Assembly line workers at the Thomas Built school bus factory in High Point, North Carolina are over the moon about the new infrastructure bill—specifically Title XI, Section 71101. Buried deep in the 2,702-page document approved by the House last week, that line item allocates federal funds to help localities purchase brand-new battery-powered school buses. That’s good news for Thomas Built, a subsidiary of German auto giant Daimler that controls nearly 40% of the North American school bus market. And for Chris Pratt, president of the local United Auto Workers chapter and a 22-year veteran welder at the Thomas Built plant, the legislation means one thing: more jobs. “We’re all excited,” Pratt says. “This is something huge for us.”

The school bus provision accounts for a comparatively tiny $5 billion within the $1.2 trillion bill now awaiting the President’s signature. But for workers like those in High Point, and campaigners advocating to get rid of diesel fumes on children’s commutes, this new federal funding represents a turning point in a surprisingly significant industry that will affect communities across the country.

The U.S.’s approximately 500,000 school buses comprise the country’s largest public transportation network, moving 26 million children between school and home every day. That’s more than four times the New York City subway’s daily ridership, all picked up and dropped off at farm houses, suburban developments, and city apartment blocks from Idaho to Alaska. About 95% of those buses run on diesel, accounting for more than 5 million tons of yearly greenhouse gas emissions, and exposure to their exhaust fumes have been linked to lower test scores and worse respiratory health for children, whose developing lungs are more susceptible to irritation caused by the fine particulates bus engines generate. Inside those buses, especially idling in traffic or in pickup lots, children often breathe the most polluted air they experience all day.

The burden of those health problems falls heaviest on low-income communities of color, says Johana Vicente, national senior director at Chispa, the Latinx-oriented branch of the League of Conservation Voters based in Washington D.C. Spurred by asthma and other health effects they saw among children, Chispa began that year to campaign to electrify the nation’s buses. “School buses were not necessarily part of the conversation at all,” says Vicente. “It was a very new topic that we were talking about.”
Membership on the electric-school-bus bandwagon soon swelled to include groups like progressive policy nonprofit Jobs to Move America and the Sierra Club, united by a pretty much inarguable case. It’s hard to produce electric versions of heavy vehicles, like long-haul trucks, due to their need for huge batteries, which weigh a lot and require long charging times. But as far as big, gas-guzzling vehicles go, electrifying school buses would be relatively easy, since they only need limited range, and have plenty of time to charge up during the school day or at night. Doing so would not only help the environment, but also directly impact children’s health—not to mention that the major U.S. school bus manufacturers were all already eyeing electric versions of their tried-and-true staples.

Electric buses are pricey though (two to three times more expensive to produce than diesel versions) and many of the low-income districts whose children most need cleaner commutes are also the ones least able to afford to upgrade their fleets. Some states, like California and Maryland, have passed measures to help schools buy electric buses but the federal money from Biden’s infrastructure plan will make a huge difference nationwide. Battery-powered school buses account for less than 1% of vehicles in the U.S.’s half-million strong school-bus fleet, with just 1,164 electric versions either in operation or planned to be delivered, according to the World Resources Institute. The $5 billion infusion from the Biden Plan, researchers estimate, could bump up that number to about 10,000 within five years, though the President’s original March infrastructure proposal aimed to electrify almost 10 times that number of school buses, and the current funding would still leave bus makers cranking out many more diesel buses than electric ones every year (annually, U.S. bus-makers produce about 30,000 school buses per year, which are either directly commissioned by school districts or busing contractors, or sold through dealerships). But the federal funding could still be enough to start to bring down electric bus costs as more and more of the vehicles come off the line, and bus makers start to get economies of scale on crucial electric components, like batteries.

Still, the new measures are far from adequate, advocates say. To start, that $5 billion number in the current infrastructure bill isn’t exactly as good as it sounds. Only $2.5 billion is allocated specifically for electric buses. The $2.5 billion remaining is for so-called “clean school buses,” a broader category that includes buses that run on propane and natural gas—a head-scratcher for the climate conscious. In addition, campaigners who want the money to be distributed in a way that prioritizes low-income school districts feel the matter still needs to be ironed out.

And though the federal funding may jump-start a nascent industry, it still barely makes a dent in the nation’s massive fossil-fuel-powered school bus fleet. Another bill, the Clean Commute For Kids Act of 2021, would have a more sizable impact, if it ever gets through Congress. Introduced by Alex Padilla, the junior Senator for California, in April, that legislation would allocate $25 billion for zero-emission school buses—enough to replace half of the U.S. fleet. But so far, the bill is still stuck in committee.
In High Point, workers say building buses is one of the best jobs you can get these days. There used to be other good work at the hosiery or furniture factories, before those businesses packed up and shipped their jobs overseas in recent decades. There are still jobs at the textile businesses, but workers there can’t expect to make more than $10 an hour. At the unionized school-bus factory, pay starts at about $17 an hour and tops out at $27, plus benefits. “It’s the best thing going,” says Pratt, the union president. “People come from hours away for these jobs.”

Those jobs attract more than workers—school bus assembly lines make good photo ops for politicians as well. Blue Bird’s school bus plant in rural Fort Valley, Georgia, has hosted visits from its local congressman Sanford Bishop and newly elected Georgia Senator Raphael Warnock in recent months, while Vice President Kamala Harris visited Thomas Built’s High Point plant in April. (The two companies, along with IC Bus, a subsidiary of Wolfsburg, Germany-based auto Goliath Volkswagen, control the lionshare of the $1.5 billion U.S. school bus market). The combination of healthy kids and blue-collar jobs are a no-brainer for politicians. “It doesn’t matter somebody’s political background,” says Brian Alexander, public relations director for Lion Electric, a Canadian electric bus startup. “It’s just one of those universally-liked ideas.”

And the promised jobs may be on their way. Kevin Bangston, CEO of Thomas Built, says the company will be bringing on a “pretty significant” number of new hires in the weeks ahead, thanks in part to new demand spurred by the infrastructure bill. Executives at IC Bus say they may ramp up production at their Tulsa, Oklahoma plant. Congressman Bishop, who represents a central Georgia district that includes Fort Valley, home to the 100-year-old Blue Bird bus factory, also expects the bill to bring more bus-building jobs for his constituents. “It makes good environmental sense, and there’s going to be good economic investment,” he says.

Perhaps the most significant of those investments is in Joliet, Illinois, where hotshot industry newcomer Lion Electric will be plowing about $70 million into a new school bus factory, planned to open around the second half of 2022. Eventually, that facility will employ around 1,400 local workers. “That’ll basically increase our production capacity nine-fold,” says Alexander. “So we’ll definitely be ready to respond once the [federal] program’s in place.”

Globalization hasn’t been easy on Joliet. Located about 40 miles southwest of Chicago, the city was once home to the second-largest steel mill in the U.S. before the facility closed down in the 1980s. A local Caterpillar plant that once employed about 7,000 people closed for good in 2019, and the city has long suffered higher unemployment than the surrounding Will County region. Doug Pryor, vice president of economic development at the Will County Center for Economic Development, says it’s easy to be disheartened by those losses, but that
the new Lion Electric factory may be a game-changer. “Lion is a project that really represents that this region, and frankly the state of Illinois, can still compete in modern manufacturing,” Pryor says. “It’s a very big flag in the ground.”

At High Point’s Thomas Built factory, Pratt, the union president, says new positions can’t come soon enough—job demand has skyrocketed since a recent pay raise announcement, scheduled to take effect this month. “They pitched up the starting pay from $14.13 an hour to $17.21,” Pratt says. “And we’ve been flooded with applications.”

**Correction, Nov. 16**

The original version of this article misstated the name of Jobs to Move America. The organization is called “Jobs to Move America,” not “Jobs Move America”