



Beyond the yellow bus:

How districts can leverage alternative transportation to weather driver shortages.

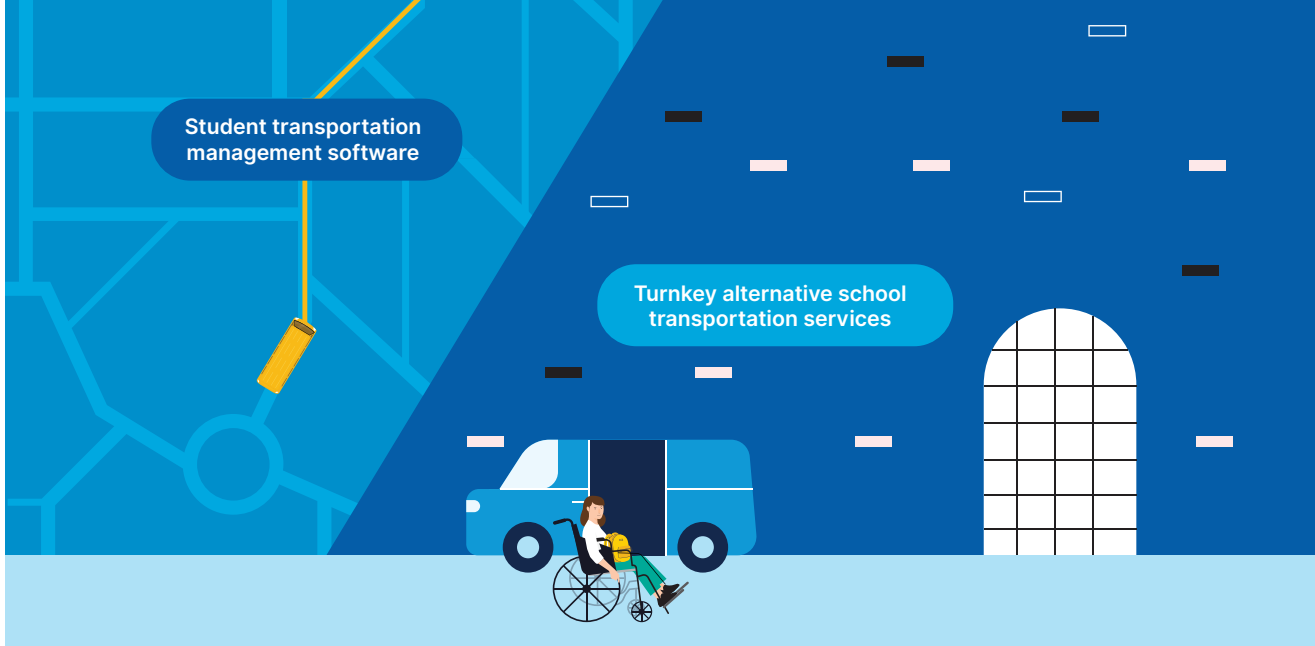




An unprecedented squeeze.

As the 2023 school year kicks off, you've seen the headlines. Driver shortages, which began impacting districts during the pandemic, are only getting worse. Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has only half the drivers it needs to run its planned routes. The state of Wisconsin recently passed a law allowing school board members to serve as volunteer drivers, in an attempt to alleviate its districts' staffing challenges. The Today Show reported that some districts have even been forced to cancel classes.

What can districts do to weather the storm? Many are making greater use of alternative transportation programs already in place for students with disabilities or unstable housing. Alternative school transportation — typically using smaller vans or taxis — leverages a different pool of drivers than yellow bus fleets, which require drivers to hold commercial drivers' licenses with additional specialized endorsements. Implemented strategically, an expansion of these programs can be a powerful tool to combat the yellow bus driver shortage.



How to get started.

Though some districts may choose to directly recruit alternative transportation drivers, most deliver these services through contracts with local taxi providers and an emerging cadre of school-specialized operators. Many districts already work with multiple providers, as one method of guarding against shortages. Although expanding existing contracts appears as a swift way to grow alternative transportation, it presents downsides, namely:

- **Out-of-control costs**, as traditional providers are not typically prepared to scale supply in a cost-effective manner.
- **Ineffective and slow driver recruitment**, as traditional providers may not be able to adjust their marketing efforts to maintain a larger driver pool.

In this guide, we'll take you through the steps of launching or expanding an alternative transportation program that efficiently leverages driver supply and reliably grows your driver pool. These steps will help guide your team whether you're looking to take action on your own, or define criteria by which you can assess potential vendors for your scaled program.

Why did we write this guide?

Operating alternative school transportation at a larger scale is a fundamentally different proposition than operating it to fill specific, federally-mandated needs. At Via, we are experts at operating efficient, large-scale services with flexible fleets of smaller vehicles: from school transportation to microtransit, paratransit, and NEMT services.

More importantly, we know how to scale services effectively, even amidst turbulent market conditions. In 2022, we doubled driver supply across our deployments, with no service reductions related to the driver shortages that plagued transit services around the country. With 650+ deployments worldwide, and 100,000+ drivers recruited, our partners know we attract high-quality drivers who have experience working with sensitive populations, and keep them motivated and engaged.

We've also built cutting-edge software platforms to plan and operate both traditional and alternative school transportation: Via's Student Transit platform is rolling out across the New York City Department of Education's ~9000 buses for the start of School Year 2023-24.



1 Identify where alternative transportation works best.

As a district, you may already use some form of alternative transportation. Maybe students with disabilities require transport to specialized schools, or the nature of a student's disability necessitates that they travel alone. Under the McKinney-Vento Act, students experiencing homelessness continue attending their school of origin, leading to longer and less-predictable school transport journeys that are better fulfilled by smaller vehicles.

As you consider expanding alternative transportation, understanding where smaller vehicles can most efficiently serve your students is critical. Trips that are expensive to serve with traditional yellow buses — especially long journeys, or those where it is challenging to aggregate a bus-full of students — may be cost-effectively served by smaller vehicles, especially if routes are planned such that

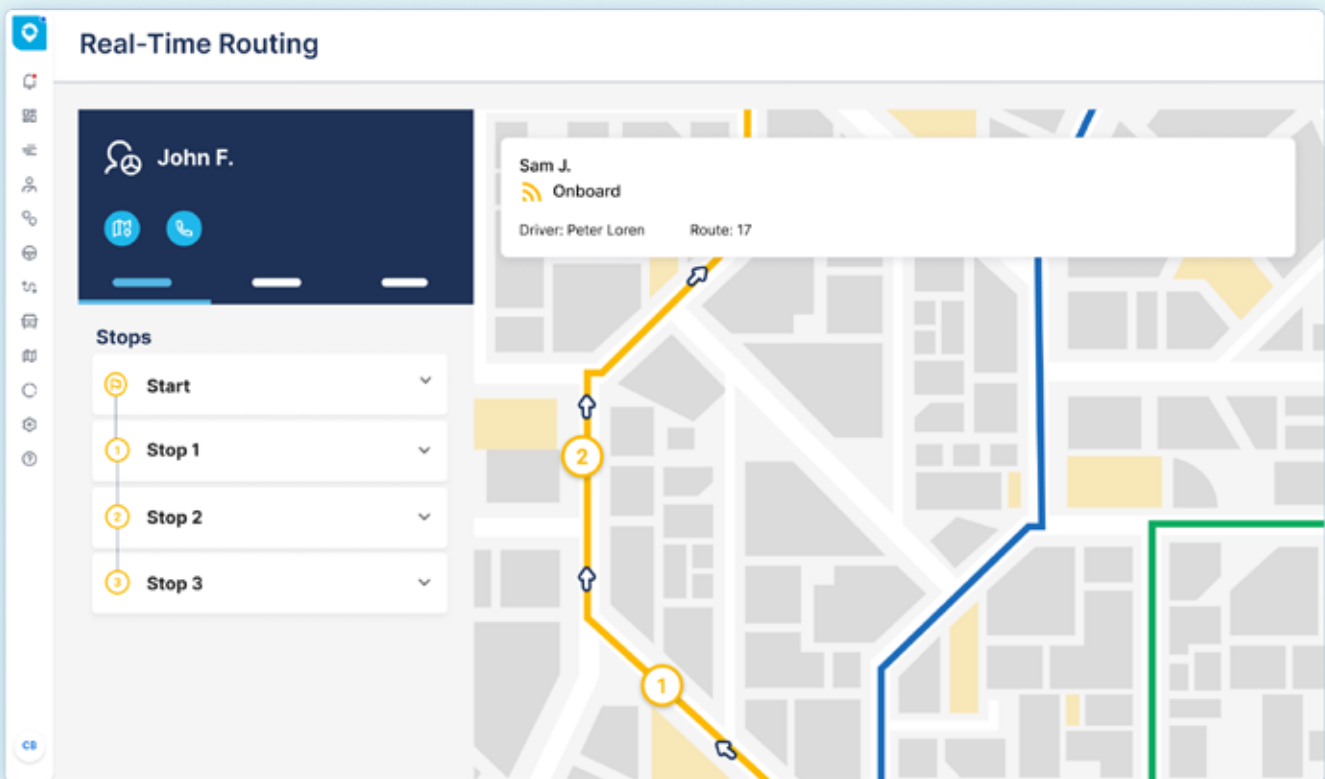
groups of students ride together. You'll likely need help — from consultants, operators, or software providers — to run these kinds of analyses, even if you already use software tools for your yellow bus program. Look for companies that specialize in small-vehicle transportation, which are more likely to have specialized tools to simulate the effects, and the cost, of deploying a small-vehicle fleet to accommodate students within a given geographic zone.

You'll likely need help — from consultants, operators, or software providers — to run these kinds of analyses, even if you already use software tools for your yellow bus program. Look for companies that specialize in small-vehicle transportation, which are more likely to have specialized tools to simulate the effects, and the cost, of deploying a small-vehicle fleet to accommodate students within a given geographic zone.

2 Investigate new technologies to help with scale.

You'll also want to consider that the sophistication of routing and dispatch can vary greatly among providers — and this matters more in larger scale programs than smaller ones. Look for companies that leverage automated routing software, and can show real efficiency gains compared to other providers.

As more students use alternative transportation, automated vehicle tracking and updates, delivered through an app to parents and caretakers, can also minimize the time the district spends responding to parent questions.



Look for vendors who can maximize fleet efficiency with proven routing algorithm

3 Set safety standards.

Driving a yellow school bus requires an expensive, time-intensive, and often onerous licensing process — and drivers who have obtained the required Commercial Drivers' License have their pick of jobs in trucking and other large-vehicle transportation industries. Expanding alternative transportation can help your district tap into a new pool of drivers who make a living driving smaller passenger vehicles, like taxis or microtransit vans.

But it is critical to ensure that these drivers nevertheless meet your district's rigorous standards for personnel who interact with students on a daily basis. These standards need not prevent the expansion of alternative transportation, though they do require that you look for operators who can maintain these standards even at a quicker pace and larger scale of recruitment. Operators with a track record of recruiting large numbers of drivers for services designed for sensitive populations, like students or passengers with disabilities, will be better equipped to meet your needs.

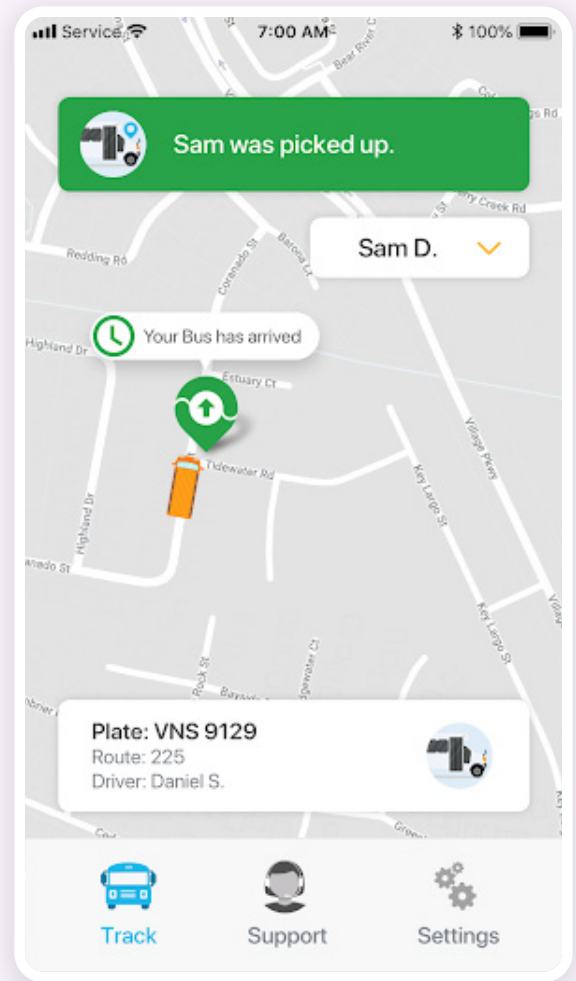
Background checks, drug- and alcohol-testing, caregiving experience — whatever your requirements, an experienced operator can design a recruitment program to keep a steady supply of qualified candidates in your pipeline.



It feels good to be able to provide a service and help people accomplish the things they need to during the day."



Maria, Via Driver Partner in Jersey City, NJ



Example of Caregiver app

4 Build your recruitment engine.

In the climate of a driver shortage, you need to get creative — and be persistent — to grow a pool of qualified drivers sufficient to guarantee reliable daily service. Recruiting professional drivers for alternative student transportation is different from recruiting yellow bus drivers, and requires special attention to different aspects of the recruitment process.

Look for providers who can develop a successful messaging strategy, guide drivers through an extensive vetting process, and keep up a continual recruitment pipeline. Find more details on each of these critical components to recruitment below.

Tailor messaging and recruitment channels to a unique audience of small-vehicle drivers.

When recruiting yellow bus drivers, you know you're competing for CDL drivers against trucking companies, fixed-route public transportation operators, and delivery businesses. But for alternative school transportation, you need to look for vendors who can reach drivers who might otherwise work for a taxi company, drive on a transportation network company (TNC) platform, or drive for a food delivery platform. These drivers are accustomed to being reached in particular ways: through social media advertising, large job boards like Indeed and LinkedIn, or referral bonus programs from other drivers.

Though the media often refers to TNC and delivery drivers as part of the "gig economy" — suggesting part-time or inconsistent work — we've found that the majority of the drivers we recruit prefer to work full-time, albeit on a schedule that can flexibly



accommodate other commitments. Messaging that emphasizes that alternative school transportation offers consistent shifts — while leaving the middle of the day open for other driving work, care-giving responsibilities, or education — is likely to be successful with this audience.

“

The good thing with Via is [that it is] just flexible because you can [schedule to] drive anytime. So I can do it before school, after school, and [on the weekends.] If I want to work from 6 to 10, I can do that. If I want to work the whole weekend, 10 hours, 12 hours, I can do that. And its not easy to find something like that"



Gerges Said,
Driver since 2022

Have a strategy for successfully guiding drivers through a multi-stage vetting and process.

Though drivers qualified to operate alternative transportation vehicles are in greater supply than those with CDLs, they won't all meet your district's standards for student-facing work. Look for an operator that can impose any number of additional requirements on the drivers they recruit. For example, in various Via markets, we require drug- and alcohol testing, certain kinds of caregiving experience, and a variety of background checks. We can also require that drivers evidence completion certain kinds of training courses before driving for our services, or that they have access to particular kinds of vehicles (wheelchair-accessible, low-floor, etc.).

But with each added condition, the number of applicants who will ultimately qualify to drive will be lower. And at each stage of the vetting and training process, even those drivers who would ultimately qualify may exit the process if they find it confusing, overly-long, or invasive. Looking for a vendor who can

manage applicants' experience — through carefully-honed messaging, stage-based incentives, and clear expectation-setting — is critical for keeping highly-qualified applicants engaged and excited to drive.

To keep up a robust driver pool, recruitment never stops.

When you think you have enough drivers, celebrate — and keep recruiting. Look for vendors who never turn off their recruitment engine, creating greater flexibility to respond to shortages and schedule changes. In Via-powered services, we aim to maintain a pool of qualified drivers that is ~50% larger than needed to fulfill daily shifts. This oversupply means that we can expand our services quickly if more students qualify for services or if yellow bus supply decreases further.

To maintain such a large driver pool, we recruit constantly. Because drivers can take a long time to progress through the recruitment process, especially given the multi-staged vetting required for school transportation, it is impractical to wait for shortages and boost recruitment efforts when they happen.

Sample driver hiring funnel with indicative marketing costs and conversion



5 Engage and support your drivers.

Keeping drivers motivated to deliver great, consistent service to your students is just as important as recruiting high-quality candidates. Working with vendors who continuously assess your compensation, incentive, and support practices is key. Find more detailed criteria on driver engagement and support below:

Benchmark and reassess compensation frequently.

To set compensation rates, vendors should look at pay for the kinds of opportunities smaller-vehicle drivers have available in your area. Pay rates for TNCs and delivery platforms can change frequently in response to demand, so ensure that what your vendors offer is consistently higher — and ask them to watch for trends in average pay to stay ahead. In the markets where Via operates, our operations team is constantly optimizing compensation to maintain our target-sized pool of drivers.

Customize incentives to your specific community needs.

Beyond base compensation, monetary and other kinds of incentives can help drive consistent performance. If

certain shifts are less appealing, a bonus for claiming those shifts can be the difference between filling them and not. If you value drivers claiming the same shifts daily (so students get to know a consistent face), or claiming shifts far in advance (so you can feel confident service is well-in-hand), work with vendors who can incentivize those behaviors with bonuses.

Not all incentives are simple cash bonuses. In some markets, we've found that tailored subsidies — for snow tires in cold-weather locations, or for housing in expensive or remote areas — can be more compelling than a pay-rise or cash bonus. Knowing your market, and the barriers that could prevent drivers from consistently delivering service, is critical to determining these more creative kinds of incentives.

Establish strong support and feedback systems for drivers.

Offering high-touch support can help your drivers feel appreciated and stay engaged. Look for vendors who allow always-on messaging to dispatch, encourage 1:1 meetings with driver advocates (former drivers or operations staff), and hold “office hours” or “town hall”-style meetings to create a sense of community, and help drivers feel confident that their questions will be answered and their needs met.





Students make up 36% of the riders of Chandler Flex, a microtransit service in Arizona.

6 Partner with local transit services.

The preceding steps are geared at helping your district expand alternative transportation as a dedicated resource. To complement dedicated service, source backup drivers, or provide overflow service, investigate local

microtransit, dial-a-ride, or other demand-responsive services in your area. Depending on your needs and their service parameters, these kinds of services may have supply available to commit to alternative transportation trips.



What's next?

We hope these six steps have helped you start thinking through how to best expand your alternative student transportation program. We're always happy to talk through ideas, share more insights from our own operations, or discuss how we can implement these steps on your behalf.

Please reach out to us with any questions, or if you'd like to learn more about creative ways to close gaps in student transportation.



Matt Pelak,
Director of School Partnerships
✉ matt.pelak@ridewithvia.com
☎ (845) 750-2920