel.

The extent of the problem can be illustrated by the situation in a one-mile area of Camden, North London, where there are 29 state and private schools. One councillor estimates that the area is clogged with 3,000 cars every morning and every evening, which contributes to the borough having some of the highest nitrogen dioxide levels in the country.¹² Unsurprisingly, this has been causing such anger with residents that the council has asked local head teachers to help them to phase out the school run.¹³

Social costs

Our current home-to-school transport system also has a social cost: the inadequacy of provision makes it harder for children from less affluent backgrounds to attend the best state schools. In other words, the lack of free school transport has an impact on the equity of our current education system. Although according to a 2001 study for the Department for Education and Skills, 85 percent of parents are able to send their children to their ‘favourite’ school,¹⁴ the factors parents consider when choosing their ‘favourite’ are closely linked to socio-economic class. Those living in social rented housing, for instance, are one and a half times more likely than owner-occupiers to make decisions about school choice based on travel convenience. Conversely, a school’s academic record is the main determinant for some 48 percent of owner-occupiers, compared with only 32 percent of social-renters.¹⁵ The reasons for this divergence are clear when levels of car ownership and distances travelled to school are analysed by family income group:

Trends in car use and school travel by income group¹⁶



On average, families in the top income quintile own almost two cars and their children travel two and a half miles to school. Those in the bottom quintile own an average of just over half a car per family, and their children travel just over a mile to school. A child from a poor background is significantly more likely to attend the school closest to their home than a child with affluent parents, who, in turn, is five times more likely to attend a school over five miles away. So the absence of reliable, convenient home-to-school transport reduces parents' choice of school, lowers expectations and reinforces generational disadvantage among children living in the poorest households.

Conclusion

Home-to-school transport in England is characterised by an increased reliance on the car at the expense of walking and cycling. Buses are used sparingly, and dedicated school buses are relatively rare. This has a negative impact on children's health, their educational choices and on the environment in which they live. Parents expend a considerable amount of their time transporting their children to school. The further extension of school choice is likely to exacerbate this situation.

3. Choice and the school run

Effective school choice

In England, parents are, in theory, able to exercise school choice: that is to say they can express a preference for any school and have the right to send their children to any school which has spare places. Proponents of school choice highlight a number of benefits which arise from giving parents a credible threat of exit from, or refusal to enter, an unsatisfactory school. They argue that this will first level up the quality of schools by creating contestability, so that schools must offer the best services possible in order to compete to attract pupils; and second that it will render schools more responsive to parental demands, as it is in schools' interests to listen to and modify their services according to parental opinion. In theory, the *threat* of choice will bring about higher quality and more responsive school services, which should render exercising that choice unnecessary.¹⁷ However, there are a number of issues that prevent school choice operating ideally and equitably: a lack of capacity within the education system, the admissions processes working against less proactive or affluent families, and – of course – the lack of adequate school transport.

School choice in the UK

Years of rationalisation of school places has seen the number of spare places in secondary schools fall by 50 percent¹⁸ between 1994 and 2003. As a result, rather than parents choosing the school most suited to their child, it has become common for popular schools to use over-subscription criteria to select their intake, often on the basis of the proximity of a pupil's home to the school. In response, property prices have risen in the catchment areas of the top state schools, in effect introducing social selection to many schools. This trend is borne out by analysis undertaken for the Sutton Trust by the National Foundation for Educational Research which showed that less than three percent of pupils at the 200 top performing state secondary schools are entitled to free school meals, compared to a national average of fifteen percent. Moving to an area in order to gain access to a good school is simply not an option for many low-income families

and, even when catchment areas are not an issue, other forms of ‘covert selection’ often limit school choice to savvy middle class families.

Attempts to rebalance the demand and supply of school places have become more concerted in the past year, with the aim of allowing more parents, particularly from poorer backgrounds, to access appropriate schools.¹⁹ There are a number of proposals as to how this can be achieved, some of which – such as allowing schools to expand with parental demand and creating non-fee paying independent schools – have already been undertaken by the Government with varying degrees of success. More radical suggestions for extending school choice have also been proposed. For instance, in their report *Hands up for school choice*, Policy Exchange advocates the establishment of a voucher system which would allow the taxpayer to choose any school – state or independent – provided the fees do not exceed the costs of educating the child in the maintained sector.²⁰ As an alternative, the Open Access scheme, pioneered by the Sutton Trust, aims to open up the country’s top independent day schools to all on the basis of academic merit, with parents contributing to the costs according to their means.²¹ Tackling the problem from a different angle, the Social Market Foundation has proposed allocating places in oversubscribed schools through an admissions lottery to ensure that pupils from different backgrounds are more evenly distributed across schools.²²

Choice and school transport

But giving parents freer choice of school may increase the likelihood of them wanting to choose a school which is some distance away or inconveniently located for public transport. In turn, parents may be unable to arrange transport for their child, and low-income families may be unable to afford the public transport fares even if the school is relatively near. So, even if sufficient places are created and an equitable admissions policy established, poor transport would continue to limit school choice. Increasing the range of options will have limited impact if some families are still compelled to send their child to the school nearest their house.

Offering real choice will require the Government to address

these barriers, most probably in the form of free or subsidised school transport to all those who require it. If transport limits or restricts these choices, then those advantaged parents who currently monopolise the best state schools are likely to continue to do so. As Sir Cyril Taylor, chairman of the Specialist Schools Trust, has put it: “If choice is to be available to those from deprived backgrounds as well as the middle classes, it is vital that we improve access to home-to-school transport. If communities are to be able to exercise real choice between the different specialisms that are increasingly available, we must give them the means to do so.”²³

Of course, the state supporting *unrestrained* choice of school with unlimited free or subsidised transport is not feasible, for cost reasons. Deciding on a *reasonable* level of choice is likely to be the resulting compromise if spiralling costs are to be avoided. In their proposals for a school admissions lottery, the Social Market Foundation argues for school transport subsidies, which would “have the practical effect of offering completely free school transport to a certain number of schools and a subsidy for choices of more distant schools.”²⁴ While this level of provision is some way off, even reasonable choice implies a significant extension of the existing school transport system, given current transport provision and the limited proposals outlined in the School Transport Bill put before Parliament in October 2004.

Choice and the School Transport Bill

The Regulatory Impact Assessment of the School Transport Bill²⁵ demonstrated that the Government was aware of these issues, and that “current school transport legislation acts as a barrier to parental choice for families who cannot afford to send their children further than the local school: effectively there is less parental choice for children from low income families, who are less likely to have a car available for the school run or to be able to meet the cost of bus fares”.

The Bill therefore proposed to base eligibility for free school transport on eligibility for free school meals. While this seems like a sensible way forward, the proposals cause concern because

Charles Clarke told the House of Commons Transport Select Committee that the main aim of the Bill was “the encouragement of people to go to their local neighbourhood school and, therefore, to travel less in the whole approach”.²⁵ This is borne out in the legislation – paragraph 13 of the Bill stated: “Pupils from low income families may not be charged for travel arrangements... unless suitable arrangements are made for the pupil to attend a school nearer his home” – which essentially gives no financial support for low income parents who want to pick a school other than the closest. There is a clear tension here between two competing government objectives, choice on the one hand and local schooling on the other. Given that the notion of school choice is now well established and unlikely to be reversed, we believe strongly that income should be no barrier to its uptake.

Conclusion

In short, transport costs and availability are, and will continue to be, a factor affecting, and sometimes constraining, parental choice of school. Improving the number and range of schools and school places will go some way towards improving the range of conveniently located services for parents to freely choose between. However, the extent to which transport issues may still be a crucial factor varies greatly from family to family – those on low incomes, living in isolated areas or served by poor transport infrastructure, or those who simply want to choose a more distant school for their child, may still find their choice unfairly limited without additional support.

4. The yellow bus system

The scale of the US system

The United States of America is often seen as the land of the automobile. Outside the big cities, public transport is a rarity. The giant Amtrak rail company seems to lurch from crisis to crisis, as people prefer the convenience of the budget airlines. All in all, the USA would not be the place we would expect to find one of the most effective publicly funded transport systems in the developed world. Yet the yellow school bus system is just that: every day, some 440,000 yellow buses carry 23.5 million American schoolchildren to and from school.²⁷ There are three and a half times as many school buses in the US as there are public transit vehicles (including buses) in urban transit systems.²⁸ Whereas only six percent of UK pupils travel to school by dedicated bus, 54 percent of all American school children use yellow buses. No European country has a comparable standard of provision.

Funding for the US yellow bus system

Local city, town and state governments fund American school buses; there is no federal subsidy, except for some specialist buses. But parents are increasingly being charged a fee, where state law allows it. The rules regarding who is entitled to free travel vary from one jurisdiction to another, but typically those living more than one mile from the school are entitled to a free trip.²⁹ Even so, the public subsidy in 2000 was worth more than \$500 per pupil.³⁰

Canada has a similar school transport system. The national government sets safety standards, the provincial authorities provide funding and regulations, and local school boards set local policies, determine need and contract provision. School bus use is widespread, averaging 55 percent, but ranging from 32 percent in Manitoba to 76 percent in New Brunswick. Costs are similar to those in the US, and the system has an excellent safety record. The broader context is also similar – like the US, Canada also has a relatively limited national bus transit system.³¹

Success factors in the US

There are several aspects of the US home-to-school transport system which make it both popular and effective:

- A dedicated bus service – as opposed to increasing the availability of public transport – has a number of benefits. Yellow buses are easily identifiable; each child has an allocated seat and is delivered directly from a pick up point near their home to the school gates, which can help to cut truancy. The drivers are subject to the same background checks as others working with school children, and often drive the same routes each day, which means they get to know their passengers and the hazards of the journey. Some buses also have extra personnel on board, either as aides to support individual students with SEN, or as monitors to assist student safety and to help maintain discipline on difficult routes. Others work with the youngest preschool students, helping them to put on seatbelts.³²
- The yellow bus system is arranged in such a way as to seek to maximise efficiency and utility. For example, some operators work with other community transport companies to maximise the use of vehicles. During the school holidays, for instance, it is possible for the service to be made available for other community uses and, during term, for trips and after school activities, which are increasingly viewed as an important part of rounded educational provision. Staggered start times in US schools also allow each bus to make several trips in the morning and evening. In the US, elementary schools typically start at 9.00am, middle schools at 8.15am and high schools at 7.30am. Canada has a similar system in place. Earlier starts in secondary schools also allow teachers to work with students in the mornings, when their concentration is at its best, and free more time in the afternoon for extra-curricular activities. In Britain, by contrast, the school run is usually concentrated around 8.50am, when children are dropped off for a typical 9:00am start at both primary and secondary schools.
- Safety is the biggest reason given by parents in the UK for not sending their children to school by bus, but it can be more readily guaranteed when there is a dedicated service.

The regulated system that operates in the US with purpose-built buses ensures high safety standards, including ‘rollover protection’, increased joint strength, safe fuel systems and a seat design that minimises crash injuries even without seat belts. The US Bureau of Transportation Statistics records just 18 fatalities among occupants of school buses in 2001, out of a total of 42,815 highway deaths.³³ Only one percent of pupils killed on their way to school are yellow school bus passengers and, according to US bus operators, a further 800 lives could be saved if all school pupils switched to buses.³⁴

The US yellow bus system is a practical reminder of how the UK could do things better.

Yellow buses in the UK

There is a growing awareness of the need to improve school transport in Britain, which has found expression in two new policy developments. The first is the continuing trial of the yellow bus in some parts of the country by private operators and forward-looking local councils. The second was the publication of the Government’s School Transport Bill in 2004 which was designed to begin deregulating the restrictive 1944 rules about entitlement to free school transport and to allow local authorities to experiment with new models of provision. Both are signs that home-to-school transport is finally being regarded as a serious policy issue. But progress remains slow, and these positive developments only scratch the surface of what could happen with political will and the right resources.

Local trials

A number of private operators already run American-style yellow school buses in Britain. First Group is one such firm – as well as running a range of bus and train services in this country, it also owns over 20,000 yellow school buses in the United States and Canada and is the second biggest operator of yellow buses in the US. First Group estimates that it now carries around 2,500 pupils on 40 dedicated school buses. These schemes range from 11 buses serving schools in Wrexham and 12 serving schools in Berkshire, to three buses in Aberdeen and a single bus in Bristol.³⁵ Additionally, First Group has also piloted yellow bus

schemes in West Yorkshire, which have been deemed such a success that Metro, the West Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive, won £18.7m from the Department for Transport in December 2003 for a fleet of yellow school buses that now provide an integrated service to 1,400 pupils. The buses have CCTV on board to assist with security, as well as allocated seats for each child.

More than 100 children are registered to use the Hebden Bridge yellow bus service (which has one bus), 64 percent of whom are former car passengers.³⁶ This means that there are 25,000 fewer car journeys each year from that one bus, and a substantial reduction in school gate congestion. In the Ilkley pilot scheme, between 40 and 50 percent of the 120 children using the two buses are former car passengers, which amounts to a saving of 30,000 car journeys a year. Both services have been rated very highly by four out of five parents. Other councils have also been attracted by yellow buses: Staffordshire County Council claims to have been the first in Britain to use them and has expanded its fleet from seven in 1998 to 30 vehicles this year. The fleet, which is retained in-house, serves sixteen secondary schools in the area.³⁷ Warwickshire has five yellow school buses serving ten schools and colleges, and the buses are also used by local primary schools for swimming trips.³⁸ Norfolk has a fleet of 20 buses, serving schools in Norwich and King's Lynn.³⁹

Government support

The Government has been actively encouraging these pilots. There has been much co-operation between the Department for Transport and the Department for Education and Skills, which resulted in the *Travelling to School* action plan⁴⁰ in 2003 and the School Transport Bill in 2004, the main proposals of which are likely to be incorporated into the Education Bill announced in May 2005. Both documents were part of a strategy to reduce the congestion caused by the school run in a way that does not antagonise parents. The Bill was particularly concerned to address the problems faced by those who live between one and three miles from school, and who would not, under the present system, be entitled to free transport. The action plan said that: "Any local strategy for reducing car use on the school

run must cater for pupils who cannot realistically walk to school, but for whom there is no bus service available." However, by deregulating the existing law, it would also be open to authorities to start charging parents whose children are currently receiving free transport, provided those entitled to free school meals continue to travel at no cost.⁴¹

To facilitate the development of local strategies, the Government intended to approve between six and twelve area schemes in England, covering up to 20 LEAs and up to six further schemes in Wales. The local pilots, which would run from 2006 to 2010 (or start later if there were too few applicants), would have to be approved by the Secretary of State or the Welsh Assembly and were intended to encourage LEAs to come forward with practical ideas to expand school transport.⁴² It was hoped that the schemes would not only attempt to cut car use, but also help to solve local problems. They could, for example, help pupils attending religious or Welsh medium schools, those travelling unsafe routes or those taking part in after-school clubs. Innovations such as using smartcards to collect fares or a wider use of staggered school opening hours would also be encouraged.

Not everybody was convinced by the Government's plans. The House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee, responding to the Draft School Transport Bill, thought that by allowing charges where none currently applied, the proposed legislation could restrict choices for low income parents. "The Government seems confused as to the objectives of its Draft Bill," the Committee charged. "The Secretary of State has said that it will encourage more children to walk or cycle to their local school, yet this does not sit easily with Government policies to increase diversity in schools and to allow for the expression of parental preference: an approach that encourages greater mobility. Pilot schemes are required to reduce congestion, but this target is not quantified and no mention is made of the significant health, environmental and educational benefits that improved home-to-school transport could bring".⁴³

The Committee believed that if fares were introduced, they might have to be pitched at a low level to attract passengers, but

such charges would be insufficient to cover the costs of running the service. The Committee did, however, accept the main principles behind the Draft Bill, though it wanted the Government to go further and faster: “the Draft Bill’s proposal to pilot schemes tailored to local circumstances, which may include charging, is sound,” the Committee noted, “but it must be accompanied by a more radical overhaul of legislation, which would allow schemes to adapt school transport strategies to today’s social and technological context.”⁴⁴ The House of Commons Transport Committee had been even more trenchant in its assessment earlier in 2004, accusing ministers of taking a “leisurely approach” to solving the problems of the school run.⁴⁵

The problem for the Government lies in the political sensitivity of charging some people for a service they currently receive for free, even if the net effect is to produce a better service for more people. In the run up to the General Election, opposition politicians sensed an opportunity to make political capital of the issue. The Liberal Democrats published figures suggesting that 600,000 children, including 128,000 in the South East and 85,000 in the South West would lose their ‘right to free school transport.’⁴⁶ The Conservatives made no mention of school transport in their policy document, *The Right to Choose*, even though they insisted there would be no geographical constraints on its plans for a form of educational voucher.⁴⁷ Tim Collins, the then shadow education secretary, said his party opposed the Government’s school transport plans and pledged an ‘all out fight’ against proposals which would make better off parents pay for their children using school buses.⁴⁸ Education pressure groups were equally critical. Margaret Morrissey, spokesperson for the National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations, said: “Many working parents in rural areas, living just above the breadline, are not going to be able to afford this.”⁴⁹

Such criticisms seem misplaced. There is certainly a legitimate question over what charges should be made and to whom, but in having this discussion, it is important to recognise the almost arbitrary nature of the current system. There is no such thing as a general right to free school transport: three quarters of school run trips are currently ineligible for compulsorily funded school transport. There is a duty on local authorities to provide free

travel to children under sixteen in certain very clearly defined and limited circumstances. And, as two select committees have recognised, the problem with the Government’s plans is not that they are too radical, but that they are being introduced too slowly.

The proposals in the School Transport Bill were sensible as far as they went – they exempted children on low incomes from charges, and authorities would have to ensure they keep fares for others to a reasonable level. However, more than just the passive encouragement of local authorities is needed in order to develop local initiatives. Ministers need to make the case for a country-wide system of dedicated school buses so that the benefits realised under local schemes can be translated to a national scale.

Environmental and health benefits

The school run is adding 2.1 million tonnes of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere each year and increasing levels of nitrogen dioxide.⁵⁰ Unsurprisingly, this is having an adverse effect on our children’s health – one in eight are being treated for asthma, and the UK now has the highest prevalence of ‘severe wheeze’ in thirteen to fourteen year old children worldwide.⁵¹ Furthermore, according to the American Lung Association, ‘continued or frequent exposure’ to higher than normal levels of nitrogen dioxide, ‘may cause increased incidences of acute respiratory disease in children’,⁵² and the Department for Health reports that wheezing symptoms among children increased by 50 percent from 1967 to 1997. That health is closely linked to road pollution is confirmed by a survey conducted in Nottingham, which found that children living within 30 metres of an ‘A’ or ‘B’ road are twice as likely to wheeze as children living 120 metres away.⁵³ A dedicated network of efficient yellow buses would help to alleviate these problems, and would also help the UK to meet its international targets for cutting greenhouse gases by 2010.

Reducing congestion

The nationwide roll out of a yellow bus system would also help to substantially reduce congestion. Each day, there are some two million extra cars on the road at peak times because of the school run, and each year 745 million school journeys are made

by car in our biggest cities and towns. A greater reliance on school buses would reduce these numbers and improve the quality of life for many people. Those living near schools, for instance, who often find their parking spaces occupied by parents on the school run, or their otherwise quiet residential neighbourhoods disturbed by traffic, would see an immediate and welcome improvement. Likewise, those with no choice but to travel by car – or those making deliveries for businesses – would find it easier and quicker to get to their destinations if buses took other school run traffic off the roads.

Improving safety

Yellow buses would also improve safety – a major concern of parents. As we have seen, there is very clear evidence from the United States that school buses are safer than other modes of travel to school, accounting for less than one percent of pupils killed on their way to school. While walking and cycling provide healthy exercise, they are also far more dangerous modes of transport for children than a properly supervised school bus, as the statistics below indicate.

Deaths in Great Britain per billion passenger kilometers ⁵⁴

• Cyclists	885
• Pedestrians	726
• Car/van passengers	71
• Bus passengers	16

In total, the Boston Consulting Group has calculated that 40 deaths and 900 serious injuries are directly attributable to the school run each year. Reducing the school run by using more dedicated buses – and by ensuring that the pupils embark and disembark from them safely – will save lives and reduce injuries.

Conclusion

The yellow school bus is a greener, healthier alternative. Local experiments in the UK – as well as evidence from North America – have shown this to be the case: in the Hebden Bridge scheme, for instance, school gate congestion fell by at least 15 percent, and in some cases by as much as 60 percent, when yellow buses were introduced.⁵⁵ On a national scale, yellow buses would have a significant impact in lessening air pollution and in reducing the illnesses associated with it. Bus travel is generally safer than other modes of transport, but when accompanied by the additional regulations that should be part of any new school bus scheme, levels of safety would improve still further.

Although there would inevitably be start-up costs involved in moving to a more comprehensive school transport system, the direct and indirect costs of continuing with the school run in its present form are substantial and growing. Ministers should see school transport as a cross-cutting issue for a joined-up Government, committed to both a cleaner environment and increased school choice.

5. Costs and benefits

So far we have argued that there are many problems with current school transport provision, and that a national network of yellow school buses would bring varied educational, environmental and social gains. If the scheme is to be taken seriously by policymakers, however, we also need to examine whether it is viable to introduce such a system across the UK. Crucially – and controversially – we must also determine whether parents should be asked to make a contribution to the costs of school buses and, if so, the extent of that contribution.

The Government already subsidises the existing system by almost £700 million a year, much of which is spent on around 70,000 children with special needs. In the past, local authorities have often cut back on mainstream school transport services when faced with hard budgetary choices, sometimes provoking rows with church authorities over access to denominational schools. Contrary to popular opinion, there is currently no general entitlement to free travel, with only 10 per cent of school children in England receiving free transport.⁵⁶ Many local education authorities charge ineligible children for spare seats on school buses, and college students and sixth formers often have to pay.

That is the system as it stands, but what might a new system look like?

A model for primary schools

On behalf of the Sutton Trust, the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) modelled a scheme for the national introduction of yellow school buses for primary schoolchildren. The model looked at children who were travelling more than one mile to school each day, representing some 45 percent of the 4.4 billion primary school trips made each year.

Sutton Trust / BCG model: providing dedicated school buses for primary schools

743 million, primary school trips over 1 mile made each year, of which ...

500m are made by car	128m walk	94m take the bus	19m cycle/other
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But if...
17% of trips (120m a year) moved to a dedicated school bus service*

....4,200 Yellow Buses would be required

Total cost per year	£184m
60% of existing subsidy	-£60m
Fares from fee-paying pupils at 50p a journey	-£41m

... at an annual cost to Government of £83 million.

*Assuming 60 percent shift from pupils eligible for free travel; 15 percent from non-eligible

The model assumes that 60 percent of pupils eligible for free school transport would move from their current mode of travel to a yellow bus, but only 15 percent of those who would be expected to pay would do the same. This would give an 85 percent occupancy rate on a network of 4,200 yellow buses, costing approximately £184 million a year to run. The Department for Education and Skills estimates that it currently subsidises primary school transport for non-SEN pupils to the tune of £100m a year. If we applied just £60m of the existing subsidy to our scenario, the cost of the scheme would fall to £124m. This could either be provided as an additional subsidy, or some of it could be derived from charging pupils not currently eligible for free travel at 50p a trip (or £1 a day).⁵⁷ This would raise up to £41m, reducing the need for an extra subsidy to £83m. Although the model focuses on primary pupils, similar models could be developed for secondary school pupils, particularly in areas where good bus provision would enhance parental choice.

Charging

The issue of whether to charge for the use of yellow buses is a vexed one. Under the measures put forward in the Government's 2004 School Transport Bill, local authorities would have been free to charge all those not eligible for free school meals to travel by bus. If their numbers were retained under our proposals, this would result in further savings of £44m, so the scheme might be provided at a cost of less than £40m. However charging will have a negative effect on usage, a point noted by the House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee. The evaluation of yellow bus trials has also suggested a mixed reaction among parents to a £1 a day fee, concluding: "Views on the affordability of the yellow bus schemes varied. In some areas, £1 per day was thought by users and parents as about the right amount to charge. In other areas, this was considered too expensive for primary pupils."⁵⁸

If charging is necessary, three issues arise:

- The first is the question of who should pay. The easiest solution is to relate entitlement to free school meals eligibility, as the Government intended. This would mean that the children of parents who earned less than £13,200 a year would continue

to travel for free. However, the House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee highlighted that many families eligible for free school meals do not claim their entitlement, and warned that "families whose income is just above this level, particularly large families, may be significantly disadvantaged by the new regime and the 'cut-off' income level may cause just as much inequity as the arbitrary limits of walking distances." The Committee suggested that a more sophisticated means of calculating entitlement might be developed, perhaps linked to the working tax credit.⁵⁹ There is certainly merit in this idea on the grounds of equity although the administrative costs would be high, and it may be subject to the same problems of take-up as are free school meals.

- Equity and simplicity are often not easily allied, which raises the second issue: the collection of fares. This could be both time-consuming and divisive, particularly in situations where some children pay and others do not. One obvious solution would be to employ a smartcard system, similar to the one already used by many schools to collect school meal payments from pupils. Parents could top up the cards on a weekly or monthly basis, which would remove the need for children to carry cash, and reduce the chances of money being lost, stolen or used for other purposes. As the cards would be used by both paying and non-paying pupils, they would also reduce any stigma that might be attached to free provision.
- The third issue is the most politically sensitive: whether some children currently entitled to free travel – particularly those in rural areas or attending denominational schools – should be expected to pay under a new yellow bus scheme. Wherever the threshold for free travel is set, which in turn depends on the subsidy local and national government are willing to provide, there will be some families on relatively modest salaries who would face bills of around £180 a year for each child (if fares are levied at £1 a day). Introducing co-payment – where the costs are shared between services and public service users – is politically controversial, but the Government has recognised it in other areas, for example through the introduction of university tuition fees. Co-payment for all but the poorest families seems to be a fairer and more consistent way to meet the cost

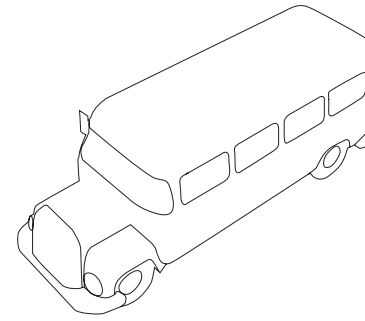
of home-to-school travel than the current arrangements which take no account of means. And although some families in rural areas will lose free travel rights to their nearest school, for a relatively modest cost a range of school choices would be open to them. Indeed, parents already contribute to the costs of state education in a variety of ways, whether by paying for school meals, trips, uniforms and classroom necessities or, indirectly, paying thousands of pounds to live in the catchment area of popular schools. One major outcome of the pilot schemes will be to establish, in this context, how much people are willing to pay for school travel.

Economic benefits

But the worth of a dedicated school bus service should not be assessed in isolation. We need to recognise that there is a considerable cost associated with failing to address the problems of our current system – particularly in terms of the time wasted by parents and other road users, environmental damage, poor safety and educational inequity – and that there would be net benefits to the economy in taking positive action. Indeed, much of the expense of a yellow bus system would not be additional – the cost of paying a child’s bus fare, for example, needs to be set against the money which would be saved on car running costs.

The Boston Consulting Group (BCG) has calculated that the provision of a dedicated school bus network to primary school children would save parents around £350 million a year through lower driving costs and extra time available for work and leisure. BCG also argue that society would benefit annually by at least £100 million a year because of reduced school traffic, in terms of better punctuality at work, more efficient communications, and improvements to the environment. Overall, the model shows that the potential benefits outweigh the costs by a factor of two-and-a-half to one. Further savings still could arise from greater social inclusion, if poorer families have access to better schools, and youth crime and truancy rates fall. Although it is difficult to quantify such benefits, their impact on society would be significant, particularly if yellow bus provision was extended to the secondary sector and to all parts of the UK.

Benefits of a yellow school bus network for primary school children



Benefits to Parents	£m p.a.
Vehicle operations	£33m
Extra work time	£94m
Non work driving time	
- driving parents	£131m
- non-driving parents	£91m
Benefits to Society	
Safety	£7m
Goods vehicle savings	£8m
Environmental	£9m
Extra spare time	£?
Social inclusion	£?
Total	£458m
Costs (without subsidy)	-£184m
Overall Benefit	£274m

As our model shows, the yellow bus scheme – with wide-ranging benefits for modest amounts of state subsidy – represents exceptional value.

6. Moving forward: policy recommendations

The introduction of yellow school buses nationwide is a policy that should be at the heart of the Government's agenda for its third term. The icon of American childhood should now become a practical part of the experience of British youngsters. Such a system would not be prohibitively expensive, and would make a significant contribution to a range of Government policies. Lowering greenhouse gas emissions would have considerable environmental and health benefits; reduced traffic congestion and increased punctuality would help the economy and improve quality of life, particularly for those living near schools and roads; journeys would be safer for pupils on and off buses; truancy would be reduced and discipline improved; and the wider community would benefit from an accessible and reliable source of transport. All this would deliver benefits of around £458 million a year – two-and-a-half times the annual cost of £184 million.

Crucially, a properly implemented yellow bus scheme would represent a major step in addressing the inequalities of our education system. At present, those from poorer backgrounds are more likely to attend the school which is closest to their home, regardless of its suitability or standard. They cannot afford to live near the very best state schools, where house prices are high, but neither can they afford the transport costs that would make the mantra of school choice a reality. Only adequate, safe and efficient school bus provision will enable parents to send their children to the schools most suited to their needs and abilities. Such a move towards genuine choice for all should be welcomed not only by teachers, parents and pupils, but by all those who have an interest in the country's future.

Policy recommendations

1 Evidence from the pilots that have taken place in the UK, and the US and Canadian experience of yellow buses, indicates that there are substantive benefits to introducing a national

yellow bus scheme in England. The Government's programme of reform of the education system, with its major themes of increasing choice and diversity of provision requires a considerable extension of the current provision of school transport if parents are to have effective choice of schools. This applies particularly to parents on lower incomes for whom transport costs are a significant barrier to real school choice. The Government should introduce legislation which goes beyond the proposals in the 2004 School Transport Bill, and which places a statutory requirement on LEAs to provide access to school transport for every pupil.

- 2 The provision should take the form of a yellow bus scheme, although subsidised access to public transport systems for older children could be substituted where appropriate routes exist. LEAs will be best placed to decide on the precise nature of the service.
- 3 The guarantee of school transport cannot be made open-ended, however, given the potential impact on costs, and some limitation will be necessary. What is considered reasonable in terms of distances and journey lengths will vary radically between rural and urban areas making these criteria on their own a poor basis for decision. Since a key objective here is the provision of real choice for parents, we propose instead that geographical limits be developed based on the number of alternative schools within a given area. We propose, therefore, that the statutory obligation should apply to a limited number of schools (say five) nearest to the pupil's home. While central government should set the minimum number of schools to which the obligation will apply, it will of course be open to local authorities to extend the entitlement further if they so wish.
- 4 Since the benefits of introducing school buses accrue both to parents and to society at large, co-payment is a reasonable approach to funding schemes and should be adopted. It is clear from feedback from existing schemes that take-up is price sensitive and levels of acceptability vary from area to area, although £1 per day appears to be the maximum that parents will accept. If the introduction of school transport is to bring the sort of environmental and safety benefits out-

lined above, it is important that it brings about modal shift from car to bus and that the marginal price of the school run is considered when setting fares, rather than basing it on the cost of provision. For this reason we propose to leave it to LEAs to decide on fare levels. Government guidance should recommend that these should be flat rate and amount to no more than £1 per day, per pupil, although it should be open to LEAs to adopt an alternative fare structure if they are able to show that this would meet targets for reductions in the school run and would not disadvantage families on low incomes. LEAs should be encouraged to waive fares during the first few months of any new scheme to encourage take-up.

- 5 Even a £1 per day, per pupil fare would act as a disincentive to parents on low incomes and to those with more than one child. On that basis, we propose that children who are eligible for free school meals should also be eligible for free school transport. In addition, government guidance should recommend that the fares for a parent's second and third child should be reduced to around half that of a full fare subject to the same right for LEAs to adopt an alternative fare structure.
- 6 Yellow school buses would be more cost effective if they made more than one journey in the morning and afternoon, and served both primary and secondary schools. Spreading the trips made by yellow buses in this way would also help to reduce the chronic congestion that occurs just before 9:00am. Further, it is important that pupils who travel by bus do not miss out on after school activities – an increasingly important part of educational provision. We therefore propose that the start times of schools be appropriately staggered and that provision should be made for at least two afternoon journeys per school to allow pupils to participate in after school activities.
- 7 Dedicated school buses will not be required during weekends and holidays for the school run or at certain times of the school day. During these periods they could be used to support other activities. LEAs or their school bus contractors should be free to hire out their yellow buses for community or commercial activities, some of the proceeds of which could be used to subsidise the school run.

- 8 Funding to meet this statutory obligation should derive from savings on the current obligations on LEAs to provide free transport for certain categories of pupil. On the basis of the analysis set out above, we estimate a shortfall of only £184 million per annum which should be provided from efficiencies in the current education budget.
- 9 To facilitate ease of use and to ensure that eligibility for free transport is kept private, we propose that smart cards be used as a mechanism to pay fares. However, it should be noted that some of the research on pilot schemes has indicated that paying large sums in advance is a disincentive to parents on lower incomes.⁶⁰ This suggests that the facility to top up cards weekly will be important for ensuring equity.
- 10 Finally we propose that the government publish good practice guidelines for the provision of yellow buses which promotes the lessons learnt from the pilot schemes. These are likely to include establishing pick-up and drop-off points close to home and school, a well-trained driver regularly allocated to a specific route, and a guaranteed seat for every child.

Footnotes

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- 3 Figure from *Travelling to School* (Boston Consulting Group for the Sutton Trust, 2003)
- 4 Data from the *National Travel Survey*, published by the Department of Transport at www.dft.gov.uk. 'Primary schoolchildren' are those aged 5-10 in the survey; 'secondary schoolchildren' are those aged 10-15.
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- 7 Cited in C. Ryan "Can Pay, Will Pay?", *Public Finance*, 12 March 2004
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- 13 "Parents outcry over school run purge", *BBC News Online*, 10 July 2003
- 14 Parents' experiences of the process of choosing a secondary school (Department for Education and Skills Research report, 2001)
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- 17 For a comprehensive analysis of the potential benefits and objections to choice of public services, and choice of school in particular, see *Choice: The Evidence* Rossiter, A and Williams, J, Social Market Foundation, 2004.
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- 19 See, for example, Ruth Kelly's first speech as Secretary of State for education where she reaffirms the Government's drive for a more diverse state school sector with City Academies and specialisation, and the DFES move to allow popular schools to expand and create new sixth forms.
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- 22 *School Admissions*, ed Moussa Hadad (Social Market Foundation, 2004). Report available at www.smf.co.uk.
- 23 Quoted in *Public Finance*, *op cit*
- 24 *School Admissions*, ed Moussa Hadad (Social Market Foundation, 2004). Report available at www.smf.co.uk.
- 25 *Presented before the House of Commons on 20 December 2004*
- 26 *Oral Evidence given by Charles Clark to the House of Commons Transport Select Committee, 3 March 2004*
- 27 Figures from the US National School Transportation Association website (www.schooltrans.com)
- 28 *The Yellow School Bus Industry: Safety, Caring and Innovation* (National School Transportation Association, 2002)
- 29 *ibid* 31-32
- 30 £278 at 2004 conversion rates of \$1.80=£1
- 31 Boston Consulting Group *op cit*
- 32 *ibid* p19
- 33 *National Transportation Statistics 2003* (US Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 2004) available at www.bts.gov.
- 34 Based on averaged data calculated by Boston Consulting Group using official statistics
- 35 Information provided by First Group press office, 2004
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- 37 "Yellow bus services 'a success'", *BBC News Online*, 7 April 2004
- 38 "School bus service success", *BBC News Online*, 11 January 2004
- 39 C. Ryan *op cit*
- 40 A summary is available at <http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/>
- 41 *ibid*
- 42 *ibid*
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- 44 Education and Skills Select Committee *op cit*, p4
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- 46 "Labour wants 600,000 to pay for buses" *Times Educational Supplement*, 11 June 2004
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- 60 Steer Davies Gleave *op cit*