



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2023.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Fairfax County

Program Title: Fairfax Connector Free Student Bus Pass Program

Program Category: Transportation

CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: Kala Quintana

Title: Head of Marketing for Fairfax Connector;

Department: Fairfax County Department of Transportation

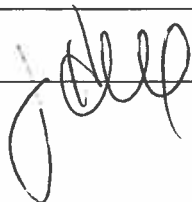
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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Bryan J. Hill

Title: County Executive

Signature: 



County of Fairfax, Virginia

To protect and enrich the quality of life for the people, neighborhoods and diverse communities of Fairfax County

2023 Virginia Association of Counties Achievement Award Submission Transportation/Regional Collaboration: Fairfax County: *Fairfax Connector Free Student Bus Pass Program*

Abstract:

The Fairfax Connector Free Student Bus Pass program launched August 2015 to address issues surrounding the deficit of late afternoon school bus service due to the later shift in school start times. This program allows all Fairfax County students (grades 7 – 12), including private and homeschool students, to ride Fairfax Connector for free from 5 AM – 10 PM, seven days a week, 365 days a year. The program now includes +Metrobus (Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority- WMATA) for five high schools, including one for students with special needs, without access to Fairfax Connector service. **To date students have taken over 2.7 million trips on Fairfax Connector and Metrobus.**

Need/Issue:

During 2010, Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) conducted a sleep study for high school students. The results indicated that students needed more time to sleep and FCPS adjusted high school start times to later in the morning. However, FCPS did not have the budget to purchase more school buses or hire additional drivers. As a result of the adjusted high school starts times to later in the morning, afternoon buses were limited to once per week. This lack of adequate transportation for students disenfranchised students who needed to stay late for

after school assistance, school clubs and sports, as well as other after school activities. Students who had a stay-at-home parent/guardian or who could afford a car, were at an advantage to other students who have neither. The ability to participate in extracurricular activities is critical to successful college applications, at all levels, and can set a student up for success later in life. Fairfax Connector had both capacity on buses and a flexible bus network that would allow students to ride for free, if structured correctly.

Program:

The Free Student Bus Pass Program (FSBPP) was launched in Fall 2015 to all Fairfax County middle and high school students. Staff developed brochures, a flash pass (which expired annually), posters and promotional materials to get the program started. This included briefing middle and high school principals and educators to convince them that Fairfax Connector had a role in the transportation of their students. The FSBPP was met with skepticism, at first, as concerns over liability, safety, and use of the public buses we discussed. We shaped the program terms and conditions with the help of FCPS administration. As a result, students can ride using their student bus passes seven days a week from 5 AM - 10 PM, 365 days a year. There is no restriction on the pass otherwise. Students can use the buses to get to/from school, jobs, movies, meet-ups with friends, etc.

In 2016, the City of Fairfax asked that its CUE bus system be included in the program, so we could provide seamless coverage between the City of Fairfax, which sits in the middle of Fairfax County, and the County, and vice versa. In 2017, we began working to address a separate need with Justice High School, which is at the eastern end of the County and did not have Fairfax Connector service near campus but was instead served by WMATA's Metrobus. We worked with Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) to establish a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) and with WMATA on a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to purchase specially programmed and designed SmarTrip cards and to launch a pilot at Justice HS to use Metrobus in addition to Fairfax Connector. It took approximately one year to finalize the interagency agreements and launch the FSBPP Student Pass SmarTrip card and the Free Student Buss Pass + Metrobus program. Staff reported regularly to the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors Transportation Committee on the program successes. By 2021, the Board of Supervisors voted to expand the +Metrobus program to 4 additional schools: Annandale HS, Falls Church HS, Marshall HS, and Davis Center. These schools are in legacy WMATA Metrobus service areas with less access to Fairfax Connector bus service.

Davis Center is unique amongst these schools because it caters to high-functioning students with developmental and intellectual disabilities such as Autism and Down syndrome. Staff adapted program materials into social stories and created an animated video customized for students with special needs using best practices and feedback from the Principal at Davis Center.

Staff regularly attend high school pyramid student events to educate parents and students and distribute passes to those that are interested. Parents are provided with Free Ride Coupons to ride with their student and practice riding the bus. Staff conduct travel training for students of all abilities both independently and in coordination with WMATA Metrobus. Staff visits schools at lunch time to promote the program.

All participating schools are provided with large format system maps and a customized display for bus schedules and information. All materials are in English and Spanish including animated videos. Materials are also inclusive so that all students regardless of gender, race, ethnicity or ability can see themselves in the marketing materials. All materials were produced in-house. No contractors were used for this program.

Agency Role:

Staff needed to develop the entire Free Student Bus Pass program from the ground up. This included gaining technical knowledge and specifics about the regional SmarTrip card and “reverse engineering” the system to adapt it in such a way as to protect student privacy, while giving complete control to the individual schools over the SmarTrip cards and continually training students and administrators on how to maximize use of this technology.

Staff were also responsible for collaborating with legal counsel at multiple agencies (FCPS, FCPS Transportation, and WMATA) to develop memoranda, systems, integration, testing, guidance,

and best practices. The Head of Marketing for Fairfax Connector served as the sole project manager from 2015 – 2022, in addition to other responsibilities of marketing the system. In 2022, due to the overwhelming success of the program, the Board of Supervisors approved a new position for a Student Bus Pass Program Coordinator.

FSBPP was a good faith effort put forth by Fairfax County to ensure transportation equity for students in Fairfax County in accordance with One Fairfax. This has led to additional policy changes such as “12 and under ride free with paying adult” (beginning May 1, 2023) so that any child living in Fairfax County from birth to high school graduation will be able to ride Fairfax Connector for free.

Costs:

Staff hours total 4,000 hours since the program’s inception. This includes staff time, legal counsel, outreach efforts, material design, program design, SmarTrip card and accounts troubleshooting, elected official briefings, surveys, etc. Fairfax County DOT has also purchased over 30,000 SmarTrip cards, at a cost of \$60,000 from WMATA. \$50,000 has been spent on the printing of marketing materials and advertising in the schools. Costs for Fairfax Connector trips are in-kind, while the +Metrobus program costs are \$2.00 per trip (approximately \$300,000).

Results:

To date, students have taken over 2.7 million trips on Fairfax Connector and Metrobus at no costs to FCPS or students (see infographic), as this effort is fully funded within Fairfax County Department of Transportation's existing budget. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic students were taking nearly 50,000 trips per month (March 2020). Ridership dropped precipitously as schools closed. However, as of February 2023, student ridership has fully recovered to pre-Covid levels. FSBPP continues to be a lifeline for Fairfax County students which account for nearly 7% of Fairfax Connector overall ridership.

After the first year of the program, FCDOT polled students, parents, bus operators, school counselors, and school administration early on to find out more about the impacts of the program from all sides. The results were surprising. Students and parents loved the program, teachers and counselors could better support at-risk students, and students who missed the school bus could take Fairfax Connector and not miss the full day of school. Students felt more "grown up" and "responsible," and loved that they could save money getting to jobs and see friends. They could visit a family member across town to stay more connected. So many students were so grateful for this new tool that they begged us not to take it away. Counselors have reported students staying in school until they graduate because they do not want to lose their student bus pass. We even surveyed our bus operators to determine if there were any behavioral issues on the bus. Operators reported that while our regular customers were well-behaved, the students were even better behaved than the regular passengers because they

knew they could lose their pass (and freedom) if they acted inappropriately. This feedback has been consistent over the past eight years.

We have consistently described this program as having a “pebble in the pond” effect. That one student who can stay after school for help or to participate in an extracurricular activity, is hired for an after-school job, earns good grades, admitted to college or a trade school, which allows them to support themselves and a family and live a better quality of life -- all because of a free bus pass. The need to seek peer support by connecting with friends or being able to leave an abusive household for a safe trip on the bus is also met. It is the improved comfort level taking transit which allows them to live a car-free lifestyle because they know how to use the bus system. Fewer cars on the road means less dependence on foreign oil, improved air quality, less congestion, fewer crashes, accessibility to good jobs and healthcare. Transit savvy students lead to transit savvy adults.

FSBPP has had such an incredible impact on families and students in Fairfax County and we are pleased to see that it continues to grow and serves as a model for other transit agencies eager to engage the next generation of transit users.

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Fairfax Connector Free Student Pass Program

2.7 Million
Trips on Fairfax Connector
2016 to 2023

173K+
Trips taken by the
FSBP+Metrobus
School students
2018 to 2023



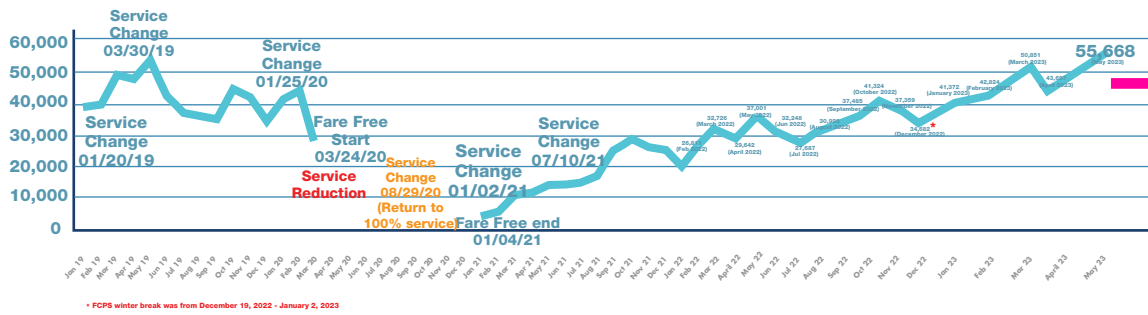
Fairfax County Team Excellence Award 2019

Bus Tracker is an important tool for students to get real-time bus information



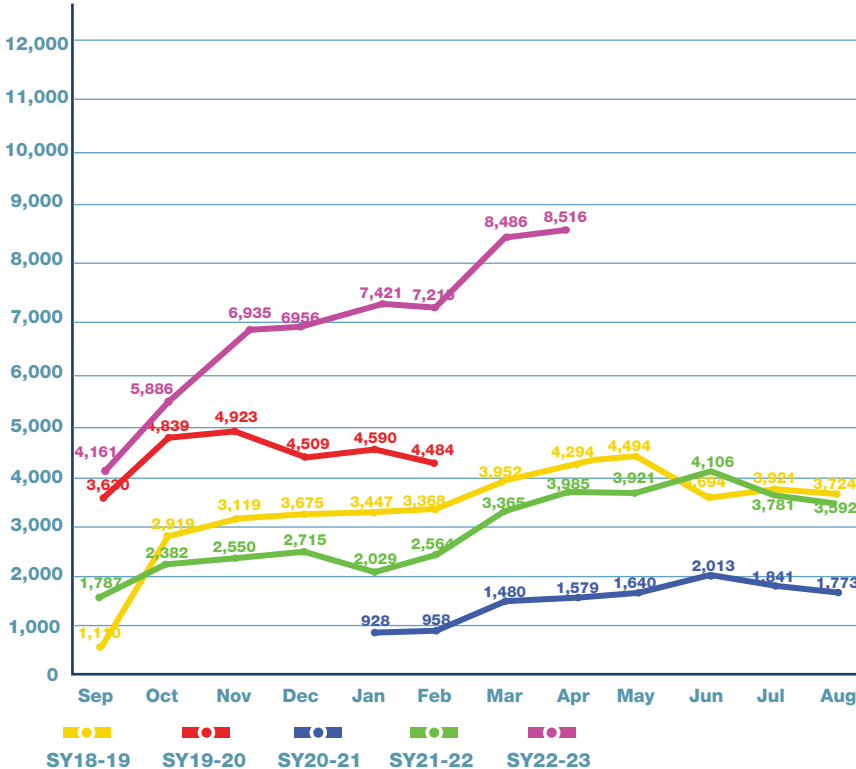
55,668
trips
(May 2023)

Fairfax Connector Monthly Student Pass Ridership - COVID Recovery



4 more schools have been included in the **Free Student Bus Pass + Metrobus** Program since September 2022

The number of trips **has rapidly increased** in eight months since the Expansion of the program started in September of 2022



3,592 trips before the expansion (August 2022)

8,516 trips after 8 months of the expansion (April 2023)

Fairfax Connector Free Student Pass Program

Marketing Material

Posters displayed at 24 middle schools, 28 high schools, and 11 school centers

Bilingual Coloring and Activity Book



Bilingual Brochures (English and Spanish)



Videos

English Version
Link to our **2D ANIMATED VIDEO**
"How to ride the Fairfax Connector"



English Version
Link to our **VIDEO**
"How to ride the Fairfax Connector"



En Español
Enlace a nuestro **VIDEO ANIMADO 2D**
"Cómo viajar en el bus de Fairfax Connector"



En Español
Enlace a nuestro **VIDEO**
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