

Overhauling Transportation Services

A complete overhaul of the student transportation system can save money and increase customer satisfaction.

By Paul A. S. O'Malley, Ed.D.



Every day, more than 25 million children in the United States travel to and from their public schools by school bus, according to the American School Bus Council, a coalition of the school transportation community.

With some 480,000 vehicles, the mass-transit fleet that transports schoolchildren is the largest public-conveyance system in the United States. Beyond ensuring that children can receive the education opportunities they deserve, the fleet has the added benefit of helping reduce carbon emissions, traffic congestion, and hazards for children and adults on the nation's roadways.

Students have depended on the school transportation industry to make the morning bell since the late 1800s, when public schools across America relied heavily on horse-drawn wagons to achieve the task. A great deal of planning, resources, technology, and ingenuity is dedicated to achieving that very important public education function that few give much thought to until something goes wrong.

When something does go wrong, as any seasoned school district administrator will tell you, the phones ring off the hook in the principal's office with complaints from angry parents about long travel times,

inattentive drivers, late buses, or buses that don't show up at all. Every year, school districts across the nation wrestle with how to run the most efficient cost-beneficial means of performing the difficult task of student transportation.

System Overhaul

Community Unit School District 308 in Oswego, Illinois, had experienced its fair share of difficulties. Serving more than 18,000 students, it is one of the fastest-growing districts in the state and has the ninth-largest enrollment of Illinois's 868 public school districts. With a staff of 1,854, the district operates 22 schools: 1 early-learning center, 14 elementary schools, 5 junior high schools, and 2 high schools. Its buses travel more than 2 million miles annually, transporting students from Aurora, Joliet, Montgomery, Oswego, Plainfield, and Yorkville.

In the summer of 2012, Matthew Wendt was hired as superintendent of District 308. Shortly after the beginning of the 2012–2013 school year, when a large number of complaints and service issues came to his attention, he realized that the district had a serious transportation problem. He initiated a process to completely overhaul the district's transportation system in order to reduce costs, increase efficiency, and better serve the students and their parents.

An initial step in the overhaul was the hiring of Derrick S. Berlin as director of transportation. The district has the challenging task of transporting more than 13,000 students back and forth every day from communities spanning 69 square miles. Therefore, having a capable helmsman was important to the initiative's success. Berlin, who is certified by the National Association for Pupil Transportation, brought more than 23 years of experience in school transportation.

Making a Plan

The district's next step in its overhaul was to commission an independent audit of its transportation services. The audit, which began in October 2012, included extensive interviews with key stakeholders (students, parents, business owners, district employees, etc.) to identify trends that could lead to improvement. The result was a five-year plan that was approved by the district's board of education in March 2013. The plan makes meaningful systemic changes to enhance safety, to improve procurement and organizational structure, to save fuel, to reduce maintenance costs, and to trim the time that students spend waiting for buses.

The plan includes short-term and long-term goals for the department's organizational structure and planning, staffing, bus routes, bus fleet, implementation and upgrade of technology (including GPS mapping), contract and procurement procedures, transportation facility, parking and fueling needs, elementary start and



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end times, and a pay-to-ride program. Additionally, each year the plan puts a mechanism into place to increase or alter routes as enrollment changes dictate.

Keeping Customers in Mind

One of the transportation department's priorities is customer service. The key to great customer service is communication, so the plan emphasizes prompt response and follow-through on complaints, questions, and potential problems. To handle the increased call volumes at the beginning of the school year, an additional phone bank was made a standard operating procedure.

The plan also takes into account the fact that District 308 serves a growing, rapidly diversifying population that includes a sizable number of Spanish-speaking families. To better serve that population, a bilingual line was added to help those families more comfortably communicate in Spanish.

Safety and More

Another key part of the plan focuses on the effectiveness and efficiency of the district's bus routes, which led to

the GPS mapping-aided consolidation of 11 bus route packages and the streamlining of others to reduce travel times, mileage, and costs.

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Student safety was also a prime concern. Smaller, more efficient buses were obtained for special-needs students and to cover the rural areas of the district. Additional safety equipment has also been installed on buses, including integrated car seats used to transport early-learning students and a rear stop arm on full-size buses.

Aligned with the plan, the district updates the department's contracting and procurement protocols to complement its stronger emphasis on customer service while reducing costs.

The Road Ahead

To allow for future growth and consolidation, the district purchased a facility directly behind its original location. The facility houses the department's business

offices, training center, employee resources, and vehicle maintenance. Also, a new employee and bus parking lot, along with a fueling station, was constructed adjacent to the transportation center. The new parking area has room for expansion and consolidates fueling for all district vehicles. A fuel bid was submitted to providers that ultimately reduced the district's fuel costs.

A five-year staffing plan was also developed and implemented to support the changes in the department. Department positions, responsibilities, and duties were evaluated and realigned.

The process of overhauling the transportation system was indeed challenging. However, Berlin says the district has reaped the rewards of positive change. Customer service is strong and responsive; employee training programs are better than ever; complaints have fallen to record lows; and efficiency and safety have been dramatically enhanced.

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