

FARE-FREE TRANSIT FOR YOUTH IN NEW ORLEANS



WORLD CLASS TRANSIT FOR NEW ORLEANS

The Case for Investing
in New Orleans Youth
Through a Citywide
Fare-Free Program

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About our Organization

Ride New Orleans is an independent nonprofit 501(c)3 organization. We envision a region in which taking transit enables full access to jobs, education, health care, and other needs that ensure the equitable, thriving community that all residents deserve. Our mission is to win world-class and equitable public transportation that works for all residents across the New Orleans region. Visit rideneworleans.org for more information.

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Introduction

Young people (<18) are a special category of transit users and a vital part of current and future New Orleans. Providing fare-free transit for young people is a win-win with many economic, environmental, and social benefits. Transit agencies, city government, community partners, and other stakeholders should work together to find a solution that meets youth transit needs without compromising services.

Across the country cities are re-thinking transit fares and successfully increasing transit access. Many are offering fare-free transit for youth, and some are going completely fare-free for everyone. We believe New Orleans can find the resources and political will necessary to make this bold project a reality. There will be some obstacles to overcome around costs and verification processes. However, if stakeholders work collaboratively on this initiative, these can be overcome and New Orleans can begin offering fare-free transit to youth. City government and community stakeholders should come together to find reliable and ongoing sources of funding to help the Regional Transit Authority (RTA) provide this vital service.

Going fare-free for youth

Young people constitute a unique group of transit users. On one hand, they need to travel frequently, for school and for a myriad of other purposes. And yet, they generally have less disposable income and have greater security and wayfinding needs than adults. Providing safe, reliable, and affordable transportation for youths is crucial to their development and quality of life. For youth (in this paper, defined as anyone 18 and under), especially those from low-income families, paying transit fares can present a significant burden. Ride New Orleans (RIDE) proposes that young people should not have to pay to ride transit. However, making this happen should be a collaborative effort and done in a way that ensures no transit services will be cut or compromised.

For some, this may sound like a radical proposal, but in fact, many places across the country are reconsidering transit fares.¹² Most transit agencies already have special prices or exemptions for specific groups such as youth, seniors, and people with disabilities. Beyond that, a number of cities have moved to make transit entirely free for everyone.³ This includes dozens of cities across the United States, and while most are smaller municipalities or college towns,⁴ other larger cities are also warming to the idea. In 2020 Kansas City went completely fare-free and the results so far have been positive.⁵⁶ A year later, [Albuquerque New Mexico](#) decided to go fare-free for a one-year pilot.

The terms used vary from place to place, with some referring to “fare-free,” “fareless,” or “zero fares.” But the broad idea is that people should not have to pay to move around the city. At this point, RIDE is not proposing New Orleans go entirely fare-free, but we do feel that taking this approach for youth is a good idea.

Benefits of youth fare-free policies

Saving money for children and families that can be used for other needs is, by itself, a good enough reason to consider fare-free transit. However, the potential benefits go far beyond that. A number of studies⁷ have been conducted on the potential benefits of fare-free transit for youth including:

Economic benefits. When young people have greater access to the city, they are able to get to education, jobs, recreation, and other useful destinations. Transportation is especially vital for helping opportunity youth (ages 16-24) take their first steps toward future careers.⁸ Taking transit also helps young people build life skills such as navigation and time management that make them more independent and self-sufficient. Furthermore, the money saved on fares can be spent on other essential items and services. Additional economic benefits may be observed at the school level. Currently, New Orleans schools spend significant funds every year on yellow bus services. If, instead, youth had free access to reliable and efficient transit, schools could use these transportation funds for other purposes.

Environmental benefits. If youth have better access to transit, it could mean fewer family members driving them in cars, fewer long lines of idling cars around schools in the afternoon, and fewer yellow school buses, which are much less likely to run on alternative fuels than public transit,⁹ on the roads. Furthermore, students are at a pivotal age where they develop travel habits and behaviors that will last into adulthood. If they perceive public transit as a costly, inefficient ordeal that must be endured, they will eagerly begin driving cars as soon as they can. If, however, they experience transit as a low-cost, efficient way of getting around the city, they are more likely to become transit riders and supporters for life who use cars less or not at all.

Social benefits. transit is highly inequitable. Moving around a city is more difficult and expensive for lower-income and minority groups. Removing fares for youth will not instantly resolve the numerous inequities in this domain, but it would remove one of the obstacles.



Many youth trainees from Liberty's Kitchen rely on transit
(photo credit: Ride New Orleans)

Arguments against

The most common resistance to any type of fare-free transit concerns the costs. It is true that a certain amount of revenue would be forfeited if young people are not paying to take transit. However, the proportion of overall revenues represented by youth fares is relatively small and can be covered by ongoing (not one-time) funding sources if stakeholders work together. Furthermore, these lost revenues should be weighed against the potential benefits mentioned above, as well as others such as reduced on-board processing times.

The other critique of fare-free transit points to the complications involved in verification and enforcement. In the cases of completely fare-free transit this is not as much of a concern because everyone rides for free. However, when only certain groups like young people or students are exempted, things become more complicated. Determining who is allowed to ride for free can be a process that causes extra work for operators and can slow down boarding and thus travel time. Nonetheless, as the following section explains, many cities across the country are finding ways to effectively and efficiently manage verification. In some cases, this is done through the school systems (e.g., schools distribute transit passes or youth can show their school ID). In other cases, young people who appear above the maximum age are simply asked to present identification showing their age.

Fare-free youth transit in other cities

Cities across the United States are taking a fresh look at fares and thinking of creative ways to do things differently,¹⁰ and some have already adopted fare-free transit for youth. In this section we look at several of them.

Los Angeles Metro is currently piloting a [GoPass Student Fareless Pass Program](#) that allows K-12 and community college students unlimited fare-free transit (bus and train) rides through June 2023. In this case, schools and colleges are the main distribution points for the passes. The hope is that removing fares for students will reduce their financial burdens while also increasing their access to, and performance in, the classroom. Several months into the program, there are nearly 100,000 students enrolled who have collectively taken over [1 million fare-free rides](#). Of course, operating a fare-free program on such a large scale is not without costs. The Los Angeles program is funded by [\\$41 million from the American Recovery Plan Act](#) while the rest will come from cost sharing.

Omaha, Nebraska, launched a pilot program in 2021 called [K-12 Rides Free](#). As this name suggests, the local transit agency (Metro) allows students to take the bus, bus rapid transit, or paratransit without paying a fare. High school students are asked to show a student ID, while younger students can simply inform the operator that they are a student. The program, funded by a local philanthropic organization, was launched as a one-year pilot. Because it was deemed successful and ridership was high, the board of directors extended the program.

San Francisco recently introduced [fare-free transit for youth on the Muni](#). Previously the system was free for youth from low and moderate-income families, but in 2021 the city expanded this to include all youth 18 years and younger. Unlike Los Angeles which relies on passes distributed by schools, San Francisco requires no passes. Anyone 18 or younger can simply get on and ride. The agency recommends that people between 16-18 carry an ID in case verification is necessary. The fare-free policy, which began as a pilot, now has [funding through 2024](#).

Other Cities and States. On a different scale, young people across the entire state of Washington may soon be able to ride transit for free. In Spring 2021, the Washington state legislature approved \$3 billion in transit funding to be spent over the next 16 years. However, in order to receive funding, local agencies must allow [people 18 and under to ride buses and trains for free](#). Some cities in the state, such as [Seattle](#), have already offered fare-free transit for youth, but the new move by the state legislature has the potential to massively expand opportunities and access to young people across the state, including [smaller cities and more rural areas](#). There are other instances where transit agencies make special efforts to improve access for young people. For example, Boston's [Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority](#), allows youth under 11 and under to ride for free.



Students boarding RTA bus in New Orleans (photo credit Della Hasselle /The Lens)

The case for a citywide fare-free transit program in New Orleans

Even in New Orleans, the concept of fare-free transit would not be unprecedented. Many New Orleanians fondly recall an earlier time when students could ride for free. However, in recent years, critics have pointed out the deficiencies and problems associated with transportation for youth in New Orleans—particularly concerning schools. Although public schools are required to provide free and adequate transportation for their students, a number of factors lead to inequalities and inefficiencies for both schools and families. Some point to the system of private and public charter schools,¹¹ while others draw attention to the myriad other inequalities in New Orleans, a city often segregated by race and class.

Regardless of the root cause, numerous news stories and countless personal testimonies from frustrated parents and students illustrate the deficiencies of the current status quo, such as long travel times and illogical bus routes. A 2018 analysis of travel times found that New Orleans public school students who took public transit or yellow school buses had much longer commutes than their peers who rode in cars.¹² During the pandemic, driver shortages exacerbated the situation and many New Orleans schools faced difficulties in securing transportation for their students.¹³

Some schools have even given stipends to parents if they seek alternative transportation to the yellow school buses. Not only is the current system bad for families,

but it is also bad for schools. In addition to scrambling to secure transportation for all its students, schools in New Orleans end up spending much more on transportation than the state average.¹⁴ Currently, only a small percentage of youth take transit to get to school. A 2020 study found that only 5.2% of public-school students in New Orleans took transit to get to school.¹⁵

RIDE believes removing fares will significantly increase this proportion and that this would be a just, strategic, and practical move that would benefit students, families, and schools. Furthermore, if funding can be secured from a non-RTA source, then service should not be negatively affected. RIDE's optimism in this domain is buoyed by the fact that we have seen some movement in the right direction in recent years. Based on internally conducted studies, the RTA temporarily revised its fares in 2021. One of the changes was the creation of discounted rates for youth and seniors. After six months of operating with these discounts, [the RTA made the new fares permanent](#). Currently youth can get a one-day Jazzy Pass for \$1, or a one-month pass for \$18. This is a significant reduction from adult passes (\$3 and \$45 respectively).

As discussed previously, two common arguments against going fare-free concern the costs and complications of doing so. It is true that going fare-free for youth would represent some revenue loss, however, we argue that these costs would be relatively minor.

“ We need to normalize the idea that young people should not pay for transportation—an essential service that helps them get where they need to go. In the same way we do not expect children to pay to use a library, we should consider transportation a vital component of their growth and development. Yes, getting kids on transit fare-free will have some costs, but as a society, we find ways to pay for the things we care about. And what could be more valuable than investing in our youth? ”

Last year, youth and senior fares accounted for about 10% of RTA fare revenues. Based on past data, as well as current and projected trends in ridership, the RTA estimates the cost to forgo youth fares would be between \$430,000-\$450,000 per year. Alone, this may sound like a significant amount, but when we consider the RTA's overall annual revenue is >\$100 million, the youth contribution becomes fairly trivial. Other cities are finding ways to offer fare-free transit for youth without compromising service, so we are confident New Orleans can do the same. Similarly, verification does not seem like an insurmountable obstacle. Other cities have found relatively simple means of getting students and young people on transit for free. In fact, the RTA currently allows children under 5 to ride for free and offers discounted fares for youth who are either under 19 or a student in kindergarten through 12th grade, so verifying ages should not represent a major new challenge.

Of course, going fare-free will not solve all transportation-related issues young people face in the city. For example, until service improves, transit riders will still be at a significant disadvantage vis-à-vis cars. And some areas of the city have much better transit service than others. Nonetheless, providing fare-free transit for youth would be a big step forward for New Orleans.

Who should act?

The RTA has taken some important steps in the right direction including reducing fares for youth. RIDE wants to see the agency continue this progress and eliminate youth fares entirely. The agency recently received a federal RAISE grant to upgrade and modernize fare technology. And according to presentations to its board, the agency is planning other big changes including establishing a fares department as well as adopting account-based ticketing and/or a proof of payment system. As it moves forward, fare-free rides for youth should be baked into the agency's fare restructuring. That is to say, it should be taken for granted as a key feature of the new system, rather than something to be considered later.

However, something this important should not be up to the RTA alone. It will take political and financial support from city government as well. The mayor's office and city council should champion the cause of youth transit and identify funding sources to offset any lost revenue. The mayor's office has already identified low-cost or free transit for youth as one of the action strategies in the New Orleans Youth Master Plan. It should work with all stakeholders to ensure this and other components of the plan are fully embraced and implemented.

The rest of us are responsible for a collective mindset shift. We need to normalize the idea that young people should not pay for transportation—an essential service that helps them get where they need to go. In the same way we do not expect children to pay to use a library, we should consider transportation a vital component of their growth and development. Yes, getting kids on transit fare-free will have some costs, but as a society, we find ways to pay for the things we care about. And what could be more valuable than investing in our youth?

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