Routing Our Children's Futures

Reenvisioning a 21st Century School Bus Transportation System for New York City

December 2025

Executive Summary

New York City Public Schools is the largest school system in the United States, and is responsible for transporting 145,000 public, charter and private school students to and from school each day at an annual cost of nearly $2 billion.[1] While these students represent only about 12% of the city's public school 3K-12 students, the population riding school buses each day in New York City is larger than the entire public school student enrollment in the state of Delaware.[2]

Of those 145,000 students, 62,000 are students with disabilities who have mandated school bus transportation as part of their Individualized Education Program (IEP) as proscribed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and NY State Education Law. 14,000 of those students are experiencing homelessness and have mandated transportation via the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

For years, parents, advocates, and students have made clear that New York City's school bus system suffers from deep structural problems. To better understand these issues, the Comptroller's Office conducted an audit that found widespread vendor failures and weak oversight by the Department of Education (DOE)'s Office of Pupil Transportation. Bus service is abysmal: in 2023–24 alone, the Office of Pupil Transportation (OPT) received more than 150,000 complaints, yet DOE lacks systems to investigate root causes, enforce contract terms, or hold companies accountable for violations. Required practice runs often go unperformed, GPS technology is inconsistently used, and millions in penalties for noncompliance go uncollected. Students with disabilities are most affected, accounting for nearly all "problem runs," while DOE continues to rely on a routing system built in 1994 and unsupported since 2015. The result is a system that repeatedly fails families and lacks the basic oversight needed to deliver reliable, safe transportation.

These deep, longstanding failures in vendor performance and OPT's core functions cause constant heartache and trauma for families and students: parents miss work when the buses don't show up, students miss instructional time and breakfast when late to school, and as documented in the Comptroller's Stranded After School report, students with disabilities, and those in temporary housing or foster care face major barriers to afterschool participation.[3] A co-dependent culture of underperforming bus companies and weak OPT oversight has persisted for years, costing the City millions: in the 2024-25 school year alone, DOE failed to collect $42.6 million in liquidated damages for basic GPS log in violations.

In addition, bus drivers and attendants face longstanding workforce challenges that include low pay and difficult working conditions. As many school bus drivers approach retirement, these conditions undermine workforce stability and discourage younger workers from entering the field. The City is currently short approximately 300 drivers necessary to fully staff routes.

New York City's school bus service problems stem from 46-year-old contracts with 48 vendors and decades of labor and legislative issues that have prevented DOE from competitively rebidding its 99 contracts to improve service. Now, with new three-year contract extensions running through June 30, 2028, the incoming Mayoral administration has a rare window—roughly 2¼ effective years once the contracts are registered—to finally tackle and reform a system that has resisted change for decades.

This report lays out three viable scenarios for how the incoming Mayoral administration could consolidate and improve school bus transportation in New York City:

- **Scenario 1: Competitive Reprocurement**: Rebidding all the City's school bus contracts would require State legislation to preserve long-standing employee protection provisions (EPPs) while allowing DOE to competitively procure new contracts. If the proposed bills

(S1018/A8440) pass in 2026, DOE could begin an 18-month reprocurement process, but the approach carries risks—including legislative uncertainty, ongoing fragmentation across 48 vendors, and challenges in fixing OPT's core routing and oversight failures.

- **Scenario 2: Municipalization:** Creating a municipally run school transportation agency—modeled on the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA)—would consolidate all bus operations under City control, improve routing, technology, and working conditions, and treat drivers and attendants as City employees. Benefits include unified oversight and better service quality, but challenges include major upfront costs (fleet acquisition and pension liabilities), operational risks typical of large public agencies, and concerns about efficiency and innovation.
- **Scenario 3: Non-Profit Management:** Expanding the existing nonprofit NYCSBUS (New York City School Bus Umbrella Services, Inc.) into a citywide operator (akin to the City's library system) would remove the profit motive, achieve industry consolidation, and enable a governance structure focused on service quality and accountability. DOE could reprocure NYCSBUS's contract after 2026 to absorb routes, routing, customer service, and GPS functions. Key hurdles include absorbing substantial pension and fleet purchase costs, and restructuring governance to ensure independence and effectiveness.

All three paths present important trade-offs that should be evaluated carefully with input from parents, educators, administrators, advocates, and students. To ensure success regardless of the path chosen, the City should:

- **Appoint a School Bus Czar** within the first month of 2026 to stabilize and oversee OPT, conduct a comprehensive assessment of family needs and system performance, align the legal, fiscal, labor, and legislative strategy for reform, and lead the City's transition to a modern, equitable school transportation system by 2028.

It is essential that this administration take this issue seriously from day one, as each of these plans would require years to complete and demands sustained focus and leadership from City Hall. The largest school system in the United States deserves to go into the next decade with a world class system of transportation for its students.

Summary of Audit Findings

The Comptroller's audit of the Department of Education's school bus operations was conducted to assess overall performance and oversight over vendors.[4]

The auditors identified several critical deficiencies, including:

- **Bus company performance is abysmal,** especially amongst the companies with the highest rates of complaints and DOE routinely fails to promptly investigate, take corrective action, or resolve individual complaints in a timely way. In the 2023–24 school year alone, OPT received more than 16,000 complaints related to special education transportation, over 15,000 calls about late pickups or late arrivals, more than 14,000 no-show pickup complaints, and more than 5,000 reports of disconnected calls. There is no evidence of any system to identify root causes, prevent repeat problems, or hold high-complaint vendors accountable.

- **DOE does not ensure that required practice runs are completed** before the first day of school. Where they are completed, bus companies often underperform; At Jofaz Transportation, for instance, with 423 routes, more than half of all dry runs went unperformed in the 2023-24 school year.

- **DOE does not use readily available global positioning system (GPS) technology to improve bus service**. Bus companies and DOE do not ensure that GPS devices are installed and operational on all buses. In the 2024-25 school year for 200,556 instances in which drivers did not log in, vendors did not meet the log in standard of 90%.

- **DOE does not hold their vendor Via Transportation accountable for implementing technology that would improve routes** and let parents know when their children board/exit buses. Implementation is delayed by "development issues" at Via; Via's routing capability is now four years late and student badging is more than five years late at a cost of $51.7 million.

- **Lack of oversight by OPT results in lost revenue from liquidated damages**. In the 2024-25 school year DOE assessed damages in only 5.5% of cases where drivers did not log into their GPS device, collecting only $1.7 million. This left $42.6 million in uncollected penalties—for just this one type of breach of contract terms. In another example DOE did not assess ANY liquidated damages for vendor failures to perform dry runs before the 2023-24 school year, costing the City more than $269,000 in lost revenue.

- **DOE's reactive approach primarily relies on individual complaints to identify problems.** The DOE fails to systematically analyze complaint data to enforce contract terms, identify trends and problematic vendors or routes, or improve performance.

- **Routes for students with disabilities make up 99% of problem runs** reported by vendors and the majority of bus service complaints. There is no evidence that OPT investigates and modifies routes for problem runs. Additionally for these routes OPT continues to use a legacy routing system built in 1994 with software unsupported since 2015.

- **The New York City Department of Education does not adequately oversee vendors or hold them accountable for poor performance** by implementing corrective action plans, issuing violations, or assessing penalties. It has no written policies and procedures related to reviewing or resolving complaints or contract managers assigned to perform vendor oversight and contract term enforcement.

Bus Contracts & Employee Protection Provisions

At the core of these bus service issues are DOE's 46-year-old school bus contracts with 48 different vendors. Complex labor and legislative issues dating back decades have concentrated power over these 99 contracts with the bus companies, preventing DOE from a competitive reprocurement to upgrade service. EPPs which guarantee job continuity for drivers, are included in many of DOE's older "legacy" bus contracts. DOE's ability to rebid its bus contracts while preserving essential labor protections is constrained by a 2011 New York State Court of Appeals decision (*L&M Bus Corp. v. NYC DOE*), which bars the City from including Employee Protection Provisions (EPPs) in new contracts.[5] EPPs—won in the 1970s —guarantee drivers continuity of employment, wages, and benefits when contracts change hands.[6] Without them, a rebid could leave thousands of experienced drivers facing job loss or reduced compensation, effectively preventing DOE from moving forward with a new procurement under current law.

For years bus companies have used the threat of service interruptions to force the City into the repeating cycle of five-year contract extensions that had persisted for decades. In October 2025, the Panel for Educational Policy (PEP) finally broke this cycle by forcing the bus companies into shorter-term three-year contract extensions in the hope that this would be enough time to fix the system.

The current three-year contract extensions are retroactive to the end date of the last five-year extension—July 1, 2025. Since then, bus companies have been operating on 30-day emergency contract extensions while the City negotiated a longer-term extension. The three-year bus contract extensions were approved by the PEP on November 19, 2025, and will terminate on June 30, 2028. DOE will now need several months to package and submit all the contracts for registration to the Comptroller's Office, after which the Comptroller has a 30-day period for review. Based on these timelines, the contracts are unlikely to be registered before March 2026, leaving roughly 2.25 years, or 27 months, to redesign the system.

Charting the Path Forward

Improving New York City's school bus system will require choices that go beyond incremental fixes. The current structure—fragmented vendors, limited accountability, and outdated contract terms—cannot reliably deliver safe, timely, and equitable transportation for students. Policymakers now face a narrow window to decide what comes next. This section outlines three pathways for long-term reform: competitively rebidding the system, municipalizing school bus operations, or transitioning to a non-profit management model. Each scenario presents distinct legal, financial, and operational considerations, as well as different implications for labor protections, service quality, and governance. These scenarios frame the set of strategic decisions the City must confront to build a modern, durable, and student-centered transportation system.

Scenario 1: Competitive Reprocurement

One potential path for overhauling New York City's school bus system is a competitive reprocurement of all bus contracts. Reprocurement could modernize contract terms, strengthen accountability, and improve service quality—but only if it preserves the essential labor protections that 15,000 school bus drivers and attendants currently rely on. Under existing law, DOE cannot rebid these contracts without removing those protections, making State intervention a necessary first step before this scenario can proceed.

NY Senate Bill S1018 (Senator Robert Jackson)/Assembly Bill A8440 (Assemblymember Yudelka Tapia) was introduced late last legislative session to address this barrier to procurement, amending New York State education law by requiring that any future school bus contracts issued by municipalities in New York with at least one million inhabitants include these labor protections in any new school bus contract. The bill would require that contracts, regardless of contract bid method, retain "workers already employed as school bus drivers and preserve their wages, health, welfare, and retirement benefits."[7] These bills did not pass last legislative session, but the bill sponsors plan to reintroduce them for the 2026 session.

For decades, attempts to legislate this have failed, despite strong support from the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1181, which represents 8,000 New York City school bus workers, from parent organizations, and from the NYC Department of Education. EPP legislation passed by the legislature was vetoed by then Governor Andrew Cuomo in 2016 and again in 2019.[8] Gubernatorial opposition to this legislation remains a possibility, especially as Governor Hochul mounts a competitive reelection campaign. A key reason for this is opposition from the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, which represents about 300 drivers in New York City, related to unresolved concerns regarding pension liability language in the legislation.

If the legislature is able to overcome these political challenges and pass S1018/A8440 in the 2026 session, DOE could begin a new procurement process in the late spring. In fact the pre-procurement process—and potentially restructuring OPT—could begin even sooner with a robust stakeholder engagement process to gather input from parents, students, vendors, and other partners on contract design, required terms, and whether functions like routing should be outsourced. DOE should then develop and release a request for bids (RFB), allow vendors a response period, and evaluate submissions based on standard metrics including price, capacity, value. After selecting winning vendors, DOE would prepare RAs for PEP approval, followed by contract registration and a 30-day Comptroller review. DOE estimates this full rebid would take approximately 18 months, making the earliest feasible start date for new contracts the end of 2027—just before the current three-year extensions expire.

Despite its potential benefits, this scenario carries significant risks. The timeline depends on a series of best-case outcomes: the legislature must pass the bill in the 2026 session, the governor must sign it without delay, and DOE must be able to move quickly through each subsequent procurement step. Any disruption—a failed vote, a veto, or even a late signature—would push the entire process back indefinitely.

Even if the legislative path is successful, reprocurement alone would not resolve the structural challenges of a system that relies on 48 separate vendors. No other major U.S. city manages such a fragmented school bus landscape, and simply rebidding contracts would not make this model easier to govern unless significant consolidation occurred. Moreover, this approach keeps OPT largely intact, leaving unresolved the longstanding routing and oversight problems documented in the audit.

Finally, reprocurement would not fundamentally shift the adversarial dynamic that has defined relationships among DOE, bus companies, and labor unions. As long as the system remains in the hands of for-profit operators, DOE's ability to exercise real oversight will remain limited, and companies will continue to face incentives to suppress wages—contributing to persistent driver shortages and undermining service quality.

Scenario 2: Municipalize the School Bus Industry

Another potential path is full municipalization of the school bus system, shifting operations from private vendors to a dedicated City-run agency. Under this model—drawing on the structure of the MTA—drivers, attendants, mechanics, and other workers would become City employees, and all assets and core functions, including buses, depots, maintenance, routing, and technology, would fall under the mandate of a single agency. Like the MTA, the agency could have a board consisting of government representatives as well as labor partners, education advocates, parents and students.

Municipalization via asset purchase agreements would allow the City to buy out existing school bus companies' fleets and depots without assuming responsibility for unwanted liabilities. Acquiring 8,000 new buses over a short period of time is prohibitive given supply side limitations. Based on comparable sales, purchasing roughly 7,000 used school buses could require an upfront investment of about $200 million. [9]

By consolidating operations, municipal control would bring routing, maintenance, technology, and customer service into one agency staffed with specialized expertise. This structure could enable improvements now limited by contract negotiations, such as expanding afterschool service, accelerating electrification, installing air conditioning, and implementing modern routing and safety technologies. Workers would receive City wages and benefits while retaining their union status.

Municipalization could also address long-standing workforce challenges. Many school bus drivers are approaching retirement, and low pay has made the job unattractive to younger workers particularly when MTA drivers earn an estimated $37/hour vs. $25/hour for school bus drivers. Measures such as prevailing wage requirements and performance-based pay could help build a sustainable career pipeline, especially compared to the limited investment in recruitment and retention today.

Working conditions would also likely improve. Under the current system, drivers are paid for an eight hour day, but work five split-shift hours, with long gaps and limited access to basic facilities like bathrooms. Municipal control could help solve for these problems by improving conditions and introducing greater flexibility into shifts, including early/late and Saturday shifts for drivers. This could help with recruitment of young drivers, increase employee retention and lower the 10% daily average sickout rate. With only a 4% spare factor across the industry, losing 10% of drivers every day leaves the system chronically understaffed; the industry is currently short approximately 300 drivers.

Municipalization would also require the City to assume pension obligations for employees. Currently school bus drivers and matrons contribute to a number of pension systems including the ATU 1181 pension plan. Employers are also required to contribute weekly payments for each employee. Municipalization would require covering bus drivers and attendants under the City's pension programs: transferring pension programs would be a complex and potentially costly challenge, especially given the older average age of school bus employees and a potential retirement cliff.

Large-scale municipal models do exist. For example, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) transports over 60,000 students daily across 2,000 bus routes and operates five major garage facilities that service over 3,000 district-owned buses. LAUSD pays 100% of employees and their dependents coverage for medical, vision and dental, while bus employees receive paid vacation, holidays and illness time, tuition reimbursement, and career development opportunities.[10]

While municipalization offers meaningful advantages, it also carries significant risks. As highlighted in the Comptroller's Office Life in the Slow Lane report, government agencies often struggle to provide consistent, world class service. For example, one-third of MTA buses fail to show up at their scheduled stops on-time.[11] A school bus system fully housed within City government could face similar challenges. Moreover, the bureaucratic structure of municipal agencies is not well suited to running a nimble, technologically innovative transportation operation. Oversight would remain largely limited to the Comptroller's auditing authority, which is not designed to drive rapid operational change.

Scenario 3: Non-Profit Management of the School Bus Industry

The third option to consider is non-profit management of the school bus system, building on New York City's long-standing partnerships with non-profit organizations to deliver core public services. According to the Comptroller's Office, the City holds 3,663 non-profit contracts across nine target agencies with contract values of nearly $43 billion.[12] There are non-profit organizations that provide everything from child care and shelter to meals-on-wheels and job training.

New York City's 219 free public libraries and research centers for example, are managed by three independent, non-profit organizations—Brooklyn Public Library, The New York Public Library, and Queens Public Library—funded by the City, State, and private sources and governed by substantive boards.[13] Animal Care Centers of New York City (ACC) is the non-profit that runs the city's animal shelters under a contract with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, caring for and sheltering over 20,000 animals each year across all five boroughs. ACC has ten board members including three ex officio members from New York City government. Of their $33 million in FY2024 revenues, $26 million or nearly 80% was provided by their contract with the City.[14]

The City's zoological parks are managed by the non-profit Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), whose FY2025 operating revenue totaled $422 million, including $41 million in City funding for operations and capital projects. WCS has an expansive governance structure with over 30 board members with a wide range of expertise, and eight ex officio members from City government.[15]

A non-profit model for school transportation is not hypothetical. In 2020, the de Blasio administration created NYCSBUS, an independent, City-associated non-profit, as an initial step toward deprivatizing the industry. The City bought the operating assets of Reliant Transportation, its largest bus contractor which at the time was responsible for 10% of DOE's routes.[16] After DOE procured a five-year contract with NYCSBUS, the new non-profit acquired Reliant's 1,000 buses, hired its workforce, and assumed its pension obligations. Once the deal closed in early 2021, NYCSBUS began operating 950 routes.

NYCSBUS remains the only non-profit school bus contractor in New York City and has invested in several technological innovations beyond what its competitors provide, while offering $7,500 signing bonuses to drivers. Its governance structure, however, is unusually constrained: three board members, including the chair, are appointed by the Chancellor, and two ex officio members represent the Chancellor and the Director of OMB. Because every board member also represents the organization's sole contract holder, the arrangement creates an inherent appearance of conflict, blurring the line between fiduciary responsibility to the organization and accountability to DOE.

Expanding NYCSBUS into a citywide non-profit model—completing the roll-up envisioned under the de Blasio administration—would offer significant long-term benefits but also faces notable hurdles. The City would need a clear strategy to persuade private companies to sell and a realistic plan to absorb the associated costs. Ongoing pension obligations represent perhaps the largest financial obstacle but would be more straightforward to overcome than under municipalization. Using the total average number of bus company employees DOE reported for the first six months of FY 2025 and published high-end FY 2025 ATU 1181 pension plan required employer contributions, the Comptroller's Office estimates that weekly pension payments for all employees would be more than $70 million per year.[17] In the NYCSBUS deal, NYCSBUS was required to contribute $2.88 million towards a $5.6 million five year bond that guarantees any cost for the potential pension withdrawal liability.

Despite these challenges, the benefits are substantial. Consolidating the industry under a non-profit model would eliminate profit-driven incentives and create a unified system focused on service quality, cost, efficiency, and student safety. It would also provide a foundation for establishing other creative solutions such as a worker owned school transportation cooperative.

Reforming NYCBUS's governance—through bylaw amendments to expand the board and incorporate broader expertise and stakeholder representation—would strengthen accountability and build a culture centered on professionalism, technology, and responsiveness to family needs.

Finally, the expiration of NYCSBUS's current contract extension on June 30, 2026, offers a natural opportunity for DOE to reprocure a redesigned negotiated acquisition that incorporates newly acquired routes, centralizing routing, customer service, and GPS tracking. This would allow the City to phase out OPT's current structure. School bus transportation has long been an afterthought for DOE-- an agency focused primarily on instruction. Transferring responsibility for these functions to a more specialized and nimble organization would minimize undercapacity routes, capture cost and routing efficiencies, and accelerate the adoption of safety and service improvements such as dynamic routing and stop-arm camera technology.

Recommendation: School Bus Czar

The convergence of shorter bus contract extensions, strong advocacy, and a new administration open to progressive transportation reform creates a rare opportunity to finally address a problem that has plagued hundreds of thousands of New York City families and students for half a century. Consolidating the school bus industry, improving conditions for drivers and attendants, and improving service quality—from better routing to afterschool coverage to air-conditioned buses—are all achievable under any of the three scenarios described in this report. But progress will require swift, coordinated action.

To seize this moment, the new Mayor should immediately appoint a School Bus Czar who would:

1. **Stabilize and oversee the system:** From City Hall, the Czar would coordinate with the Deputy Chancellor for Operations at DOE and ensure OPT complies with its current responsibilities—routing, customer service, problem solving, contract oversight, and assessment of liquidated damages for violations—while improving day-to-day performance.

2. **Assess the current school bus landscape and family needs**. Within the first month, the Czar should convene DOE, elected officials, advocates, students and industry experts to implement a thorough review of the New York City school bus transportation landscape and a data informed needs assessment that includes analyses of current stop to school policies, enrollment trends, route and service problems, options such as ride share, the timeline for fleet electrification, and the impact of further increasing local access to special education programs, services and preschool seats, and accelerating the work of the School Construction Authority to make more school buildings fully accessible on future demand for school bus transportation.

3. **Align legal, fiscal, labor, and legislative strategy.** The Czar would bring together the Law Department, OMB, NYCEDC, labor unions, and state legislators to evaluate the three scenarios outlined above and determine which best meets the City's long-term goals and current fiscal and legislative realities. State engagement must begin immediately given

the legislative calendar, with implementation of any chosen approach—whether a new procurement, an acquisition strategy, or another structural option—beginning by July 1, 2026.

4. **Launch the next generation of school transportation.** The Czar would be responsible for translating the chosen path into a coordinated, fully resourced execution plan. This would include developing implementation timelines, securing necessary capital and operating funds, managing stakeholder communications, and ensuring that reforms—such as improved routing, expanded afterschool service, electrification milestones, and stronger vendor performance standards—are delivered on schedule. Ultimately, the Czar would steward the full transition from the current system to a modern, equitable school transportation model that meets the needs of families across all five boroughs.

The new administration should seize this moment by putting the City on the best path toward reenvisioning school bus transportation and operationalizing that vision by 2028, while making clear to bus companies that the current three-year extensions will be the last.

Conclusion

New York City's school bus system is not just flawed; it fails the students who rely on it most, especially students with disabilities and those experiencing homelessness. Decades-old contracts, fragmented vendors, weak oversight, and outdated technology have produced a system that routinely gets children to school late—or not at all—while costing the City nearly $2 billion a year.

The three scenarios outlined in this report—competitive reprocurement, municipalization, and non-profit management—offer different paths forward, but all require clear choices, sustained leadership, and real investment. What the City cannot afford is another decade of drift.

It is noteworthy that mayors Bloomberg, de Blasio and Adams all attempted to address busing at the END of their terms. Each had their success: Bloomberg brought new vendors to the system and reduced costs, de Blasio created NYCSBUS as an alternative to the for-profit model and as a chance for the City to gain insight into busing, and Adams ended the pattern of automatic five-year renewals. Yet none was able to achieve true improvement because they started too late.

The next administration should move quickly, starting with the appointment of a School Bus Czar to stabilize daily operations, lead a rigorous assessment of needs, align legal, fiscal, labor, and legislative strategies, and drive implementation through 2028. At the same time, it must make clear that the current three-year extensions are the last under the old model. The largest school system in the country deserves a school transportation system that is safe, reliable, and worthy of its students—and this is the time to finally build it.

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