



Students Can't Learn if they Can't Get to School

**By Paul T. Gessner, Head of School,
St. Joan Antida High School, Milwaukee
November 17, 2016**

As we approach Thanksgiving, we take time to contemplate that for which we are grateful. As the Head of School at St. Joan Antida High School (SJA), an all-girl International Baccalaureate World School, I am thankful to our learning community, made up of our extraordinary teachers and staff, a talented board, and of course, our committed students and their families, many of whom go far out of their way to ensure that their children come to school ready to learn and succeed. Our school's goal is to break the cycle of poverty in Milwaukee by providing a competitive, college-bound education to our students.

However, we cannot be competitive as a school in a school choice environment when our students' basic transportation needs are not being met. These are transportation needs, guaranteed under Wisconsin law, yet neglected by the Milwaukee Public School District (MPS), despite their legal responsibility to provide for these services.

This past week, the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty filed a notice of claim against the Milwaukee Public School District, demanding the school district reimburse St. Joan Antida High School for the cost of the busing of 70 SJA students who are eligible for transportation services through MPS but are not receiving them.

Under state law, children who attend private schools and meet certain criteria must be transported to their school by the local public school district. In Milwaukee, MPS is the designated transportation provider. MPS is required to provide the same transportation services to students who attend private schools as it provides to students who attend public school. MPS currently provides transportation to students who attend public citywide high schools including Rufus King, Community High School and Golda Meir, but is not providing the same service to students attending St. Joan Antida High School.

Safe and reliable student transportation is a top priority for St. Joan Antida High School families and the leadership team of the school. And so, because MPS is not providing our students with transportation, we do pay for the busing of more than 50% of our student body, which relies on school bus transportation, at a total cost of more than \$108,000. This dollar amount is the equivalent to the cost of our International Baccalaureate and Girls in Engineering programs. A \$108,000 cost savings in transportation would allow us to greatly expand our course offerings, including adding teaching staff.

St. Joan Antida High School has provided thousands of young women a student-centered, intensive college preparatory education since its founding in 1954. We enroll students from 40 feeder schools throughout the city; the vast majority of them (more than 90%) are students of color. Last year, more than 43% of our graduating seniors who took IB exams scored high enough to earn college credit. And more than 90% of our graduates go on to study at a 2-year or 4-year college or university. We are grateful to our partners in education, including the Milwaukee School of Engineering and Project Lead the way, both of which have helped enhance our STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) educational model.

Lastly, we are grateful to the families of our 70 students who have put their trust in St. Joan Antida High School to go to bat for them to demand the same transportation services received by their public school peers. Students at our school should not be discriminated against and denied transportation just because their families choose the private school option for their daughter.



Paul T. Gessner