

## **MTA Headed in the Wrong Direction**

Why is it that when government agencies want to cut funding, it's always low-income families that get it in the neck? The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) is at it again. It has raised fares on the city's subways and buses twice in the past two years. Last week, it approved a budget that would – among other drastic service cuts - phase out free and discounted subway and bus rides for more than a half million students who commute to school. This is supposed to save the agency about \$170 million a year.

The overwhelming numbers of public school students in the city are African American and Latino children who live in low-income families, with household incomes of less than \$36,000 a year for a family of three. The Community Service Society, in its latest survey, "The Unheard Third," found that 56 percent of low-income New Yorkers have less than \$500 in savings to fall back on in case of an emergency. A third has no savings at all. For the school year, full fare transportation costs would be about \$900 per child. Of course, the \$900 presupposes that the MTA won't raise fares again in the near future, a faint hope given its history.

For the poorest New Yorkers – those with household income of less than \$18,000 for a family of three - the median residual income – the household income left after paying the rent – is about \$132 per family member, or about \$5 a day to cover all other expenses, food, clothing, transportation, medical needs. With the subway and bus fare today set at \$2.25 per ride, how could these families expect to pay for their children's transportation to and from school?

### **Families Struggling**

Families are already struggling to survive under the current economic pressures. CSS's survey revealed that one in five low-income families has been hit with the loss of a job in the past year. Nearly a third cut back on buying clothes or school supplies because of a lack of money. These are not the New Yorkers who should bear the burden of an increased cost of living in the city.

The MTA is a quasi-public agency created by the state to address a specific area without having to deal with the political pressure of the voters. Established in 1965, the authority operates the city's buses and subways, the Metro North and Long Island railroads, Long Island buses, and seven bridges and two tunnels in New York City. It serves 2.4 billion users annually. Members of the MTA board are appointed by a combination of public officials, none of whom can be held solely responsible for the agency's actions. A neat political maneuver! The MTA ostensibly makes its decisions after holding public hearings, but the real work – and the decision making – is done away from the media and the public affected by those decisions.

### **An Educational Decision**

The MTA may view the ending of the student transportation subsidy as a purely budgetary decision, but it is ultimately an educational decision. It will damage the fabric of an already fragile educational system. The dropout rates from the city's high schools – already amongst the worst in the nation - would be expected to grow with those dropping out among the poorest of the city's poor families. Even now, little more than half of the students entering high school graduate. A recent report by the Community Service Society, "From Basic Skills to Better Futures," found that there are already more than a million workers in the city who have neither a high school diploma nor a GED. New York City needs an educated workforce to compete in a global economy and we are not going to produce that by throwing economic barriers in the way of 585,000 school children.

There has been talk that this is a tactic by the MTA to force the city and state to increase their subsidies for student fares. Governor Paterson, Mayor Bloomberg, and Council Speaker Quinn have all expressed outrage at the MTA's decision. But these politicians should not be shocked by the MTA's actions. The city's contribution to the MTA subsidy for student fares hasn't increased for over a decade and the state cut its annual contribution by 76 percent in November.

I know these are very tough economic times for the city and state, each of which must find ways to balance its budget. But saving \$170 million a year – out of city and state budgets totaling more than a \$175 billion – seems like a false economy considering the potential damage. Like many public agencies in this recession, the MTA's budget has shrunk. But making students shoulder this burden is a step in the wrong direction.

There are other sources of revenue to cover this expense. Tolls on the city's bridges and tunnels – an idea that has been discussed numerous times – is a possible solution. And if we are tired of regressive taxation, a small increase in the personal income tax on the wealthiest New Yorkers could provide the MTA with sufficient funds to continue free and discounted fares for the city's public school students.

Phasing out the transportation subsidy for students is not expected to go into effect until the beginning of the next school year in September. So there is still time for the governor and the mayor to find the funds to save this subsidy. Its maintenance will directly affect the future of countless students and, ultimately, the economic strength of the city and the well being of its residents.

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David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 160 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS's website: [www.cssny.org](http://www.cssny.org).

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