

# CSBA Superintendents Advisory Council Zero-Emission Bus Survey

January 2025

## Background

In fall 2023, Gov. Gavin Newsom signed Assembly Bill 579 (AB 579), which mandates that all newly purchased or leased school buses must be zero-emission starting in 2035.

The California School Boards Association’s (CSBA) Superintendents Advisory Council surveyed California superintendents to better understand their local educational agencies’ financial and logistical experiences and plans to transition to zero-emission buses in order to advocate effectively. “Zero-emission” refers to any school bus that does not emit waste or pollutants into the atmosphere. This includes electric school buses, hydrogen-powered buses, or any other zero-emission vehicles.

AB 579 contains provisions allowing LEAs, beginning in 2035, to apply for one five-year extension of the mandate from the California Air Resources Board (CARB). To qualify for the extension, an LEA, upon determination by CARB, must “reasonably demonstrate” that zero-emission buses cannot feasibly provide for the daily transportation needs of its students due to terrain or route constraints. Beginning in 2040, frontier school districts, defined as districts with an average daily attendance (ADA) of fewer than 600 students or in an area with a population density of less than 10 people per square mile, may request annual one-year extensions until 2045.

## Zero-Emission Bus Survey

Recognizing the need for research, CSBA’s Superintendents Advisory Council convened in summer 2024 to discuss AB 579 and its implications for California LEAs. The council put together a list of questions that explored a wide range of topics, including financial implications, logistical planning, personnel, the benefits of switching to zero-emission buses, and other critical topics.

One hundred fifty-four superintendents from across the state responded to the survey that was sent to all CSBA member superintendents. This fact sheet presents high-level findings from the survey.

## Findings

**Overall, respondents were not very confident in moving toward zero-emission busing by 2035.**

- ▶ Sixty-six percent of respondents stated that they were “not so confident” or “not at all confident” that they would be able to comply with the mandate by its deadline.
- ▶ Eleven percent indicated they were “extremely confident” that their LEA could transition to zero-emission buses by the 2035 deadline.

The lack of confidence surrounding the transition may indicate a lack of state support and guidance. This can cause LEAs to miss key opportunities or timeline extensions in the following decade.

**Most concerns revolved around cost, infrastructure, and personnel.**

Superintendents highlighted many concerns surrounding the cost, infrastructure, and personnel requirements to fulfill AB 579’s mandate. These concerns stemmed from issues LEAs already had with zero-emission buses and those that they anticipate having in the future. The top issues in each of these areas are:

Anticipated issues	Issues already experienced
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) The cost of the transition</li> <li>2) Issues installing charging stations</li> <li>3) The ability to obtain charging equipment</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Issues with bus maintenance</li> <li>2) The length of time to obtain buses</li> <li>3) The lack of available power</li> </ol>

Other critical issues related to LEA composition were noted; chief among them was the district's total area in relation to bus range. Additionally, superintendents relayed issues such as the terrain of routes and climate as concerns around zero-emission bus range.

**Over half of the respondents were unaware of timeline extension opportunities in AB 579.**

Only 49 percent of superintendents who responded to the survey knew of the timeline extension provisions outlined in AB 579. There is a significant learning opportunity to this finding. There may be districts concerned about their ability to comply with the mandate that could be granted an extension to allow extra time to help plan and procure the necessary infrastructure and vehicles. LEAs should know all of their options to make the best decisions for their local circumstances.

**Over half of LEAs represented in the survey have yet to apply for zero-emission busing grants.**

Though not explicitly asked about eligibility, 55 percent of respondents said they had not applied for a grant for buses or infrastructure.

Currently, numerous state and federal grants are available to aid LEAs in transitioning to zero-emission buses. For example, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency offers a [Clean School Bus Rebate Program](https://www.epa.gov/clean-school-bus-rebate-program) ([bit.ly/3ZWgT3Q](https://bit.ly/3ZWgT3Q)) through January 2025. The California Energy Commission runs the [School Bus Replacement Program](https://www.energy.ca.gov/programs-and-services/school-bus-replacement-program) ([bit.ly/49H455f](https://bit.ly/49H455f)) for disadvantaged and low-income communities.

However, creating grant programs puts the onus on LEAs to find grants and compile extensive applications. CSBA has [documented the extensive reporting load](https://www.csba.org/resources/reports-and-publications/2024/07/24/documenting-the-extensive-reporting-load) ([bit.ly/41zf4LI](https://bit.ly/41zf4LI)) that LEAs already face. At the same time, annual state budget uncertainty surrounds whether these grant programs will persist through AB 579's deadline. While not all districts represented in this survey may be eligible for grant opportunities, it is important that they are aware of them in case there are funding opportunities.

**There are common benefits that were reported in owning and operating zero-emission buses.**

While not representing the majority of responses, there were common benefits that 21 respondents reported. The top 4 of these benefits were:

- 1) Positive environmental impacts such as cleaner air.
- 2) Zero-emission buses produce less noise. This has led to positive feedback from student riders and the community.
- 3) In some instances, respondents reported decreases in fuel costs when compared to diesel buses.
- 4) In some instances, superintendents also reported maintenance savings due to the reduction in moving parts on zero-emission buses.

The Superintendents Advisory Council presented the results of this survey at CSBA's Annual Education Conference in December. These concerns will also be relayed to policymakers through fact sheets and district ride-alongs.

**Questions for board members to consider:**

- 1) Has our LEA begun assessing the infrastructure, personnel, and cost considerations of transitioning to zero-emission busing?
- 2) What local factors might impact our transition to zero-emission buses?
- 3) Would these factors contribute to a possible extension request in 2035?
- 4) Are zero-emission bus grants available for our LEA, and how do we access that funding?

