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NYC student advocates mark National Transit Equity Day

written by Parents to Improve School Transportation
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Transit Equity Day Feb 4th



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Parents to Improve School
Transportation



Feb. 4 - [Parents to Improve School Transportation \(PIST NYC\)](#) convened education, disability, and labor advocates to expose multiple facets of New York City's chronic

student transportation failures and to propose solutions via a School Bus Bill of Rights.

The event, marking the birthday of civil rights icon Rosa Parks - Transit Equity Day - brought together a diverse group of parents and caregivers, elected officials, including State Assemblymember Jo Anne Simon and the Office of Public Advocate, the local Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, and environmentalists.

"Transportation for access to education is now a civil and human right under many laws and international conventions, but just like the people of 1955 Montgomery, we need collective action to get it," said Johnnie Stevens, who coordinates the School Bus Bill of Rights referendum campaign for "safe, on-time, fully staffed school bus routes for students of all abilities and all housing circumstances."

Organizers from across the city charged that policy changes before and during the pandemic have led to missed school, health risks for riders and a shrinking workforce.

Claudia Galicia from Sunset Park explained the Department of Education "authorized the routes to double this year," adding, "families may be informed when a child in the same school is COVID positive, but the bus routes include children from several schools."

Bronx parent and Comite Timon leader Milagros Cancel spoke on the resulting inhumanity of long rides for children with medical and neurological conditions. Speaking in Spanish through tears, Cancel urged everyone to march over the Brooklyn Bridge on March 19 for equity in student transportation, saying, "This is criminal what's happening."

All attendees agreed: driver, attendant, paraprofessional and bus nurse shortages pre-dated COVID. In the words of Public Advocate Jumaane Williams: "The inequities

and inadequacies in our educational system – which existed prior to the pandemic and have been exacerbated by it – extend to our buses. Shortages of staffing, length of rides, and overcrowding are persistent issues which disproportionately harm communities of color and students with disabilities. The city must work to hire and train more staff at fair wages, develop shorter routes, and provide transparency and accountability throughout these processes.”

Williams was represented at the meeting by First Deputy Nick E. Smith and other staff.

Amy Tsai of the Citywide Council for District 75 (special education) reminded the gathering that “there was a huge furlough in 2020, so over that summer, a lot of kids weren’t able to utilize the Learning Centers for related services or instruction.”

First Vice President of the Citywide Council on Special Education, Paultette Healy, added, “We have special education recovery services that started in December, and families cannot access them because there’s no transportation to get our children home.”

Sara Catalinotto of PIST NYC said, “We predicted, over 10 years ago, that cuts to pay and Employee Protection Provisions (EPP) would push many school bus drivers and attendants from the workforce.”

Rima Izquierdo of Bronx Family Autism Support elaborated on the concurrent shortage of school bus paraprofessionals and bus nurses, indicating her child in the background, who was “stuck at home again because his bus para called in sick, and there is no one else designated to ride with him.”

Labor solidarity

Charles Jenkins of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists NY Chapter, pledged support, saying that workers “need to be paid on a professional level that has

benefits so that we can hire the best qualified and the best skilled folks to transport precious cargo.”

Another stated goal of this campaign is to prevent and troubleshoot problems efficiently without bias. Catalinotto cited “inequity in getting route information, let alone solutions, from DOE’s Office of Pupil Transportation (OPT) depending on how much time, internet access and computer savvy a family has, and in what language they are fluent.”

Galicia blasted the OPT’s complaint hotline as an exercise in futility, saying: “There are long hold times, no follow-up, and no solutions. I don’t have enough hours of the day to make a complaint – two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon – because the limited travel time of my child is being violated.”

Parent and advocate Maggie Sanchez testified in detail that: “Students in temporary housing miss more instruction and services, due to transportation problems, compared to their peers. We know what it’s like not to receive a bus route for weeks on end due to a simple address change.”

Beth Heller of Brooklyn Heights added, “Rather than correct the route problems, OPT sent cabs and car services for my child. I had to accompany him to and from school for a total of four hours a day. When OPT neglected to reserve a return trip, it cost \$60 to get home. If OPT were to send us to and from my son’s non-public school for a full academic year it would cost \$42,300. That could easily pay someone’s salary.”

State Assembly Member Jo Anne Simon offered her support for a School Bus Bill of Rights. Simon congratulated the coalition for “seeing this as a multi-pronged problem, [with] people assigned to and coordinating different areas of the battle.”

Justin Wood of the Clean School Bus Coalition cited evidence that “unhealthy

conditions are caused by the diesel and gasoline school buses themselves, creating serious health issues for students, in both general and special education... and we know there's linkages to severe COVID-19 illness now as well."

Event organizers said they had also received messages of encouragement from Teamsters Local 808 Secretary-Treasurer Chris Silvera, City Council member Gale Brewer, Community Education Council 17 President Erika N. Kendall, and various labor, education and community activists.

