Transporting Young Children in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts

In 2005, the Bessie Tatt Wilson Children’s Foundation conducted a study to explore the workings and outcomes of the Massachusetts Child Care Voucher System. Many families experienced the system as burdensome, confusing, and penalizing, further complicating their difficult and complex lives. This follow-up study shows that there has been limited progress toward an improving access to early education and care services that families cannot get access to early education and care services because they lack of transportation.

National studies show that lack of access to transportation has been a key barrier to participation in universal preschool initiatives in other states. But as the Massachusetts Legislature focuses on plans for universal preschool (UFP) by 2012, transportation of young children is not receiving the policy attention it deserves. While Massachusetts invests in its universal preschool agenda despite the economic downturn, lack of transportation services remains a problem for many families who receive subsidies, not just those in the UFP program.

Everyone we spoke with—parents, providers, transportation agencies, resource and referral staff, and state government personnel—agreed that there are substantial problems related to transportation services for children in early education and care. In the three years since keeping the Promise was released, the confusing array of transportation policies and practices remains a barrier to many who need subsidized child care. Meeting this challenge is a next step in building a child care voucher system that meets the needs of Massachusetts families.

In 2007 a research team held town meetings in all five the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) regions and a conference breakout session on transportation with early education and care providers, transportation providers, representatives from Resource and Referral agencies, and other interested parties. The team also interviewed 20 center based staff from eight different agencies (some of whom were also parents with vouchers), 17 parents, and 19 staff from six Resource and Referral (R&R) agencies. Researchers organized focus groups with nine transportation companies of varying sizes, representing almost 3,000 children across the state, and met with key Early Education and Care and Department of Transitional Assistance staff.

This report describes the challenges to providing families who lack adequate transportation full access to child education and care services, and recommends strategies for building an effective transportation system that provides access for all Massachusetts families.

Overview of Transportation Policy and Services in Massachusetts

Transportation services in Massachusetts are a complex web of policies and regulations overseen by several different agencies (see Table A) including the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), Department of Children and Families (DCF), Department of Early Education and Care (EEC), and Registry of Motor Vehicles (RMV). At times these agencies have different or even contradictory policies. For example, a transportation company told us that the city of Springfield has regulations regarding transportation vehicles that differ from, and are more stringent than, RMV requirements.

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It took me two and one-half hours to get to the Resource and Referral agency on the bus from my house.

Parent 2005

The Massachusetts subsidized child care system serves about 16,000 “low income” children, of whom 14,390 receive transportation assistance. While not required to do so, 26% of early education and care programs that accept child care vouchers or contracts voluntarily offer transportation as a way to make child care more widely available.

Table A: Major Transportation Regulations and Policies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Policy Area</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DTA</td>
<td>Vehicle safety requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMV</td>
<td>Child passenger safety regulations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EEC</td>
<td>Special education transportation requirements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Early education and care services, and

References


5. Personal e-mail received, “Subsidized Care Transportation Trend,” 2006-2008

6. Although the leading cause of death for children ages 3 to 7 is motor vehicle traffic crashes, research and safety data from the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB)—an independent federal agency charged with investigating transportation accidents and identifying safety improvements—and the National Academy of Science’s Transportation Research Board shows that buses—both school buses and other types, such as transit buses—have lower fatality rates than other modes of transportation.


9. For example, a child who is enrolled in a preschool program and then has to go to regular early education program, or a child who attends a before or after school program as well as the regular early education program.

10. All sectors of the special education community (e.g., Department of Education, the legislature led by Representative Haddad and Senator Antonioni, superintendents, private schools, etc.) all got together for a pilot project. The legislation funded a one-year pilot through the Department of Education. There was a task force to complete the project. The project—on Special Education Transportation: “Special Education Transportation Pilot Program.” Massachusetts Department of Education, January 2008.

11. It is estimated that during any one-way trip, children shall not be transported for more than forty-five minutes and have two safety inspections.

12. The Massachusetts subsidized child care system serves about 16,000 “low income” children, of whom 14,390 receive transportation assistance. While not required to do so, 26% of early education and care programs that accept child care vouchers or contracts voluntarily offer transportation as a way to make child care more widely available.
to the eligible population, especially low income children.”

Transport on school buses and vans is for the most part safe, so access is the primary concern about transportation for low income children. Most parents transport their own children and can select early education programs that are conveniently located. But access is closely tied to family resources, and the availability of a state subsidy for transportation can influence or limit the early education options of “low income” children.

As illustrated in Table B, subsidized transportation is automatically available for some families, such as those in the homeless or teen parent categories. But other children may only obtain transportation services if there are enough state dollars, if there is an open slot in a program that offers transportation, and if there are available seats on the vehicles serving the program. The inevitable subjectivity of a process such as “criteria,” such as those in Table B, to approve a family for “flexible funding” for transportation services further complicates this matter.

Table B: Eligibility for Subsidized Transportation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria for Automatic</th>
<th>Availability of Transportation Services related to child care and work</th>
<th>Massachusetts does not have a systemic, reliable system for preschoolers:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transport Subsidy</td>
<td>Some may need providers to work extra shifts to accommodate</td>
<td>Massachusetts will encourage more participation by independent contractors, and decrease the burden to centers that provide their own transportation services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family receives support</td>
<td>availability of transportation services, and to do so in a significant manner. We have heard from families, transportation companies and providers that the low transportation rate is a barrier to access. Sustainable and effective transportation services for children cannot be built on reimbursement rates less than half of the cost of providing services.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>services related to child</td>
<td>supports the transportation of young children must consider the need to increase rates, and to do so in a significant manner. We have heard from families, transportation companies and providers that the low transportation rate is a barrier to access. Sustainable and effective transportation services for children cannot be built on reimbursement rates less than half of the cost of providing services.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings

1. Families endure substantial hardships in getting their children to child care and themselves to work or school.

2. “Three Stories from the Field” illustrate this problem.

3. Table B: Eligibility for Subsidized Transportation

   | Family receives support services related to child care and work | Massachusetts does not have a systemic, reliable system for preschoolers: |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Family receives support  | availability of transportation services, and to do so in a significant manner. We have heard from families, transportation companies and providers that the low transportation rate is a barrier to access. Sustainable and effective transportation services for children cannot be built on reimbursement rates less than half of the cost of providing services. |
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4. Transportation companies focus primarily on salary and on how to absorb the increasing costs of mandated services rather than on challenging the mandates.

Recommendations

These three recommendations will require systemic change in the Commonwealth’s philosophy and priorities, legislation, administrative accountability, and practice.

1. Massachusetts should undertake systemic planning.

   * Policies and Procedures
   * Exemplary Customer Service
   * Periodic Evaluations
   * Certified Drivers
   * Safe Vehicles
   * Communication plan between families and their transportation agencies can only meet parent transportation needs and financial benefits from a systemic interagency planning,

   2. Massachusetts should expand access.

   * Safe Vehicles
   * Certified Drivers
   * Availability of a Strategic Plan
   * Periodic Evaluations
   * Exemplary Customer Service
   * A Transportation Manager
   * Staff and Volunteers
   * Policies and Procedures
   * Training Programs
   * Knowledgeable Staff and Parents
   * Adequate Budgets
   * Knowledgeable of local, State and Federal Regulations and their impact

   3. Recommendations: All transportation services, this process is widely viewed both as inefficient and as barrier to access. Greater access to transportation can be encouraged in many ways.

   1. By increasing the rates and support services, Massachusetts should encourage more participation by independent contractors, and decrease the burden to centers that provide their own transportation services.

   2. Massachusetts should increase transportation rates. Any plan to better support the transportation of young children must consider the need to increase rates, and to do so in a significant manner. We have heard from families, transportation companies and providers that the low transportation rate is a barrier to access. Sustainable and effective transportation services for children cannot be built on reimbursement rates less than half of the cost of providing services.