

The Navigator

Guiding the Way in School Transportation

Finding the 'Sweet Spot'

by Ruth Newby, President

Cutting costs is easy, if the bottom line is your only concern.



Ruth Newby

Cutting costs in the real world, while avoiding negative and unintended consequences, is much more difficult.

Everybody loves the idea of lower costs and efficiency, until the ax falls on their neighborhood, street or pet program. That's the conundrum school district leaders face in these turbulent times: Transportation efficiency must be balanced against patron satisfaction.

Maximizing cost savings while minimizing dissatisfaction and complaints – that's the "sweet spot" that TransPar specializes in identifying and reaching for school transportation departments. The most gain for the least pain; it's both an art and a science.

Improving routing so you run fewer buses, each with fewer empty seats, is the best way to wring real efficiencies from a transportation budget with minimal effect on the public or staff. It's also the first and most important step.

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Communication Is Key to Performance, Confidence, Support

Doing It Right Requires Time and a Good Plan

Communication is vital to a school transportation program. Why? Parents and principals plan their busy lives around the bus schedule; taxpayers spend millions on a necessity that's invisible to those who don't use it; if something goes wrong, everyone in the district is going to want answers.

So the more that stakeholders know and understand about how school transportation really works, and the challenges the system must overcome, the better. Effective communication can inspire confidence from staff, build and maintain support from the public, and elicit higher performance from employees.

It's a Must

Good communication is as necessary as fuel, as important as brakes, and as reassuring as new windshield wipers – if it is done effectively.

First, your communications need to be consistent. Decide on preferred channels for each audience – newsletters to parents, achievement reports to the board, safety bulletins to drivers, for example. Then set a frequency schedule and stick to it: weekly, monthly, quarterly. Less often than quarterly is probably a waste of time and money.

Most communications failures can be blamed on one of three factors: not saying the message often enough, not making the message relevant to the audience, or not directing it to the right audience in the first place. Decide on what your fundamental key messages will be, such as your stellar safety record, the success of your cost-containment efforts, or an ongoing behavior problem among students that has become a threat to efficiency or safety. Then match those key messages to target audiences and deliver them multiple times through a variety of channels.

Not Just Happy Talk

Credibility is critical to effective communications. And that means telling people what they need to know. It's not always good news. Tone and empathy are vital in the effective delivery of unwelcome information.

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McHenry Helps Districts Make All the Right Moves



Jeff McHenry

Jeff McHenry is a trained and licensed CPA but ultimately found the profession's job description too confining. "A CPA's job is to identify problems and sound the alarm. But I get my satisfaction from solving problems, not pointing them out," said McHenry, CFO/Financial Analyst for TransPar Group.

That passion for problem solving led him to school transportation, after holding financial posts in a health care company and a law firm.

"Here, I can work with transportation and financial professionals in school districts across the

expected to be a corresponding surge in demand for management consulting.

McHenry developed TransPar's unique MENTOR service as a way to efficiently and cost-effectively fill the gap. MENTOR provides ongoing support, advice and training for district transportation directors from TransPar's team of experienced professionals. This is vital, because most districts can't afford an assistant director's position to groom a replacement over time – and no one can afford a "sink-or-swim" approach to managing a huge chunk of the district's budget, not to mention the safety of the student body.

McHenry not only designed MENTOR, he helped implement it recently for the St. Lucie County (Fla.) Public Schools. With McHenry's help, the district applied performance metrics based on national industry standards. The new director cut the district's bus fleet from 400 to 360 buses and introduced systematic approaches to everything from preventive maintenance to driver payroll.

Problem solved. McHenry satisfied.

Not a bad outcome when you consider the alternative. McHenry, the son of a Pontiac dealer, had the opportunity decades ago to purchase the family business. He declined, opting instead for his financial management career.

"I'd be 52 with a Pontiac dealership and it would probably be axed this week," he said. "Guess I made the right move."

The first of many. ■

"... no one can afford a 'sink-or-swim' approach to managing a huge chunk of the district's budget, not to mention the safety of the student body."

country to develop and implement best practices that literally save millions of dollars in transportation costs," McHenry said. "That money then goes into the classroom instead, where it can benefit kids. That's really rewarding."

One problem McHenry is working to solve: the "graying" of management ranks in the school bus industry. Most transportation directors at districts nationwide are members of the baby boom generation and nearing retirement. Demand for new managers is going to surge, and TransPar created a plan to help districts cope with what is

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Remember: a parent whose child's bus stop has been moved further from home is not going to be impressed by your brilliance at routing efficiency. Tell that parent that you understand her concerns, that you have taken steps to ensure student safety and that the dollars saved by the routing change will preserve teaching positions and keep class sizes smaller, and you will go a long way toward defusing potential anger and resentment.

Same Message, Different Language

It's quicker and easier to write one note explaining a policy change and send it to all stakeholders. But keep in mind that

transportation employees, or educators, will understand certain technical terms that parents, students or even board members may not.

Also know that each stakeholder group has its own priorities and needs, as well as its own vocabulary. Remember the importance of tone and empathy. Speak to each group as if you were standing in their shoes; the extra effort will be well worth it.

Never assume that stakeholders will understand your sound motivation and good reasons for implementing transportation policies. Remember that their job is not to understand you; your job is to understand them. Communicate accordingly. ■

Special Needs Command Special Performance

TransPar Helps SSD Overcome, Achieve in Missouri

There are districts with transportation challenges. And then there is the Special School District of St. Louis County, Mo.

The district, known as SSD, was formed in 1957 to provide dedicated service to special needs students throughout the county. Today, the district serves more than 27,000 students spread across 500 square miles, transporting them to 265 different school sites daily.

Despite the inherent logistical challenges, varying schedules, bell times and more, SSD's transportation system posted an on-time arrival average of 92.8 percent for the 2007-08 school year.

Maintaining Excellence

Due to the needs of students, nearly all SSD buses are equipped with air-conditioning systems, and more than half with wheelchair lifts. Yet despite having many more components to maintain, and a higher rate of wear due to long trips across the far-flung district, the department's maintenance shop gets by with a high bus-to-technician ratio of about 35 to 1, compared to a national average of about 19 to 1.

And by "get by," we mean earning Missouri's two top school bus maintenance awards for three consecutive years.

Such consistent, efficient performance earned the maintenance shop recognition as one of the Top Ten operations in the country by *School Bus Fleet* magazine.

And how well does the department meet the needs of its unique student body? Well enough to earn SSD the Award of Excellence and TransPar the Outstanding Business of the Year Award from Special Olympics Missouri. (The

TransPar-managed SSD fleet serves much of the transportation needs of the Special Olympics organization in the region.)

Five Years of Fruition

Exceeding expectations may be all in a day's work for TransPar's Scott Allen, operations manager, and Kenny Mulder, director of transportation for the district. But it wasn't always this way.

"TransPar was brought in to help deal with the district's imposing transportation challenges in 2003, first as a consultant," Allen said. "Shortly into that relationship, the new rounds of bus contractor bids started coming in, and they were prohibitively expensive."

Due to the job's complexity, and the high labor and insurance charges related to special needs transportation, SSD chose to begin a phased transition to a district-owned bus fleet with district-employed drivers, mechanics and staff. At that point, district officials elected to move TransPar from a consulting role into full day-to-day management of the department.

Rich Carver, SSD's chief financial officer, is pleased with the arrangement.

"TransPar has done a very good job for us, especially considering the demands for transportation in this district," Carver said. "Drivers and monitors need to be well trained. A lot of the service is curb-to-curb, too, as opposed to the neighborhood pickups you have in most districts." ■



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Changes to fundamental district policies – bell times, attendance patterns, walk zones – result in the biggest savings, but also generate the most public outcry.

Staggered bell times allow a district to use fewer total buses and drivers to transport the same number of students,

because each bus makes multiple trips. However, resistance to changes in bell time can be intense. How you present the proposed changes can make a big difference. One tactic that can help win public approval is to calculate the cost savings up front and use the numbers to build a case for support. Discussing the positive

environmental effects of more efficient bus transportation can also help win support for your efforts.

No two Sweet Spots are the same, because every district has unique opportunities and challenges. To find the most gain for the least pain in your district, give us a call. ■

The Navigator

The Navigator is published for clients and constituents of the TransPar Group. We welcome your inquiries and suggestions for future content. Please direct your comments to:

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Are You Maximizing Your Share?

State Transportation Aid Audits Can Boost Reimbursement Totals

Is your district leaving money on the table at the state capital? Perhaps more than you imagine.

We're talking about money you deserve – money to which your district and its taxpayers are entitled. TransPar can help you make sure you're getting your fair share – not unlike the way H&R Block makes sure you get the maximum refund on your income taxes.

There are significant similarities:

- State transportation reimbursements and personal tax filings both have detailed, often arcane rules.
- Both require strict record-keeping and attention to detail.
- Both authorities are run by people whose job description does not include alerting you to opportunities you may have missed.

That's Our Job

Every state handles transportation reimbursement programs differently; some don't provide any. In the states with the most complex reimbursement formulas, however – such as Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Ohio and Missouri –

TransPar typically boosts clients' reimbursements by 10 to 20 percent.

That's because reimbursement is based on data supplied by the district. The more specific detail you provide, in areas defined by your state's formula, the more reimbursement dollars the district can realize.



Auditing for Allocation

Take special needs transportation as just one example. In many states, special needs transportation costs are reimbursed at a higher percentage rate than ordinary costs. Typically, when we examine a district's reimbursement

application for the first time, we see that the district has allocated only the salaries of the drivers and aides to the special needs category. What many miss is the percentage allocation they can legally and properly make to special needs for their total fuel costs, maintenance costs, capital costs, insurance costs, etc.

And that's just for starters. Did you know special needs transportation in most districts accounts for the majority of time spent by personnel in routing and scheduling? Or that a significant portion of the cost of routing and scheduling software can be allocated to special needs?

By now you can see how essential it is to accurately gather and categorize all the data to ensure your district gets all the funding it deserves. Even if you contract out your transportation services, there can be opportunities to maximize reimbursement.

Most districts report transportation costs the way they collect them. In each state, we study how the funding agencies look at the data, and exhibit it in the way they look at it. And that makes a difference – one you can measure in dollars and cents. ■