

July 2020

HopSkipDrive to the Rescue: How a Ride-hailing Company Provides Crucial Transportation to School for Vulnerable Student Populations



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Issue

Since the Every Student Succeeds Act became federal law in 2015, foster youth have had the legally protected right to school transportation and to remain at the same school, regardless of changes to their home address. The law extended the same rights already afforded to students experiencing homelessness and students with disabilities through previous legislation, presenting logistical challenges for school districts. This was acutely true in California, where school districts do not typically provide general education transportation through yellow school bus service. While this legislation intended to protect vulnerable students' opportunities for a fair education, this requirement would be impossible to implement without a method of providing service.

In Los Angeles County, HopSkipDrive bridges this gap. A ride-hailing service specifically designed for children, HopSkipDrive operates in eight states and has transported more than 1 million children for over 7 million miles. Several school districts in Los Angeles County and the county's Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) have entered into contracts with HopSkipDrive to provide recurring school trip service to these vulnerable student populations. During the 2018–19 academic year, HopSkipDrive provided 26,706 such trips to LA schools. The researcher analyzed HopSkipDrive's trip data for morning trips to high school in Los Angeles County for the 2018–19 academic year to answer three questions:

- How do trips on HopSkipDrive compare to overall trips to school in California?
- What are the characteristics of neighborhoods where these trips begin?
- How do the travel times of trips to school on HopSkipDrive compare to analogous trips on public transit?

Key Research Findings

The overwhelming majority of California high school students travel to school by private vehicle. Only 8% travel by school bus, the second-lowest rate in the country.

HopSkipDrive's school-contracted trips tend to be longer in both distance and duration compared with California averages and HopSkipDrive consumer-purchased trips. HopSkipDrive's contracted trips average 31 minutes, whereas the average trip to school is 17 minutes in California, 19 minutes in Los Angeles County, and, similarly, 19 minutes for HopSkipDrive's consumer rides in the county.

HopSkipDrive contract trips are likely to begin in neighborhoods that have lower household incomes and higher percentages of people of color. In the average Los Angeles County neighborhood, 51% of the population identifies as non-white, while the average among neighborhoods where HopSkipDrive trips originate is 85%.

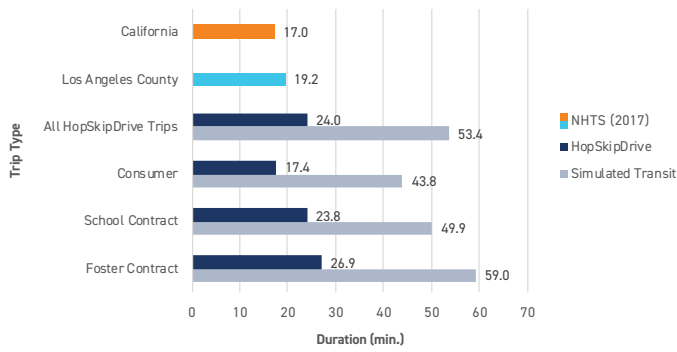


Figure 1. Duration Comparison of HopSkipDrive Trips and Simulated Transit Trips

HopSkipDrive trips offer foster youth, and other vulnerable student populations, a travel-to-school option that is similar to their peers’ in terms of duration and represents massive time savings over traveling by transit. Only 65% of HopSkipDrive contract trips to school were feasible on transit in 90 minutes or less. Of these, HopSkipDrive trips averaged 26 minutes in duration. If those students were instead given transit passes, their trips to school would have lasted 56 minutes on average — about double the amount of time on HopSkipDrive and triple the state average (Figure 1).

Study Approach

HopSkipDrive provided its trip data for Los Angeles County from the 2018–19 school year, which the researcher used to calculate trip statistics for 32,796 trips to school. The focus was on morning trips to school because they consistently begin at the home and end at school, as opposed to afternoon trips that begin at school and may end in a variety of locations. The researcher further focused on high school students because inequities are most visible among this group, particularly due to the ability to drive oneself, the ability to drop out of school, and the proximity to graduation. The primary goal was to compare these trips with a simulated transit alternative, as many schools first look to transit as a means of providing transportation.



Speroni, S. (2020). *School transportation equity for vulnerable student populations through ridehailing: An analysis of HopSkipDrive and other trips to school in Los Angeles County* (Master’s capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/077181dh>

Project ID UCLA ITS-LAS2004 | DOI: 10.17610/T61C7T

To conduct the analysis, the researcher compared HopSkipDrive’s trip-origin coordinates to census tract data from the 2018 American Community Survey and 2017 National Household Travel Survey data. Transit schedule data from Los Angeles County transit agencies were used to measure proximity to a transit stop for HopSkipDrive origins and destinations and Los Angeles County high schools. And, lastly, Google’s Directions API was used to simulate HopSkipDrive’s trips had they been taken instead via transit.

Conclusion

HopSkipDrive partnerships are vital for vulnerable students, and more school districts should adopt them.

HopSkipDrive contracts help to close the gap in California’s lack of general education transportation service and provide a more equitable method of transportation that opens better educational opportunities for vulnerable youth. Specifically, access to flexible transportation services enables students to reach a variety of destinations efficiently, which in turn allows vulnerable youth to attend the best school for them.

HopSkipDrive is not a solution for mass transportation to school for the general population.

Although HopSkipDrive is crucial for vulnerable students in specific challenging situations, it is not suitable for scaling up to the general student population.

More research is needed to determine the optimal role of ride-hailing services in school transportation.

Very little is known about the effects of transportation to school on academic outcomes. While HopSkipDrive provides a vital service to a specific group of vulnerable students, researchers must further study how transportation affects students in school before expanding HopSkipDrive’s role beyond these populations or making larger-scale decisions, such as resuming yellow school bus service in California.

This capstone project was also supported by

