

# An Evaluation of the GO Transit City Bus Program for K-12 Students in Oshkosh



Prepared for the Winnebago  
County Health Department

May 2023

## Developed by the Whitburn Center for Governance and Policy Research

Dr. Samantha June Larson, Whitburn Center Deputy Director

Elizabeth Bouche, MPA, Graduate Research Assistant and Internship Supervisor

Julliana Banayag, Whitburn Center Research Specialist

Adrian Hanrahan, Whitburn Center Research Specialist

## In Partnership with Winnebago County Health Department Staff

Ashlee Rahmlow, MSW, LCSW, Public Health Supervisor

Sarahjean Schluechtermann, MPH, Epidemiologist

Priscilla Idoko, Research Intern

Maya Van Thiel, Research Intern

## Funded by:

Wisconsin Department of Health and Human Services

Whitburn Center for Governance and Policy Research

# Table of Contents

Page 1	Background Info
Page 3	Data Collection
Page 5	Data Analysis
Page 6	Three Key Impact Areas
Page 13	Three Main Challenges
Page 17	Summary
Page 19	Next Steps
Page 20	Appendix A: Survey Questions
Page 23	Appendix B: Focus Group Questions

## Special thanks to the Student Transit Stakeholder Team

Adam Bellcorelli, Associate Transportation Planner, East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission

Lindsay Clark, Director of Club Operations, Boys and Girls Club of Oshkosh

Julie Conrad, Director of Curriculum and Development, Oshkosh Area School District

Deb Martin, Volunteer, ESTHER

Kevin Mueller, Director of Club Services, Boys & Girls Club of Oshkosh

Katie Olson, Lead Organizer, ESTHER

Dawn Shimura, ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) Program Coordinator, Oshkosh Area School District

## Acknowledgements

We also want to express our gratitude to the GO Transit staff and OASD teachers and staff who supported this project by assisting with additional survey distribution and coordination of focus groups.

## DHS Grant Statement

This project was supported by funds made available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Center for State, Tribal, Local and Territorial Support, under CDC-RFA-OT21-2103: National Initiative to Address COVID-19 Health Disparities Among Populations at High-Risk and Underserved, Including Racial and Ethnic Minority Populations and Rural Communities.

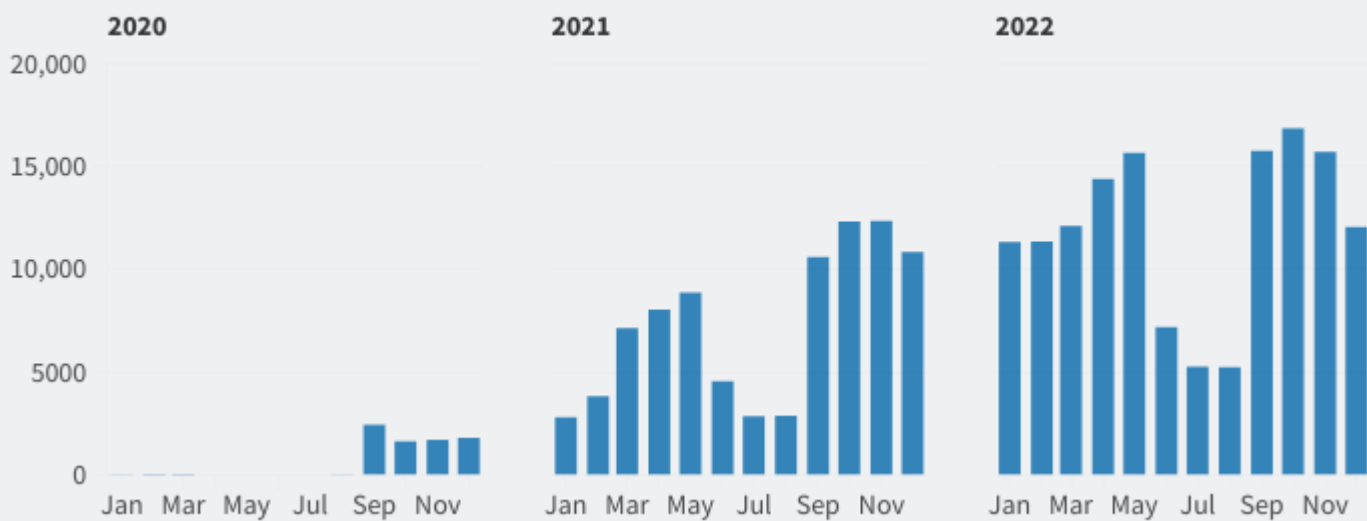
If you have questions or comments related to this project, please contact Sarahjean Schluechtermann - [sschluechtermann@winnebagoctywi.gov](mailto:sschluechtermann@winnebagoctywi.gov)

## Background: Student Transit in Oshkosh

Lack of affordable transportation emerged as an issue facing many elementary, middle, and high school students in Oshkosh in 2013. Since then, a number of local community groups, families, and students came together to advocate for no-cost transit for students through the GO Transit city bus program. Similar programs were adopted in comparable Wisconsin municipalities such as Appleton and Sheboygan in recent years. In February 2020, the City of Oshkosh, Oshkosh Area School District (OASD), and private funders approved a two-year pilot program to provide rides to public and private K-12 students free of charge. Due to COVID-19, the pilot was extended to three years.

The pilot program has had substantial growth since its inception in February 2020. Due to COVID-19 social distancing protocols and remote learning policies across the OASD, student ridership was very low at first. From January – August of 2020, only 113 rides had been provided. However, when classes began in September of 2020, 2,428 rides were given that month alone. For the year 2020, 7,688 total rides were given. That rose to 86,979 student rides in 2021, and 142,814 rides in 2022. Thus, despite COVID-19, GO Transit has become an effective and increasingly popular means of transportation for K-12 students in Oshkosh.

### Total GO Transit Student Rides: January 2020 – December 2022



## Purpose and Scope of the Research Project

The goal of this project was to assess how the GO Transit city bus pilot has impacted students and their parents/caretakers during COVID-19 and beyond. The Winnebago County Health Department (WCHD) received a Wisconsin Department of Health Services grant to evaluate impacts using qualitative surveys and focus groups. In partnership with the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Whitburn Center for Governance and Policy Research, a stakeholder team was organized to inform the project design throughout the process.

## Background Info

This project utilized a community based participatory research (CBPR) approach. Working together with community stakeholders is a key component of this method. The team included staff from the Oshkosh Area School District, East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, ESTHER (an interfaith social-justice organization), and the Boys and Girls Club of Oshkosh. GO Transit administrators were also key partners, providing background information about the pilot program, ridership data, and assisting with access to city buses for data collection. The figure below shows each of these stakeholders, in addition to others that were identified as having interest in the GO Transit city bus program for students. All stakeholders are grouped into one of four categories based on their level of interest in this project and the degree of power/influence they hold.

<b>Stakeholder Power/Influence</b>	<b>High</b>	<p><b>Keep Informed</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oshkosh City Planners</li> <li>• Oshkosh Common Council</li> <li>• OASD School Board Members</li> <li>• Oshkosh Transit Advisory Board</li> <li>• School Administrators/ Principals</li> <li>• Winnebago County Executive</li> </ul>	<p><b>Work Together</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• GO Transit administrators</li> <li>• ESTHER</li> <li>• OASD Director of Curriculum and Assessment</li> <li>• OASD English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Staff</li> <li>• East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission</li> <li>• Boys &amp; Girls Club of Oshkosh</li> </ul>
	<b>Low</b>	<p><b>Monitor</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers</li> <li>• School social workers</li> <li>• School liaison officers</li> <li>• GO Transit bus riders (non-students)</li> <li>• Activist/ social justice groups (with non-transit mission)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Engage as Needed</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student Riders</li> <li>• Parents/ caretakers of student riders</li> <li>• GO Transit bus drivers</li> <li>• Immigrant/ refugee background students/ families</li> </ul>
		<b>Low</b>	<b>High</b>
		<b>Stakeholder Interest</b>	

CBPR allows local stakeholders to define the problem, provide consultation on the cultural and social dimensions of the study population, and serve in an advisory capacity. The method is often applied when examining projects in which community members and researchers collaborate as equals in the research process. CBPR focuses on identifying and addressing local issues of concern, such as student access to transportation. Finally, CBPR is known for applying the principles of equity, cultural humility, mutual learning, and social justice to the relationships between researchers and communities. [1]

[1] Duke, M. (2020). Community-based participatory research. Oxford Research Encyclopedias. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190854584.013.225>.

## Survey Methods and Participation

The stakeholder team collectively developed two sets of survey questions – one for students in grades 6-12 who have ridden the GO Transit city bus, and another for parents/caretakers of K-12 students who have ridden the city bus (See Appendix A). Survey distribution consisted of multiple approaches, including: riding city buses and collecting field surveys from students, disseminating surveys to students by OASD staff, a message from OASD through the parent portal, WCHD social media invitations, and stakeholders surveying at the Oshkosh Farmer’s Market. A total of 117 student surveys and 114 parent/caretaker surveys were collected. [2] Further information about who participated from each group is shared below.

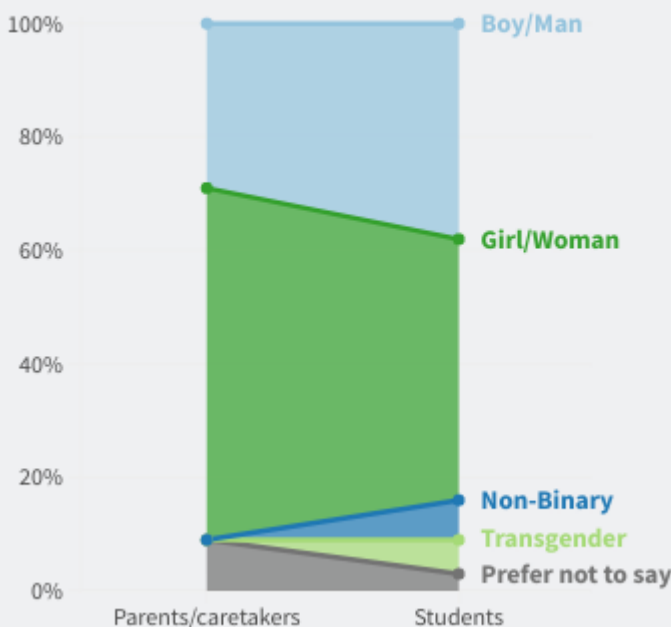
### School Representation

- Students from all public middle and high schools participated in the surveys, except for South Park Middle School. The proportion of respondents included 1% from Carl Treager Middle School, 22% from Merrill Middle School, 26% from Oshkosh North High School, 17% from Oshkosh West High School, 2% from Perry Tipler Middle School, 12% from Riverside at Fox Valley Technical College (FVTC), and 20% from Webster Stanley Middle School.
- Parents/caretakers of student respondents represented all OASD schools except for Riverside at FVTC. Of those, 34% had students in elementary school, 22% in middle school, and 36% had children in high school. About 8% selected “Other” in response to which school their children attended. All grade levels were also represented by parents/caretakers.

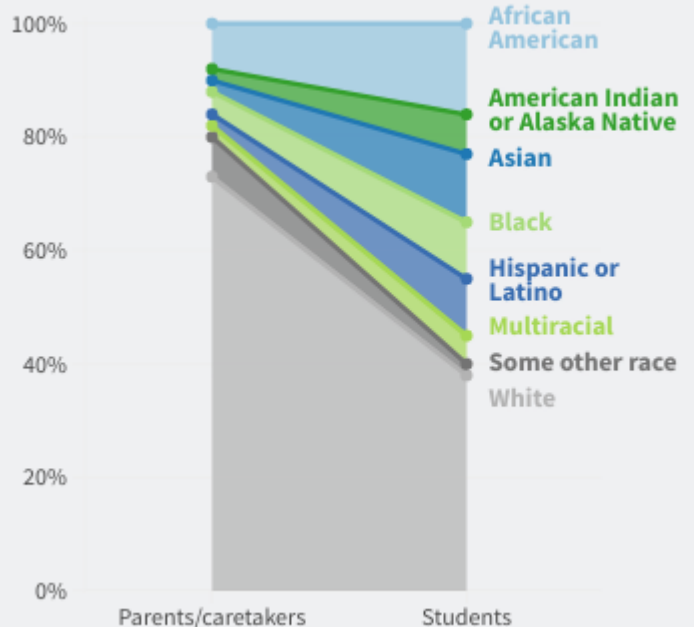
### Demographic Characteristics

The following figures show the percentage of students and parents/caretakers that identify with each gender category and their race or ethnicity. Notably, the diversity of students was much greater than the parent/caretakers. For instance, 62% identified as students of color, compared to 27% of parents/caretakers who identified as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).

**Gender of Survey Respondents**



**Race or Ethnicity of Survey Respondents**



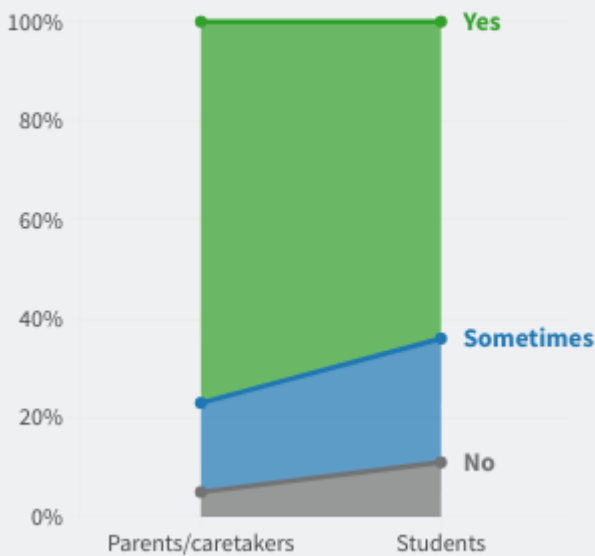
[2] Although submitted, several surveys were not included in the final analysis for several reasons, such as: surveys were started but not completed, little to no written text was provided on the open-ended survey questions, and surveys were not completed by eligible students (or parents/caretakers of students who rode the bus).

## Household Characteristics

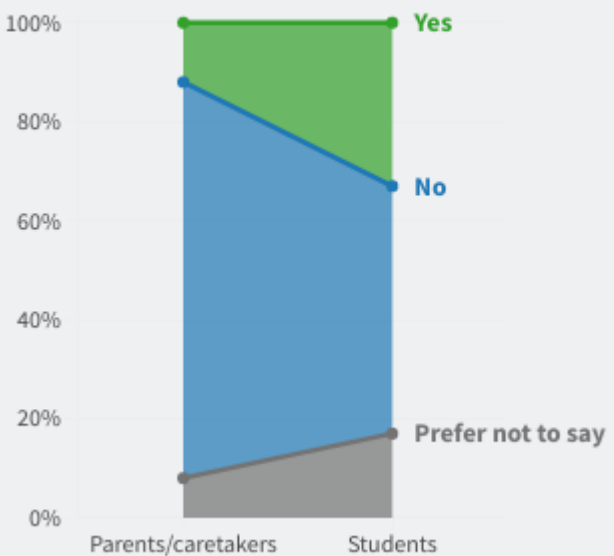
When asked if their household had a vehicle to use for transportation, 18% of parents/caretakers responded “Sometimes” and 5% said “No.” Whereas 25% of students said “Sometimes” and 11% said “No.” Of the students who do not have a reliable household vehicle, 28% ride the bus 6-10 times, and 33% ride 10 or more times per week. Thus, 61% of students depend on the city bus on a regular basis.

Studies have shown that immigrants rely on public transportation to a greater extent than native born residents.[3] This study found that 12% of parents/caretakers and 33% of students had an immigrant or refugee background. Of those students, 31% ride the city bus 6-10 times per week, and 22% ride 10 or more times per week. Thus, about 53% of immigrant/refugee riders rely on the GO Transit city bus for transportation.

**Survey Households with a Vehicle to Use for Transportation**



**Survey Respondents with Immigrant or Refugee Background**



## Focus Group Methods and Participation

The stakeholder team also collaboratively developed focus group questions (See Appendix B). These were informed by the preliminary results of the two surveys. Three sets of questions were created for focus groups – one set for students who have ridden the GO Transit city bus, another set for students who have not ridden the bus, and a third set for parents/caretakers of students who have ridden the city bus.

The stakeholder team was vital to coordinating the student focus groups. One group was held at the Boys and Girls Club of Oshkosh with 6 students who had not ridden the GO Transit city bus. Two additional student focus groups were coordinated at Merrill Middle School with 11 students in the English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Program.

Two focus groups were also held with 4 parents/caretakers. One in-person focus group was held at the Oshkosh Food Co-op. The second focus group was held virtually over Zoom. Data analysis was conducted after completion of all focus groups.

[3] Hanna, M. (2021). Movement after migration: Immigrants’ Disproportionate Reliance on Public Transportation. Migration Policy Institute. [www.migrationpolicy.org/article/movement-migration-immigrants-public-transportation](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/movement-migration-immigrants-public-transportation)

## Data Analysis of Surveys and Focus Groups

Survey analysis was conducted through two approaches. First, questions with Likert scale response options (e.g. Not at All, A Little, Somewhat, A Lot) were reviewed and quantified. Those who responded at the highest rating to questions were analyzed to determine demographic characteristics of respondents who were most impacted.

Second, responses to the open-ended survey questions were analyzed through an inductive coding technique. The same technique was utilized for the focus group analysis. This approach is often applied when conducting exploratory research. No predetermined codebook was utilized. Codes were built as data was reviewed based on themes that emerged from the text. This coding approach took place in four specific steps:

#	Action	Example
1	Initial Coding: Text is reviewed to note what the overall data looks like. Sections are broadly coded for future reference.	All written responses were coded into two broad themes: Positive or Negative.
2	Line-By-Line Coding: Text is combed through with a closer eye. Codes begin to have more details and descriptions.	All written responses were coded into two more descriptive themes: 1) Positive Impacts and Statements of Support, and 2) Challenges, Restrictions, and Areas of Improvement
3	Categorization: Similar codes are put into more precise categories. Additional sorting provides a sense of overarching themes.	Responses were sorted into more specific categories based on whether they related to: Education and School Activities, Social Wellbeing and Health, Financial, Challenges to Transit Access, or Other.
4	Determine Themes: Categorization of codes reflects the themes. This offers a path to storytelling from the data.	“Other” responses were reviewed, and a secondary theme was determined for all. For instance, responses under related to bus scheduling issues were sorted into a theme of “Bus Hours”.

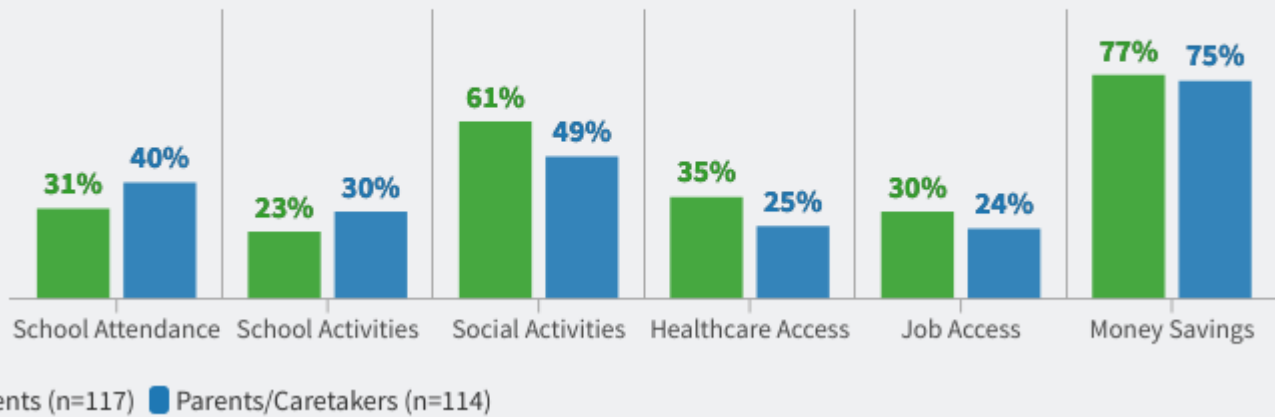
Finally, it is important to note that this analysis utilized an intercoder agreement technique to enhance validity of the coding. This process involves more than one researcher reviewing the same data and agreeing on how to code the same content under the same categories.

# Key Impact Areas

## Three Key Impact Areas

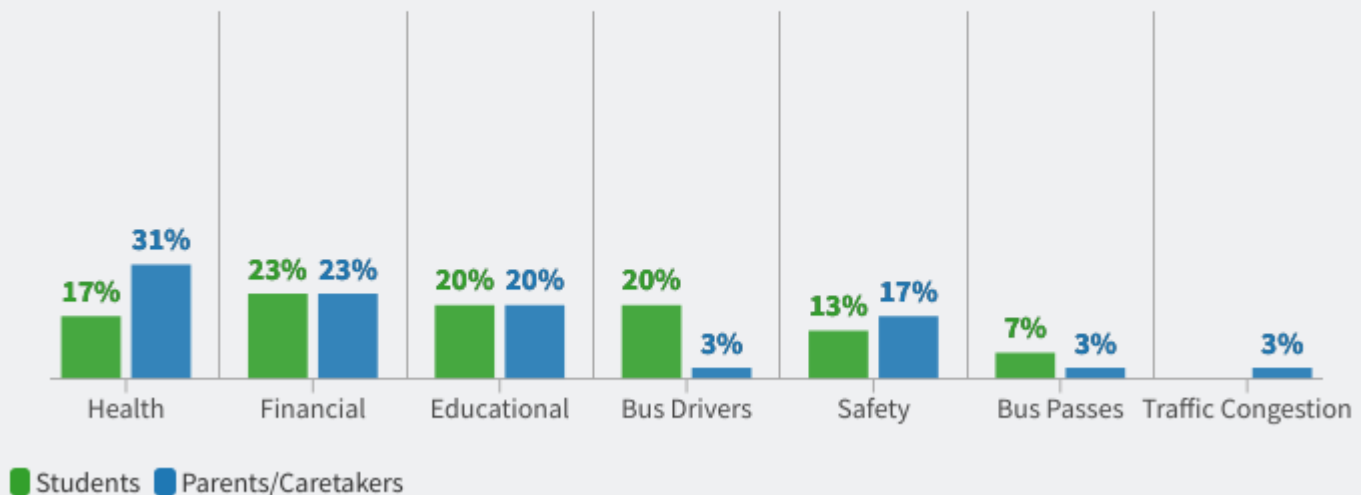
Of the 117 K-12 students and 114 parents/caretakers who responded to the survey, the table below shows percentages that answered in the affirmative regarding the degree to which students were impacted by the GO Transit program. Although a main goal of the pilot program was to increase student access to school, it provided several other benefits across three areas: educational, health, and financial.

### Proportion of Survey Respondents Highlighting Positive Impacts of the GO Transit City Bus Program



The following graph shows how much of the focus group conversations focused on the three impact areas. The positive impact most discussed by students was the “Financial” benefit (23%). The parents/caretaker focus groups (31%) focused on “Health” benefits to the greatest extent. In addition, three other emerging themes involved positive impacts on student safety, bus drivers, and bus passes. The parent/caretaker group also brought up reduction in traffic congestion. Additional analysis and quotes from the surveys and focus groups that elaborate on these findings are presented on the following pages.

### Proportion of Focus Group Conversations Highlighting Positive Impacts of the GO Transit City Bus Program





## Educational Impacts



### School Attendance

School attendance of 35 students (31%) was highly impacted by the GO Transit city bus program. Of those, 86% were students of color, 31% were from an immigrant or refugee background, and 46% live in a household without a reliable vehicle for transportation. Several students explained how the program has helped them in this regard:

“Makes me feel less stressed because I don’t got to feel rushed out the house and I know it will make me on time to school.”

“I used to live 3 miles away from my school and i would take the bus to get to school and it's been a really reliable transportation to school and back. now I am only. 1.5 miles away from school but I still take the bus to get here. I have started walking back home cause its faster but over the span of 4 years the bus has helped me a lot getting to school, home and work.”

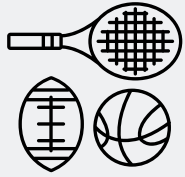
In addition, 40% of parents/caretakers reported a high impact on their students’ school attendance due to the GO Transit city bus program. As these respondents shared:

“My kids taking the bus has helped significantly for our family. Dad and Mom both work early hours so it was so nice that our kids didn't have to go to school hours before class and just wait outside. They never had transportation as a reason to miss classes.”

“One of the city bus pickup stations is directly across the street corner to where we live. It has helped our family tremendously, especially when we have children of different ages and different schools as well as pick up and drop off times.”

“Our special needs son is able to live a more independent life. He has learned skills that will help him get around without having to rely on us to drive him everywhere, which has relieved stress on him, but also on the family...The bus drivers know him and keep an eye out for him, so we don’t have to worry as much about the dangers of him walking alone.”

## Educational Impacts



### School Activities

Participants were asked how utilizing the GO Transit city bus program has impacted their ability to participate in school activities (such as clubs like student government, sports after school, art and theatre, etc.). Responses showed 23% of 6-12 grade students were highly impacted. Notably, beyond activities alone, additional benefits were noted in response to this question. The following students elaborated as follows:

"When I need to stay late I can [take] a bus home, otherwise I wouldn't be able to attend."

"It has helped me get to my practice and have good attendance and have more time to be with my friends."

"I do not participate in [school] activities; however, I do attend a program that ends halfway during the school day at the technical college. Without the bus, I would not be able to get home in time for take care of my younger siblings."

In addition, 30% of parents/caretakers noted a high impact on their K-12 students. However, several respondents noted the bus hours as a hindrance to utilizing GO Transit for school activities. Statements from these respondents demonstrate these mixed sentiments:

"If there's a school function she wants to go to and the buses are running, she'll use the bus to go which makes it a little easier so I don't have to get her [three-year-old brother] dressed and out of the house."

"I think, if I remember right, the bus routes still end at 6:00 something in the evening, and so for my 10th grader... She's involved in theater, and so usually it's later than that if they're after school, but on Saturdays, when she had to go and rehearse... We would often drop her off 'cause she was running late on Saturday, but she could take the bus home, so it made it a little easier."

## Health Impacts



### Social Activities

One of the highest impacts of the GO Transit city bus program noted by students (61%) and parents/caretakers (49%) was a greater ability to partake in social activities (such as hanging out with friends/family, shopping, going to movies, the library, Main Street, parks, coffee shops, or attending recreational events). It is important to highlight that greater access to social activities enhances social well-being and reduces isolation, which is vital to youth mental health [4]. As some students shared:

"Yes. The bus has allowed me to go places where I could [not] go to directly volunteer. It has also helped me go places where I [wasn't] going before, like [the] library, [to] meet up with friends, etc."

"I'm a very active person and it's just my mom at home so when she's working which is often I ride the bus."

"I can very easily get to Main Street and go to the comic book store."

"The city bus helps me to go to the YMCA and my friends' [house]."

Several parents explained further:

"If she takes the bus she usually takes it with her friends so it has helped her get over her social anxiety somewhat."

"He does different activities over the summer with our old babysitter and the kids she watches. They take different trips to parks, the movies and other places throughout the city. This is helpful when there can be a group of 10."

"Having the bus available gave [my daughter] a level of freedom to go visit friends' homes or hang out downtown on a regular basis without us being afraid for her safety while getting to these places."

## Health Impacts



### Healthcare Access

The GO Transit city bus program also had high impact on 35% of students' access to medical care and ability to get health products. Of the parents/caretakers, 25% also noted a high impact in this area. Several respondents mentioned the ease of riding the city bus to Walgreens and Walmart for health-related needs. Student respondents shared some of their experiences as follows:

"It's easy to get to Walgreens to pick up my meds and a really easy ride to Walmart to pick up anything else I might need."

"Yes, my family and I use the city bus to go to see the doctor and go home from the doctor. We can go to Walmart if we need health products."

"Help[ed] me get my mom's pills on time because she was sick, and my brother was not home so I had to go on the GO transit city bus [to] get there."

Parents/caretakers made similar statements, discussing greater access to medical care and health products as shown in the first comment below. Relatedly, this group also responded to questions about health in regards to COVID-19 exposure on the city bus. For instance, they expressed minimal concern about the risks for their students as noted in the second comment:

"I would just say not like going to purchase anything but even just being on the bus seeing other people has a health benefit, just seeing who's on the bus, who's in our community, kind of getting a feel for her environment, I think that's health beneficial. So it's not necessarily like you know going to the store and buying something or getting something medically help- you know, like doctor appointments, whatever. But I could definitely see that being a help in their health."

"Honestly, the way I see it is it's no different than if we took her to school and dropped her off. She's still at a higher risk [of getting COVID] because she is at school. She's still at a higher risk when she goes to a friend's house or even goes just to the store or a family function. So to me, riding the bus is really no different than doing anything outside of the house."

## Financial Impacts



### Job Access

The GO Transit city bus program highly impacted 30% of 6-12 grade students' access to work or related resources, such as transportation to a job/internship, job interviews, job fairs, volunteering, or college campus visits. For instance, the following students shared some of the current benefits (and future opportunities in this area):

"I take the bus almost all the days I work during the week/after school and I always get there on time."

"I already have a job so riding the city bus helps me get to my job on time. I wish the bus will run at later hours so I can ride the bus home from work."

"I didn't have a car for a short time and it helped knowing not only my family is there but so is the city!"

"Yes. The Go transit allowed me to go to volunteer work, which is at my local pantry."

"I haven't had to use it for job reasons yet. However, when I get a job I will be relying on the bus to get there on time."

Because the parent/caretaker respondents included those with students in grades K-12, slightly fewer (24%) noted a high impact in this area overall. Several also noted challenges of their students getting to and from work, such as jobs starting before the buses run or ending after the bus operating hours.

"The city bus has helped my son get to his part-time job at Evergreen after school. The problem is, he has no way to get home after his shift at 7:30 pm because the bus has ended for the day by that point."

"She has taken the bus to job interviews and to get applications."

"Was helpful for my son to get to job training but has not been helpful for his actual work hours, because it would not get him to work on time after school and bus schedule ends before his work is done."

## Financial Impacts



### Money Savings

The greatest impact reported by both students (77%) and parents/caretakers (75%) was money saved by using the GO Transit city bus program. Students shared how the program has benefitted them in this regard, such as:

“Since I don't have to use money, my family is able to save more money for bills/groceries, etc. I have a lot of siblings, so this makes a big difference.”

“Yes, it saved me a lot of money because I would have to pay \$3 per day just to go to school and return from school. I don't make a lot of money because I'm a student.”

Parents/caretakers also made extensive comments about the benefit for their families:

“Not only it saves us money, saves TIME on gas having to bring the kids to and from school, especially trying to wrangle a job as a single father. I don't know what I'd do without the program.”

“Since school bus service is limited in the city limits, this is the way it should have always been. At one time, we were paying for bus passes for all 4 of our kids. We lived over by Oshkosh Corp and it was insane to have kids walk to Perry Tipler. In the winter, in snow, in 20 below weather, in thunderstorms...it was just ridiculous. That's not even talking into consideration the danger of crossing Witzel. One time, a complete stranger picked up two of my kids on the street. They got in her car! I feel like the district put my kids in danger by not providing safe, reliable transportation.”

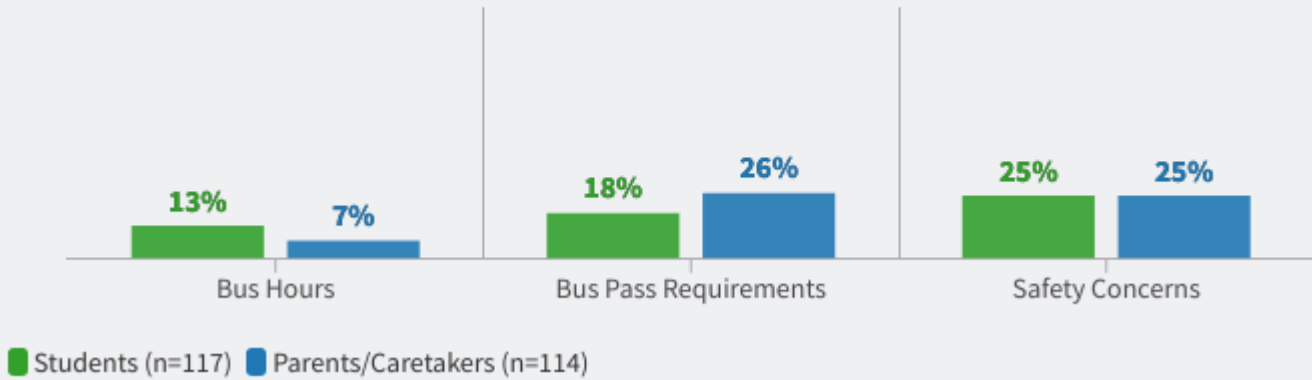
“Definitely! We used to pay for our exchange students monthly passes and it really added up to be quite a bit of money. It is an equity issue as well. While the students on the West side often have access to the yellow school buses, our students in older parts, and often poorer parts, of Oshkosh don't have that option. K12 education is a public good, and there should be no barriers to students attending school. Bus service should ALWAYS be free to K12 students.”

# Three Main Challenges to GO Transit Student Access

## Three Main Challenges to GO Transit Student Access

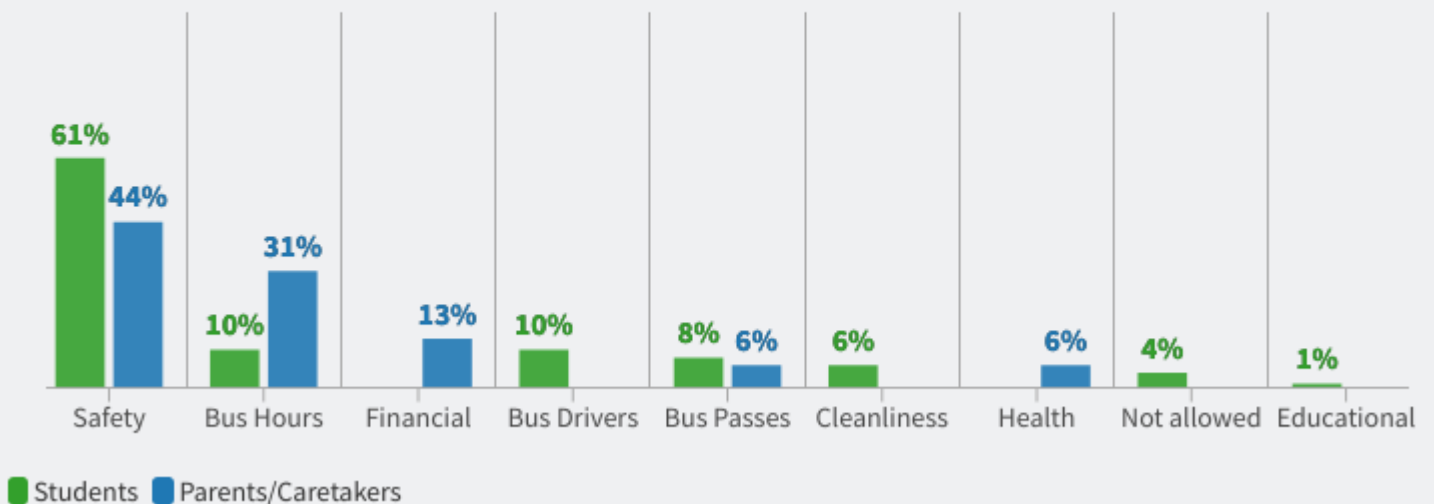
This chart shows the percent of surveyed students and parents/caretakers who responded with the two highest ratings to questions about challenges to access the GO Transit city bus program. The three main areas that emerged relate to bus hours, bus pass requirements, and safety concerns.

### Proportion of Survey Respondents Highlighting Challenges with Accessing the GO Transit City Bus Program



The following graph represents how much of the focus group conversations focused on: 1) issues related to the three main impact areas noted above (educational, health, and financial), 2) the three main challenges of bus hours, bus pass requirements, and safety concerns; and 3) other themes that emerged related to challenges with bus drivers, lack of bus cleanliness, and parents not allowing students to ride GO Transit. The most discussed challenge by students was related to “Safety Concerns” (61%), followed by “Bus Hours” (10%) and challenges with “Bus Drivers” (10%). The parent/caretaker focus groups also focused on “Safety Concerns” (44%) the most, followed by “Bus Hours” (31%) for their students. Analysis and quotes that further explain these findings are presented on the following pages.

### Proportion of Focus Group Conversations Highlighting Challenges and Opportunities of the GO Transit City Bus Program



## Bus Hours

First, the hours that the GO Transit city buses run were noted by 13% of students as a barrier to riding for school and other activities. The following statements demonstrate these challenges further:

"Every morning we get to the bus stop around 8:09 and we have to walk to our school which takes around 3-4 minutes so we are usually late."

"I ride the city bus to my job and back home. I wish the bus hours will run longer so I can go home if I work longer."

"I'm a musical choir student...and when it comes to musical season, there's been a couple of times when I was done with big rehearsals, and the bus would [close down] because it would be 7 o'clock so I wouldn't be able to get home, and I remember that one time, [I] got left at school for a good half an hour...And then I just walked home and [it] was kind of far away, which was really annoying."

Approximately 7% of parents/caretakers also noted the bus schedule as a challenge for their students. This has negative impacts, that expand beyond the schedule alone. The following quotes further demonstrate this sentiment:

"The bus has left my kids at the bus stop and drove past them when the bus is running late or full. My kids have been late to school several times this year due to being passed over."

"I wish GO Transit operated for more hours or gave an option for rides after hours."

"Often the bus is full, and my child has to wait for a second bus in order to return home. There are also many unruly children who ride the bus. She has been sworn at, called names, had things thrown at her, and generally been made to feel afraid to ride on this public transportation. This affects her stress level greatly, and her concern about riding public transportation to and from school. She also takes the bus to and from her job. Often the bus hours end before her work hours so, especially on weekends. But we are grateful for the service and for the bus drivers. They put up with a lot from some of the students."



## Bus Pass Requirements

GO Transit instituted a new pass requirement in January of 2023 for students in grades 6-12 [5]. The new pass requirements were noted as highly challenging by 18% of students. Of those, 58% primarily use the digital pass on their phones, and 42% use a paper pass. The following statements describe these barriers further:

"Sometimes you forget the ID or paper pass at home and then you have to pay to get on the bus and I do not have the money for that."

"Sometimes I don't have my phone on me or it's dead and I don't have a paper pass and I can't go on the bus."

"Me personally don't have this problem but the people who have moved here from out of the country has had difficulty getting access to those kinds of things and I've seen bus drivers being highly disrespectful to them and it angers me."

In addition, 26% of parents/caretakers noted the new pass requirements posed high challenges for their students. Of those, 69% stated their students used a paper pass. The following provides greater detail:

"They have been late to school because of this. Some bus drivers say they don't need to show a pass and some bus drivers told them they need their student ID and pass to ride. They are obviously students and the most I feel they should have to show is a school ID."

"He's lost his pass. When all he had to do was show his ID before, and it hung around his neck, it was easy. Now we have to rely on the spec ed teacher to help him get the pass and we have to count on him not to lose it. The transit system took a step back when they required that."

"They don't know what to do if [they] forget [their] phone, or phone is not charged or app not opening. [Can] they have a photo screenshot that will also work? Just showing their school app photo worked well."

## Safety Concerns

Finally, safety concerns were expressed by 25% of students as a barrier to accessing the GO Transit city bus program. Safety was expressed in a variety of ways. While some described fights between students on the buses, others described concerns of students riding with older adults, issues related to weather, interactions with bus drivers, and more. These statements from students demonstrate such concerns:

“There have been many fights on the bus but they have never directly affected me.”

“I do feel unsafe on the bus. There are some people who are mentally unstable. One day a man touched my hair inappropriately. I try to ride the bus with others in order to feel safer.”

“I’d just like some advice [for] the bus drivers to be more safe and not kick kids off when it’s below 30 degrees because they don’t have a id a pass or enough money. [Everyone] deserves to ride the bus and not be kicked off when it’s freezing cold outside or they are a kid or an adult with a kid. [Everyone] has a place and this should be the place that gets them home safe without being hurt.”

In addition, 25% of parents/caretakers also expressed safety concerns in a variety of ways. The following offers insight into their apprehensions:

“My student reported fighting to me. I rode with her and we discussed safety measures she could take. We trust the drivers and other adult passengers to keep things safe. The bus service could perhaps hire university students to monitor and mentor difficult passengers.”

“There are some mentally ill people on the bus who can be intimidating to young people, especially students.”

“My sons have witnessed several fights, sometimes involving police.”

“She feels unsafe. She tells me there are frequent fights. She also says the bus is so crowded that she is uncomfortable. I’m a little unsettled with my 15 year old daughter being on a bus so crowded that she is smushed up next to sketchy grown men.”

### Summary of Findings

Based on the analysis of surveys and focus groups with students and parents/caretakers, the key findings of this qualitative study on the impact of the GO Transit city bus program on student riders include:

- Despite a slow start to the GO Transit city bus program in the spring of 2020 due to COVID-19, student ridership has significantly increased each year since that point, requiring additional buses to be added to meet service demands in some instances.
- The original aim of the pilot program was to increase student access to school. However, many additional impacts related to social well-being, access to work, and financial savings have resulted. These have been especially significant for students of color, those from an immigrant or refugee background, and those living in a household without a vehicle for transportation.
- Some of the key challenges to accessing the GO Transit city bus program were related to bus hours and bus pass requirements. Safety concerns were also noted by many survey and focus group participants. However, it is important to note that safety was also cited as a positive outcome, with many parents/caretakers sharing that traveling by GO Transit was a safer option for their students than walking.

### Field Researcher Observations

The research team members rode the GO Transit city buses to collect student surveys. This provided an opportunity to observe the positive aspects of the pilot program in action, as well as potential challenges. Some of the main observations that emerged from their field note summaries included:

- It was easy to approach the students and ask them to participate in the surveys. Overall, survey distribution went smoothly, and there was not excessive rowdiness on the buses in the morning.
- All students had some sort of social connection with others that rode the bus. There was a strong social aspect that was apparent among different age groups and schools.
- Families navigated the bus together. Several older students helped their younger siblings ride.
- One challenge of surveying was how many students did not have a phone (or data for their phone to work without Wi-Fi) to complete the electronic survey. This may relate to pass requirement challenges for such students.

### Study Limitations

This survey and focus group research took place between February – March 2023. Due to time constraints, several limitations were encountered that are important when considering the findings in this report. These challenges included, but were not limited to:

- **Student survey data collection on bus routes**
  - When the bus was full of potential respondents, it was easy to get stuck in between riders which prevented surveyors from asking other students to fill out surveys.
  - It was difficult to ensure students finished the survey before they had to get off the bus.
  - Winter weather conditions resulted in two days of school being cancelled during the survey distribution period, so no students were riding the buses on those days. An additional day of class was also not held due to the President's Day holiday.
- **Parent/caretaker survey recruitment**
  - When the parent survey link was distributed on social media, it was quickly infiltrated by ineligible participants who were likely taking the survey in hopes of receiving the \$10 Visa gift card incentive. This resulted in the survey link being closed within 1 day of opening. However, the goal of 100 completed parent surveys was reached.
- **Student focus group coordination**
  - At first, the approach to recruiting students involved asking those who took the survey to sign up if they were interested in participating. Although some students signed up for a focus group, when they were contacted, they did not accept the invitation.
  - Members of the Student Transit Stakeholder Team were able to help the research team coordinate three focus groups. However, these involved middle school students only. Therefore, none of the focus groups involved high school aged students.
- **Parent focus group coordination**
  - The approach to recruiting parents/caretakers involved asking those who took the survey to sign up if they were interested. Although 17 signed up and were contacted to confirm multiple times, only 4 participants showed up for two focus groups.
  - Parents were given the option of participating virtually or in person. Only one parent preferred in person. The virtual option may have reduced the likelihood of showing up.

### Future Research Opportunities

Related to the limitations noted previously, the research team has determined several opportunities for future research related to this project.

1

The Student Transit Stakeholder Team discussed several important topics that were beyond the scope of this project. Because this study was limited to evaluating the impact of the pilot program on student riders utilizing qualitative methods, we documented the following questions for future study:

- What prevents students who do not use GO Transit from riding the bus?
- How can students and their parents/caretakers overcome the stigma of utilizing public transit?
- What would make riding the bus desirable to students and their parents/caretakers?
- How can students get information about the GO Transit program (especially those without internet access)?

2

Focus groups had limited participation for both students and parents/caretakers. It is recommended to organize additional high school students and parents/caretakers listening sessions. Relatedly, WCHD may consider hosting an outreach event where parents can share the reasons why their students do or do not ride the GO Transit bus, followed by a sharing out of this study's results to educate parents/caretakers and to encourage their students to ride the bus.

3

The research team recommends additional study of the level of demand for intercity bus services among 6-12 grade students beyond transportation to and from school. This includes assessing if the launch of the "GO Connect" program and Route 10 cancellation will impact student transit needs. These changes took place in April 2023. It is also suggested to assess how attitudes toward public transit impact usage by students. In addition, it may be useful to examine how the walkability and bikeability of Oshkosh impacts student ridership.

4

It is recommended to share and discuss these findings with GO Transit. This is particularly important regarding safety concerns. Tracking the number of safety incidents on GO Transit city buses that directly involve students may be important in order to understand the extent of such problems (versus the presumed issues being experienced that come from secondhand information, which was documented in the survey and focus group results).

5

The research team also recommends discussing these results with GO Transit to both celebrate the successes of this program, as well as determine strategies to work together to address the challenges. For instance, additional survey or focus group research could be conducted with bus drivers, who are important partners in this program. Their voices were not included in this study. This may be especially important given challenges that were noted in the focus groups with both students and parents/caretakers.

### Student Survey Questions

- Which years have you ridden the bus since the GO Transit city bus program started in Oshkosh in 2019? (Select all that apply)
  - 2019
  - 2020
  - 2021
  - 2022
  - 2023
- How many times per week (on average) do you ride the GO Transit city bus to school and for other activities?
- Do the GO Transit city buses run during hours that work well for you to ride to school and all other activities?
- How has riding the GO Transit city bus affected your school attendance (such as getting to school on time, attending class more often, less stress about getting to school, etc.)?
- Please explain how riding the GO Transit city bus has (or has not) affected your school attendance (such as getting to school on time, attending class more often, less stress about getting to school, etc.):
- How has riding the GO Transit city bus affected your ability to do school activities (such as participating in clubs like student government, playing sports after school like basketball, attending art and theatre performances, being in the orchestra, etc.)?
- Please explain how riding the GO Transit city bus has (or has not) affected your ability to do school activities (such as participating in clubs like student government, playing sports after school like basketball, attending art and theatre performances, being in the orchestra, etc.):
- Has riding the GO Transit city bus helped you do more social activities (such as hanging out with friends/family, shopping, going to movies, the library, Main Street, parks, coffee shops like the New Moon, or attending recreational events)?
- Please explain how riding the GO Transit city bus has (or has not) affected your ability to do more social activities (such as hanging out with friends/family, shopping, going to movies, the library, Main Street, parks, coffee shops like the New Moon, or attending recreational events):
- Has riding the GO Transit city bus helped you get a job or access related resources (such as transportation to a job/internship, job interviews, job fairs, volunteering, or college campus visits)?
- Please explain how riding the GO Transit bus has (or has not) helped you get a job or access related resource(s) (such as transportation to a job/internship, job interviews, job fairs, volunteering, or college campus visits):
- Has riding the GO Transit city bus made it easier to get health products or other medical care (such as going to doctor's appointments, picking up prescriptions, getting toothpaste, shampoo/conditioner, pain medication, etc.)?
- Please explain how riding the GO Transit city bus has (or has not) made it easier to get health products or other medical care (such as going to doctor's appointments, picking up prescriptions, getting toothpaste, shampoo/conditioner, pain medication, etc.):

### Student Survey Questions (Continued)

- Has riding the GO Transit city bus for free saved you or your family/household money?
- Please explain how riding the GO Transit city bus for free has (or has not) saved you or your family/household money:
- Has riding the GO Transit city bus ever made you feel unsafe (such as seeing and/or participating in fighting, bullying, or other threats on the bus or at bus stops)?
- Please explain how riding the GO Transit city bus has (or has not) made you feel unsafe (such as seeing and/or participating in fighting, bullying, or other threats on the bus or at bus stops):
- In January of 2023, GO Transit started requiring middle and high school students to show the bus driver their Student Bus Pass to receive a free ride. What type of pass do you typically use?
- Has the Student Bus Pass requirement made it more difficult for you to ride the GO Transit city bus (such as forgetting your paper pass, not having a smartphone, difficulty using the app, etc.)?
- Please explain how the Student Bus Pass requirement has (or has not) made it more difficult to ride the GO Transit city bus (such as forgetting your paper pass, not having a smartphone, difficulty using the app, etc.):
- Please select your grade level:
- Which school do you attend in Oshkosh?
- We are interested in learning how the GO Transit city bus program has worked for students and families that have immigrant or refugee backgrounds. Do you identify as either?
- Please select your gender: (Select all that apply)
  - Girl
  - Boy
  - Transgender
  - Non-Binary
  - Prefer not to say
- Please choose your race and/or ethnicity: (Select all that apply)
  - African American
  - American Indian or Alaska Native
  - Asian
  - Black
  - Hispanic or Latino
  - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
  - White
  - Multiracial
  - Some other Race
- Do you have any other comments that you would like to make about the GO Transit city bus program? If so, please share below:

### Parent/Caretaker Survey Questions

- How many children/students do you have that ride the GO Transit city bus to school and for other activities?
- Select which year(s) your student(s) have ridden the GO Transit city bus since the program started in 2019: (Select all that apply)
  - 2019
  - 2020
  - 2021
  - 2022
  - 2023
- Select how many times per week (on average) your student(s) ride the GO Transit city bus:
- Do the GO Transit city buses run during hours that work well for your student(s) to ride to school and for other activities?
- How has riding the GO Transit city bus affected school attendance of your student(s) (such as getting to school on time, attending class more often, less stress about getting to school, etc.) ?
- Please explain how riding the GO Transit city bus has (or has not) affected school attendance of your student(s) (such as getting to school on time, attending class more often, less stress about getting to school, etc.):
- How has riding the GO Transit city bus affected your student(s) ability to do school activities (such as participating in clubs like student government, playing sports after school like basketball, attending art and theatre performances, being in the orchestra, etc.)?
- Please explain how riding the GO Transit city bus has (or has not) affected your student(s) ability to do school activities (such as participating in clubs like student government, playing sports after school like basketball, attending art and theatre performances, being in the orchestra, etc.)?
- Has riding the GO Transit city bus helped your student(s) do more social activities (such as hanging out with friends/family, shopping, going to movies, the library, Main Street, parks, coffee shops like the New Moon, or attending recreational events)?
- Please explain how riding the GO Transit city bus has (or has not) affected your student(s) ability to do more social activities (such as hanging out with friends/family, shopping, going to movies, the library, Main Street, parks, coffee shops like the New Moon, or attending recreational events)?
- Has riding the GO Transit city bus helped your student(s) get a job or access related resources (such as transportation to a job/internship, job interviews, job fairs, volunteering, or college campus visits)?
- Please explain how riding the GO Transit city bus has (or has not) helped your student(s) get a job or access related resource(s) (such as transportation to a job/internship, job interviews, job fairs, volunteering, or college campus visits):
- Has riding the GO Transit city bus made it easier for your student(s) to get health products or other medical care (such as going to doctor's appointments, picking up prescriptions, getting toothpaste, shampoo/conditioner, pain medication, etc.)?
- Please explain how riding the GO Transit city bus has (or has not) made it easier for your student(s) to get health products or other medical care (such as going to doctor's appointments, picking up prescriptions, getting toothpaste, shampoo/conditioner, pain medication, etc.):



### Parent/Caretaker Survey Questions (Continued)

- Has riding the GO Transit city bus for free saved your student, you, or your family/household money?
- Please explain how riding the GO Transit city bus for free has (or has not) saved your student, you, or your family/household money:
- Have you ever felt like it was unsafe for your student(s) to ride the GO Transit city bus (such as seeing or hearing about fighting, bullying, or other threats on the bus or at bus stops)?
- Please explain if you have (or have not) felt like it was unsafe for your student(s) to ride the GO Transit city bus (such as seeing or hearing about fighting, bullying, or other threats on the bus or at bus stops):
- In January of 2023, GO Transit started requiring middle and high school students to show the bus driver their Student Bus Pass to receive a free ride. What type of pass does/do your student(s) typically use?
- Has the Student Bus Pass requirement made it more difficult for your student(s) to ride the bus (such as forgetting their paper pass, not having a smartphone, difficulty using the app, etc.)?
- Please explain how the Student Bus Pass requirement has (or has not) made it more difficult for your student(s) to ride the bus (such as forgetting their paper pass, not having a smartphone, difficulty using the app, etc.):
- Please select the current grade level of your student(s): (Select all that apply)
  - K-12 options were provided
- Please select the school(s) your student(s) currently attend in Oshkosh: (Select all that apply)
  - All OASD schools and an "Other" option were provided
- Does your family/household have a vehicle to use for transportation?
- We are interested in learning how the GO Transit city bus program has worked for students and families that have immigrant or refugee backgrounds. Do you identify as either?
- Please select your gender: (Select all that apply)
  - Woman
  - Man
  - Transgender
  - Non-Binary
  - Prefer not to say
- Please select your race and/or ethnicity: (Select all that apply)
  - African American
  - American Indian or Alaska Native
  - Asian
  - Black
  - Hispanic or Latino
  - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
  - White
  - Multiracial
  - Some other Race
- Do you have any other comments that you would like to make about the GO Transit city bus program? If so, please share below:

### Student Non-Rider Focus Group Questions

#### OPENING QUESTIONS

- Have you ever ridden the GO Transit city bus?
- How do you usually get to and from where you need to go?
  - Prompt: for instance, how you get to and from school, school activities, social activities like the Boys and Girls club, shopping, hanging out with friends, work if you have a job, medical appointments, etc.
  - Prompt: do you get a ride from parents, friends, or family; walk/wheel; bike; other?

#### PROGRAM QUESTIONS

- Do you have other friends or classmates that you know who do ride the GO transit city bus? If so, what have you heard about it from them? Has it been positive, negative, or in between?
- What are some of the reasons you have (or have not) ridden the GO transit city bus?
  - To school (to get to school, to ride home from school, etc.)
  - For school activities (clubs like student government, sports, theatre, etc.)
  - For social activities (to hang out with friends/family, shopping, going to the movies, etc.)
  - For work or related resources (getting to work, volunteering, etc.)
  - For health or medical care (going to appointments, pick up products like toothpaste, shampoo/conditioner, etc.)
- Do you think it would save any money for you or your family if you would ride the GO transit city bus for free? Would that ever be a motivation to ride the bus?
- Do you think the GO Transit city bus may be unsafe (such as fighting, bullying, or other threats on the bus or at bus stops)? Why or why not?
- Do you think that the GO Transit city buses run during hours when you need to ride to school or other activities?
  - Prompt: [If they mention it should run earlier or later, ask how much earlier or later]
- What do you feel is the number one barrier that prevents [you / students in general] from riding the GO Transit city bus or making use of this free bus program?

#### CLOSING QUESTIONS

- Is there anything that could be done to make you ride the GO Transit city bus?
  - Prompt: what if it there were better hours or if the bus went places you needed to go?
  - Prompt: what if you felt more safe, comfortable, or confident about how to ride the bus?
  - Prompt: what if you had a “how to” session at the Boys and Girls Club about how to ride the bus, if there were better maps on the bus or bus stops, if you were able to use the app, or if there was Wifi on the bus or at bus stops so you could use it for the app?
- Do you have any other thoughts about the GO Transit city bus program that we haven’t discussed so far?
- Is there anything else we should know?

### Student Focus Group Questions

#### OPENING QUESTIONS

- How many times per week (on average) do you ride the GO Transit city bus to school, home from school, and for other activities?
- Before the free GO Transit city bus program, how did you get to school and other activities (that you currently use the bus for)? Were there any challenges getting from place to place before the program existed?
- Overall, would you say that riding the GO Transit city bus has been a positive experience, a negative experience, or somewhere in between?

#### PROGRAM QUESTIONS – SCHOOL PURPOSES

- How has riding the GO Transit city bus impacted your school attendance (Prompt: such as getting to school on time, attending class more often, less stress about getting to school, etc.)?
- How has riding the GO Transit city bus impacted your ability to do school activities (Prompt: such as participating in clubs like student government, playing sports after school like basketball, attending art and theatre performances, being in the orchestra, etc.)?
- Do the GO Transit city buses run during hours that work well for you to ride to school and/or home from school?
  - Prompt: [If they mention it should run earlier or later, ask how much earlier or later]

#### PROGRAM QUESTIONS – OTHER PURPOSES

- Has riding the GO Transit city bus helped you do more social activities (Prompt: such as hanging out with friends/family, shopping, going to movies, the library, Main Street, parks, coffee shops like the New Moon, or attending recreational events)?
- Has riding the GO Transit city bus helped you get a job or access related resources (Prompt: such as transportation to a job/internship, job interviews, job fairs, volunteering, or college campus visits)?
- Has riding the GO Transit city bus made it easier to get health products or other medical care (Prompt: such as going to doctor’s appointments, picking up prescriptions, getting toothpaste, shampoo/conditioner, pain medication, etc.)?

#### PROGRAM QUESTIONS – OTHER IMPACTS AND CHALLENGES

- Has riding the GO Transit city bus for free saved you or your family/household money?
- Has riding the GO Transit city bus ever made you feel unsafe (Prompt: such as seeing and/or participating in fighting, bullying, or other threats on the bus or at bus stops)?
- In January of 2023, GO Transit started requiring middle and high school students to show the bus driver their Student Bus Pass to receive a free ride. Has the Student Bus Pass requirement made it more difficult for you to ride the GO Transit city bus?
  - Prompt: such as forgetting your paper pass, not having a smartphone or a data plan, difficulty using the app, phone dying or low battery, etc.?
- What do you feel is the number one barrier that prevents [you / students in general] from riding the GO Transit city bus or making use of this free bus program?

### Student Focus Group Questions (Continued)

#### CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What would make riding the GO Transit city bus a better experience for you? (Prompt: buses being on time, less crowded, charging stations for phones at bus stops, Wifi on the bus or at bus stops, better maps, a “how-to” lesson in how to ride the bus or understand routes, etc.)
- What would happen if the GO Transit city bus no longer provided free rides to K-12 students in Oshkosh? How would it impact you if you had to pay to ride the city bus?
- Do you have any other thoughts about the GO Transit city bus program that we haven’t discussed so far? Is there anything else we should know?

### Parent/Caretaker Focus Group Questions

#### OPENING QUESTIONS

- How many times per week (on average) do your student(s) ride the GO Transit city bus to school, home from school, and for other activities?
- Before the free GO Transit city bus program, how did your children/students get to school and other activities (that they currently use the bus for)? Were there any challenges getting from place to place before the program existed?
- How do you feel about the program overall?
  - Prompt: How does it impact your life? Is it mostly positive, negative, or somewhere in between?

#### PROGRAM QUESTIONS – SCHOOL PURPOSES

- How has riding the GO Transit city bus affected school attendance of your student(s) (Prompt: such as getting to school on time (or not), attending class more often (or not), less stress about getting to school (or home after school or activities), etc.)?
- How has riding the GO Transit city bus affected your student(s) ability to do school activities (Prompt: such as participating in clubs like student government, playing sports after school like basketball, attending theatre performances, being in the orchestra, etc.)?
- Do the GO Transit city buses run during hours that work well for your student(s) to ride to school and/or home from school?
  - Prompt: [If they mention it should run earlier or later, ask how much earlier or later]

#### PROGRAM QUESTIONS – OTHER PURPOSES

- Has riding the GO Transit city bus helped your student(s) do more social activities (such as hanging out with friends/family, shopping, going to movies, the library, Main Street, parks, coffee shops like the New Moon, or attending recreational events)?
- Has riding the GO Transit city bus helped your student(s) get a job or access related resources (such as transportation to a job/internship, job interviews, job fairs, volunteering, or college campus visits)?
- Has riding the GO Transit city bus made it easier for your student(s) to get health products or other medical care (such as going to doctor’s appointments, picking up prescriptions, getting toothpaste, shampoo/conditioner, pain medication, etc.)?

### Parent/Caretaker Focus Group Questions (Continued)

- Related to health, would you say that the GO Transit city bus program provided an alternative transportation option for your students that was beneficial during COVID?
  - Prompt: For instance, was there ever a time that you were COVID positive and couldn't give your student a ride, but they were able to get to school or another destination on the city bus instead?

#### PROGRAM QUESTIONS – OTHER IMPACTS AND CHALLENGES

- Would you say that riding the GO Transit city bus for free has saved your student, you, or your family/household money?
- Have you ever felt like it was unsafe for your student(s) to ride the GO Transit city bus (such as seeing or hearing about fighting, bullying, or other threats on the bus or at bus stops)?
- Related to safety, have you (or have you not) had concerns about your student(s) riding the bus related to COVID over the past few years (such as possibly being at higher risk of contracting COVID)?
- In January of 2023, GO Transit started requiring middle and high school students to show the bus driver their Student Bus Pass to receive a free ride. Has the Student Bus Pass requirement made it more difficult for your student(s) to ride the bus:
  - Prompt: such as forgetting their paper pass, not having a smartphone, difficulty using the app, etc.?
- What do you feel is the number one barrier that prevents [your student / students in general] from riding the GO Transit city bus or making use of this free bus program?

#### CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What would make riding the GO Transit city bus a better experience for your students? (Prompt: buses being on time, less crowded, charging stations for phones at bus stops, Wifi on the bus or at bus stops, better maps, a “how-to” lesson in how to ride the bus or understand routes, etc.)
- What would happen if the GO Transit city bus no longer provided free rides to K-12 students in Oshkosh? How would it impact you and your family if your students had to pay to ride the city bus?
- Do you have any other thoughts about the GO Transit city bus program that we haven't discussed so far? Is there anything else we should know?

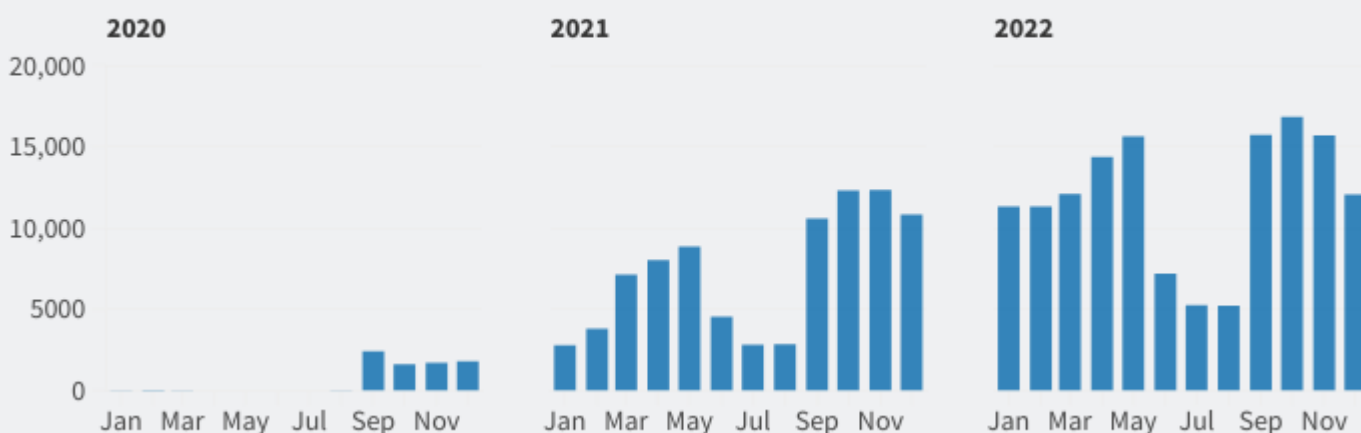
# An Evaluation of the GO Transit City Bus Program for K-12 Students in Oshkosh

## Background: Student Transit in Oshkosh

Lack of affordable transportation emerged as an issue facing many elementary, middle, and high school students in Oshkosh in 2013. Local groups, families, and students advocated for no-cost transit for students through the GO Transit city bus program. Similar programs were adopted in comparable Wisconsin municipalities such as Appleton and Sheboygan during this time. In February 2020, the City of Oshkosh, Oshkosh Area School District, and private funders approved a two-year pilot program to provide rides to public and private K-12 students free of charge. Due to COVID-19, the pilot was extended to three years.

The pilot has marked substantial growth since its inception in February 2020. Due to COVID-19 social distancing protocols and remote learning policies across the OASD, student ridership was low at first. From January – August of 2020, only 113 rides had been provided. Yet, 2,428 rides were given when classes started in September. By the end of 2020, 7,688 total rides were given. That rose to 86,979 rides in 2021, and 142,814 rides in 2022. Thus, despite COVID-19, GO Transit has become an effective and increasingly popular means of transportation for K-12 students and their families in Oshkosh.

## Total GO Transit Student Rides: January 2020 – December 2022



## Purpose and Scope of the Research Project

The goal of this project was to assess how the GO Transit city bus pilot has impacted students and their parents/caretakers during COVID-19 and beyond. The Winnebago County Health Department received a Wisconsin Department of Health Services grant to evaluate impacts using qualitative surveys and focus groups. In partnership with the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Whitburn Center, a stakeholder team was organized to inform the project design with representatives from the Oshkosh Area School District, East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, Boys and Girls Club of Oshkosh, and ESTHER. The team also partnered with GO Transit city staff.

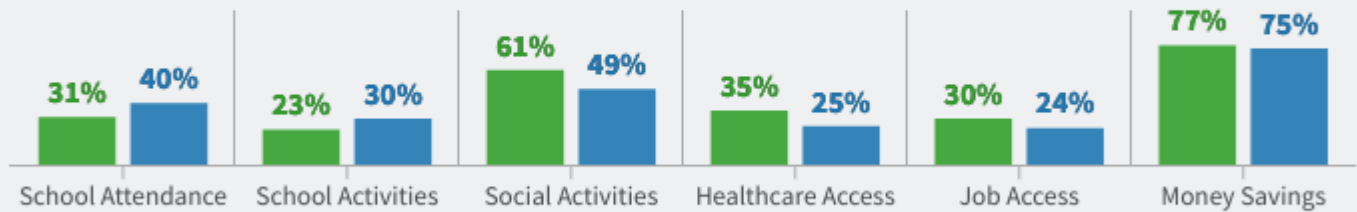
## Qualitative Study Findings

To understand the greatest impacts of the GO Transit program, surveys and focus groups were conducted with both students and their parents/caretakers in the spring of 2023. Key survey findings are noted here. Further discussion is offered in the full report, including supporting findings from focus groups.

## Three Key Impact Areas

Of the 117 K-12 students and 114 parents/caretakers who responded to the survey, the table below shows percentages that answered in the affirmative regarding the degree to which students were impacted by the GO Transit city bus program. Although it aimed to increase access to school, the pilot added benefits in three areas: educational, health, financial.

### Proportion of Survey Respondents Highlighting Positive Impacts of the GO Transit City Bus Program



■ Students (n=117) ■ Parents/Caretakers (n=114)

#### 1. Educational Impacts: School Attendance and School Activities

School attendance of 35 students (31%) was highly impacted by the GO Transit city bus program. Of those, 86% were students of color, 31% were from an immigrant or refugee background, and 46% live in a household without a reliable vehicle for transportation. In addition, 40% of parents/caretakers reported high impact on school attendance.

#### 2. Health Impacts: Social Activities and Healthcare Access

One of the highest impacts students (61%) and parents (49%) reported was partaking in social activities. These activities enhance social well-being, which is vital to youth mental health. Furthermore, the opportunity to access free transportation also had high impact on 35% of students' healthcare access.

#### 3. Financial Impacts: Job Access and Money Savings

This GO Transit pilot program highly impacted 30% of students' job opportunities. The greatest impact on both students (77%) and parents/caretakers (75%) was the money they saved by using the GO Transit city bus program.

“Our special needs son is able to live a more independent life. He has learned skills that will help him get around without having to rely on us to drive him everywhere, which has relieved stress on him, but also on the family... The bus drivers know him and keep an eye out for him, so we don't have to worry as much about the dangers of him walking alone.”

- Parent/Caregiver

“Yes, my family and I use the city bus to go to see the doctor and go home from the doctor. We can go to Walmart if we need health products.”

- Student

“Not only it saves us money, saves TIME on gas having to bring the kids to and from school, especially trying to wrangle a job as a single father. I don't know what I'd do without the program.”

- Parent/Caregiver

## Three Main Challenges to GO Transit Student Access

- 1. Bus hours** were noted as too limited by 13% of students and 7% of parents/caretakers.
- 2. Bus pass requirements**, including the new paper pass or digital app implemented by GO Transit, were noted as highly challenging by 18% of students and 26% of parents/caretakers.
- 3. Safety concerns** were described as highly challenging by 25% of students and 25% of parents/caretakers. "Safety" was discussed in many ways, such as fights, discomfort with other adults, interactions with bus drivers, and weather-related issues.