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Bad transport links add to the woes of struggling schools

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The report of a study this week by ['SchoolDash'](#) points to secondary schools in disadvantaged areas being subjected to a "double whammy" when they are also affected by poor transport links. The results are very clear, but the

reasons remain obscure. Yet travel times and unreliable transport links are obviously a problem for staff and students alike. The main lesson should be to look at this more closely.

An intriguing report from the BBC today ([Bad local transport linked to failing schools](#)) raised an important question. Could it be that school pupils with longer travelling times affect the overall performance of a school? The comparative data is well explained in a report out yesterday from the organisation 'SchoolDash' with ['Outliers: On geographically isolated schools'](#).

Unfortunately, the data does not address that travel factor for students. Instead, it considers the location schools in England in relation to travel time to a centre with a 'major employment hub' of over 5000 jobs, i.e.

time travelled away from a town or city centre (*See note 1 below). It seems that the more isolated a school, the more likely it is to underperform according to [Ofsted](#). There are more schools marked as '[inadequate](#)' or '[require improvement](#)' in isolated areas overall. The Ofsted criteria include personal development and outcomes for pupils, but this is not the only thing measured at inspections. Leadership and quality of teaching are just as important. However, the effect of transport links is a real one and it is magnified greatly in areas that are more deprived. This is described as a "double whammy". Yet, the results are clear, and they are puzzling. Even more puzzling is the observation that the effects are not so apparent for primary schools. Only secondary schools are greatly impacted. The BBC rightly asked some experts to offer an explanation. Anna Vignoles, a very experienced education expert from Cambridge University, is cited as saying "*Staffing is key*". This may well be one factor, but surely most teachers use cars. Then again, it might be that teachers tend to live in more prosperous areas and prefer jobs in those areas. I suspect the catchment of the school is another factor affecting the choice of employer. Educational economist Simon Burgess of Bristol University (co-author with Vignoles of '[School choice in England: evidence from national administrative data](#)'. [Oxford Review of Education 2019 Volume 45, Pages 690-710](#)) takes a free-market approach. Whilst acknowledging there is never a single cause, the transport effect might mean "*zero competition*" between schools and parents have no alternative.

The drudgery of commuting and the lost hours travelling.

The time taken to travel to school is surely a problem for everyone associated with a school. If teachers live far away from an 'isolated' school, then they might not find it easy to engage. Indeed, they lose time in preparation and non-classroom work to the travel time. This must also affect the effectiveness of the school overall. The hassles of lost time in commuting affect many workers and this includes high levels of stress across the board (see **note 2 below). TEFS has studied the situation regarding commuting university students. Some have very long commuting time and this is often accompanied by more hours in part-time work (see TEFS 23rd August 2019 '[Students working in term-time: Commuter students and their working patterns](#)'). The impact on learning must be mostly due to diversion to the time taken to study elsewhere, and this must affect attainment. The same would be the case for students travelling long distances to school. Parents may seek a better choice of school, but it might entail extra travel for their children. The school drop routine is commonplace in many 'middle class' families as they seek to minimise the time lost in travelling.

A personal observation.

My experience from 1965 to 1973 as a school pupil was not a particularly good one. I duly passed the 11+ and was condemned to travelling by foot and two buses across a very busy city every day to attend a grammar school. Its location was in a more advantaged area and took around 90 minutes to ensure arrival before assembly at 8.45am. School ended at 4.30pm every day and the same journey was reversed. A 10-minute walk, followed by waiting for a bus to the city centre, another 10-minute walk and a second bus to the opposite side of the city, then a final 5-minute walk. I arrived home after 6pm on most days, very tired and hungry. By the time I was in the sixth form, I also had a part-time job and a growing sense that losing three hours per day to non-productive travel, lack of sleep and sheer exhaustion were having a huge impact on my attainment. It is not unfair to say that the school showed no sympathy and offered no help.

This experience is probably replicated for students across the UK today and should be looked at more closely. The Department of [Education](#) '[Home-to-school travel and transport](#)' guidance from 2014 stresses that travel times for secondary school students should be less than "75 minutes", but "*should be regarded as the maximum*". All local authorities should have a sustainable and adequate transport plan. This may not be happening in all cases where schools might be 'isolated'. However, in my case, there is now a single bus service directly to my old school with a journey time reduced to around 50 minutes.

Since that time, it has been concerning that our society accepts unequal chances as something inevitable. The idea that all schools might offer the same chances seems elusive. This acceptance seems to go a long way to explaining why selective schools persist and parents choose schools further afield. An article from the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) this week, '[Five reasons why academic selection refuses to disappear from secondary schooling in England](#)' puts it well with we "then judge our non-selective schools by their records in getting their pupils into our uber-selective universities". The structure that allows selective schools to persist is balanced against a call for more funding for non-selective schools. Maybe better resources for 'local schools' might be a simpler focal point. It might offer real help to the cold and wet schoolboy, standing in the dark at a bus stop in the December wind and rain, facing a long journey home.

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*Note 1. The comparison was to the journey-time statistics for each school come from the [Department for Transport](#). A 'major employment

hub' refers to an employment centre with at least 5,000 jobs. Times used were for travel by foot and public transport. Travel times by car, while generally shorter, showed similar overall patterns.

**Note 2. According to a survey of 34,000 worker by Vitality Health in 2017 ['Long commutes costing firms a week's worth of staff productivity'](#). Travel time has a significant impact on mental wellbeing, with longer-commuting workers 33% more likely to suffer from depression, 37% more likely to have financial concerns and 12% more likely to report multiple dimensions of work-related stress. They are also 46% more likely to get less than the recommended seven hours of sleep each night and 21% more likely to be obese.