**In Rural Utah, Students' School Day Stretches to 12 Hours (With 4 on the Bus)** By [SAM DILLON](https://www.nytimes.com/by/sam-dillon) MAY 28, 2004 The New York Times

The sky is still dark over the canyon lands of southeastern Utah at 5:30 a.m., but two dozen Navajo students are already preparing for school. Their bus driver, William Mustache, is circling his yellow rig, checking the running lights before setting out through the backcountry dawn to fetch them.

Lasting nearly two hours, Mr. Mustache's route is one of the longest, dustiest, most bone-rattling school bus rides in the nation.

Bouncing its way along the washboard roads of the Navajo reservation and a two-lane blacktop north to Lyman Middle School and San Juan High School in Blanding, a 67-mile trip, Mr. Mustache's 24-seater rattles the students mercilessly and kicks up a dust cloud that showers them with a powder of red clay. Yet students and driver form a tight community aboard the bus, and speak of the discomforts with stoicism.

''It lasts forever; it's boring,'' said Chelsie Atene, an eighth grader who climbs aboard at Mr. Mustache's second stop. ''But I'm with friends, and a lot of times it's fun.''.

Mr. Mustache's route begins on a windswept knoll outside his house on the Navajo reservation. At 5:45 a.m. the other day, he released the parking brake and set out along a dirt track.

His teenage son, Watson, and daughter, Evangeline, climbed aboard outside their grandmother's house a quarter-mile away, looking sleepy. Chelsie and two other students boarded five minutes later.

Over the next half-hour, Mr. Mustache traversed the sandy, one-lane roads of an arid and largely treeless highland, where the horizon was broken only by windmills and telephone lines. At one stop, two girls wrapped in Navajo blankets seemed embarrassed by the presence of a photographer. ''Don't take any pictures,'' one said.

Minutes later, Mr. Mustache slowed the bus to allow 15 Herefords to cross.

After the last pickup in that sector, Mr. Mustache accelerated to 40 m.p.h., and the bus became a deafening cacophony of rattles and squeaks, noisier than any subway car. Windows were closed but chattering, and a snowstorm of dust sifted fine silt onto every surface.

All the banging and shaking takes its toll on the district's 60 buses, said Jed Tate, the bus maintenance supervisor. Rivets tear out of the chassis, light bulbs shatter, and dust chews through brake drums and seat covers.

''I suppose it grinds up the kids' clothes, too,'' he said.

Amid the din, students remained largely silent. A couple of them bounced along in fitful slumber. But when Mr. Mustache wheeled the bus onto a blacktop reservation road, the ride grew smoother, the sun streamed over the Sleeping Ute mountains, and students began to chat.

Tyron Wells, a 17-year-old junior who boarded the bus with his hair brushed up with gel, sat sullen and quiet. But after Shymaine Miller, a dark-eyed ninth grader wearing blue capris, boarded the bus and took the seat immediately behind him, he became more animated.

She pulled out a mirror and applied eyeliner. She had difficulty clasping a bracelet around her left wrist, so he reached over the seat to help her. Later she passed him a note and smiled. He read it and smiled back.

Three seats away, Danaman Begay, a 15-year-old sophomore, sat with his knees propped against the seat in front of him. He had boarded the bus outside a cluster of one-story homes where his grandparents and father, a heavy equipment operator, keep cattle and sheep as well as turkeys and geese.

Danaman rises at 5 a.m., he said, and runs two miles through the darkness to a windmill, then returns home and washes up. He usually has time to play the piano for a few minutes, he said.

''The hardest thing about the bus ride is sitting still for so long,'' Danaman said. It is also difficult for him, however, because the school is riven with cliques and his friends do not ride his bus. He exchanged punches recently with other boys on the bus who were bullying a younger child.

Shortly after the bus crossed the San Juan River, it climbed steeply through a canyon and followed a long, slow rise across high desert. The sun was high in the sky, and to the east, the snowcapped peaks of the San Juan mountains glimmered in the distance.

Outside Blanding, the blacktop broadened to four lanes, and the roadside sage and tumbleweed gave way to asphalt parking lots and chain-link fences. The bus rolled past a store selling Indian jewelry, a Super 8 motel, a Mormon church, and up a slope to the rambling brick buildings of San Juan High School. Mr. Mustache parked next to the football field.

Students clambered out, groaning. They shook their legs, brushed dust from their clothes, and headed for classes, which begin at 8 a.m.

At 3:30 p.m., students gathered outside Mr. Mustache's bus for the ride home. Weariness prevailed. Even before the bus was out of town, half the students were asleep. Some cradled their heads in their arms. One boy lay on the seat, his feet splayed in the aisle. Watson, Mr. Mustache's son, was curled in a fetal position on a rear seat. Nobody was doing homework.

''A bus is just not a good environment for study,'' said Douglas Wright, the district superintendent. Utah educators have not tried to calculate the effect of bus rides on student achievement, Mr. Wright said. ''But there's definitely going to be an impact when a student loses four hours out of his day,'' he said. ''Some students who ride the bus do extremely well. Others don't.''

Danaman said he struggled to complete homework aboard the bus. He reads, but has given up trying to complete written assignments amid all the dust and rattling, he said.

''Teachers kept saying they were too sloppy,'' he said.

Students stared in boredom at the bus's shadow, racing through the roadside pinyon bushes. One boy drew pictures on his arm.

''You've got a hole in your pants!'' one girl shouted at another.

''Shut up!'' her friend retorted, amid gales of laughter.

The bus turned off the blacktop and began its deafening rattle. Chelsie's hoop earrings bounced beneath her lobes, and her makeup became blotched with road dust.

Half an hour later, the bus groaned to a stop outside the settlement that is home to her and a schoolmate, Shaun Pelt, who was fast asleep. Chelsie slapped him hard.

''Get up!'' she said. He roused himself, and they staggered off.