Ride Yellow; Go Green

Sally Waldron

When children can walk and bike to school, the air quality at their school is measurably better. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, if we returned to 1969 levels of walking and biking, we would save 1.5 million tons of carbon dioxide and 89,000 tons of other pollutants. However, in many school districts, children live too far away to walk or bike, or the roads or the weather make it hard for pedestrians and bike riders. Giving children a ride to school in a car is one option, but cars add to traffic and pollution, and not everyone has a car! Buses are most efficient, but they still create a lot of pollution.

What if yellow school buses could be more “green”? What if school districts could shift their buses from diesel fuel to cleaner and cheaper fuels, like propane? Greener buses are better for the environment and better for children’s health. The air inside diesel-fueled school buses is often five to 10 times dirtier than the air outside. Every time the driver opens the door to let children in or out, the fumes enter the bus.

It will take a lot of effort to switch from diesel. (According to an article in USA Today, about 95% of the nation’s 480,000 school buses still run on diesel.) But some school districts are getting started. In Mesa, Arizona, school officials are switching their buses to propane. Before making the change, they thought about the cost. Propane school buses cost about $100,000, which is $3,000-$4000 more than diesel buses. Also, a propane bus gets 10% fewer miles per gallon than a diesel bus. However, over time, a propane bus saves the district money. In 2013, a gallon of diesel cost $3.54; a gallon of propane cost $1.125. The Mesa school district also got a $50 per gallon excise tax rebate on the propane, so the actual cost per gallon for propane was $625.

What do you think? Would you support the switch to propane? Why or why not?

What about in your school district?

In this activity, you will research bus use in your school district, calculate costs, and write a letter.

Find out how many school buses your community uses and what fuel(s) the buses use.

If your school district has plans to replace its current buses, what fuel(s) will these buses use?

What does a propane-fueled bus cost? What would it cost for your school district to replace 25% of their diesel-fueled buses?

What is the current price of diesel per gallon compared to the current price of propane (or other alternative fuels) per gallon? What are other advantages/disadvantages of these fuels?

Write a letter to your school district. State whether they should keep the current buses, replace the current buses with other buses, redesign school assignments so that more children can walk or bicycle to school, some combination of these things, or something else? Why?

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