

# **Report on Rural Educational Sustainability**

## **From C.O.R.E.S**

### **(Coalition of Rural Educational Sustainability)**

#### **Topic**

Transportation

#### **Background**

With the school closures our district and province experienced in 2010, a group of rural residents have made it their mandate to look at what could be done to keep our rural schools from closure in the future. CORES is dedicated to looking into all aspects of the educational system that affects the rural students within our district. For the rural student to access education, many of them require bussing. Transportation is just one aspect of the educational system this group is reviewing.

The transportation funding from the Provincial Government was determined on historical cost and has seen no increases since 2002. Although funding has seen no increases over this time period, the costs associated with delivering transportation to students have been increasing year after year. With no guarantees as to an increase in funding in this area, what other options are available to sustain this service in the future?

#### **Process**

CORES members researched, analyzed and discussed information from Bus Drivers, PAC's, District Staff, and Trustees. We examined how transportation is provided in our district in comparison to other districts, where the differences were noticed, and where improvements would be possible.

#### **Discussion**

**Expectation of Service:** There is general agreement that transportation should be provided free of charge to those students who meet the requirements in Policy 3541 (students who reside further than 4.0 kilometers from their designated school by the nearest passable road, or whose route to and from school represents an unacceptable safety risk and who cannot be serviced by public transportation) in the safest, most efficient and cost-effective manner.

If fees were attached to transportation the expectation of service would be different. If student A is picked-up and dropped-off at the end of their driveway for X dollars, then student B should receive the same service for X dollars. There are countless problems associated with delivering this kind of service and it is best not to contemplate undertaking this measure.

**Transportation Creep:** Transportation creep is the slow and incremental expansion of the transportation system resulting from attempts to accommodate various requests. Accommodating

pick-ups closer to homes has resulted in these stops becoming part of established routes. Once a stop has been created, there are no provisions to review this decision. In fact, the transportation policy states that stops will not be altered from year to year without due consideration of the school and all students on the route.

As more and more stops have been established, the system has become burdensome in many areas. The total ridership using the transportation system has also increased. In some cases this can be attributed to growth in certain areas of the city, but in others it is a direct result of school closures. More students now reside more than 4.0 kilometers from their designated schools. A system that was once developed to service rural areas has expanded to include many areas that are not rural.

**Collection Points:** The location of bus stops has generally been determined based on the nearest cross road. This practice is reasonable in rural areas where there are few cross roads, but it doesn't work as well in more densely populated areas. From time to time a request is made to the transportation administrator and a stop may be reviewed and an additional stop added. The end result is disparity between stops on the same road. There are stops at consecutive driveways and others where students must congregate at a collection point. There are a number of stops on various routes that could be eliminated to streamline delivery of this service.

Predetermined collection points on all routes make the most efficient use of transportation resources. If collection points were established for each route, the number of stops required on each route would be reduced. Fewer stops also mean that the students would spend much less time on the bus to reach their designated school. Every additional stop on a route adds to the length of time it takes to travel that route. At each stop the driver is required to wait until all students are properly seated before continuing on to the next stop. This is the most time consuming portion of delivering transportation to students.

**Safety:** Our district has an enviable safety record, yet from time to time safety issues are brought to the attention of the transportation administrator. Safety concerns are arguably the most common reason to review a bus stop or route. Safety concerns cover a broad variety of issues including heavy traffic, crossing major roadways, wildlife, darkness, winter temperatures, sexual predators, etc. The use of collection points would go a long way towards addressing many of these concerns.

Beyond efficiency, another obvious benefit of using collection points is the safety in numbers. The more students at a particular stop, the safer it is for all. Further, the use of collection points could promote a sense of community responsibility where some parents could also wait with the students for the bus.

The Board has responsibility for the safety of students using the transportation system between the collection points and the designated schools. It is reasonable to expect that the location of collection points also take into consideration safety concerns. It is impossible for the Board to assume responsibility for the students beyond the collection points as they no longer have any control over the situation.

PAC's (Parent Advisory Councils) could become involved in determining the safest location of collection points on routes. They could also be responsible for implementing such safe practices as "walking buses" to and from the collection points. Walking buses are a system of creating a chain of pick-up locations for walking students at points along a walking route that would end at the collection point. Typically this also includes a parent volunteer.

**Registration:** Registration for transportation service is completed for Kindergarten students. Students who register for service at this time are presumed to continue to require this service throughout their time within the educational system. De-registration becomes the responsibility of the parents (with monitoring provided by the bus drivers and schools as well). The only way to register for transportation is on a permanent, full-time basis. There are no provisions for infrequent users or single direction users.

The transportation system must ensure there is capacity for all registered users whether they use the service or not. Some routes are established with registered students far beyond the capacity of a bus. This is usually not problematic because on any given day there are students who for reasons of illness or some other excuse do not use the service.

Creating three options for registration would provide for greater accuracy in the establishment of routes. These options would be full-time user, morning only user, and afternoon only user. Creating a category for occasional user creates too many variables to be considered under the current system.

**Walk Limits:** There are some discrepancies in the district's policy regarding walk limits. The walk limit to school is presumably the 4.0 kilometers to reach school by the nearest passable road, yet the walk limit to the nearest bus stop is presumably the 3.2 kilometers required to be eligible for the transportation assistance allowance. There is also the winter courtesy which could be used to provide transportation during the winter months to those students who reside between 2.0 and 4.0 kilometers of their designated school. Beyond these three numbers, there are no established walk limits.

**Courtesy riders:** Transportation may be provided on a courtesy basis where riders can be accommodated on a bus if space remains. This service uses a great deal of time in the administrative offices. Each request must be processed annually and requests come in throughout the year.

Child care courtesy is the most common type and takes priority in the courtesy applications. Child care courtesy may be in or out of the designated school's area for the home address, but it is felt that it should only be delivered within the designated catchment area for which the child is enrolled. This is a service that should be accommodated free of charge where space permits. It is often stressful for parents to find appropriate child care and once found it is gratifying to know that the school district will make access to it as stress-free as possible. Usually child care comes with its own costs and it would be too much of a burden for many families to have to pay for transportation from school to the care provider on top of these costs.

The next type of courtesy in the priority sequence is Elementary out-of-catchment. This service is provided for students enrolled in district schools who attend a school other than their designated school and reside within a reasonable walking distance from an existing bus stop on an existing route to their

school of registration. The first item to discuss is what is a reasonable walking distance? Is it the 4.0 kilometers to a school or the 3.2 kilometers to the bus stop?

The second item for discussion is the walking distance criteria. Many school catchment areas have changed over the years as population demographics have changed. To many rural schools this has meant a reduction in the total catchment areas. This has provided more stress on enrolment numbers and their very existence is threatened. In order to raise enrolment numbers, rural schools are looking to attract more students from the surrounding areas. These schools are not serviced by public transportation and are not usually found on well-travelled routes. Having the ability to use school transportation is often the only option parents have outside of driving students to the school. Under the current system an out of catchment request may not be accepted due to the location of existing bus routes in relation to the location of a student's residence. Having a system where students can access transportation at the first and last stop of a route, a community stop, would make it possible for rural schools to attract more enrolment. Strict guidelines regarding the safety of these students at the collection point would need to be established.

The question then becomes whether this service should be provided free of charge. There is general agreement that when a parent exercises choice the Board is under no obligation to provide transportation. If transportation is provided it should be for a nominal fee. The rationale is that there are administrative costs associated with this service that should not be funded by the ministry. It should be noted that this service is possible only where space permits. No additional routes or stops should be added to accommodate these courtesy requests.

The next priority in courtesy requests is for Secondary out-of-catchment. The same rules should apply as to Elementary out-of-catchment. A nominal fee for this service makes sense.

Next comes the winter courtesy. Winter courtesy may be used to alleviate some of the safety concerns further. This courtesy has been used to provide transportation to students who reside between 2.0 and 4.0 kilometers of their designated school. It could be used to establish additional collection points during the winter months to reduce the concerns around darkness and winter temperatures. These stops would be added from November 1 to Spring Break.

The final priority type for courtesy bussing is after school courtesy. This is issued by schools and is generally used to give students the opportunity to go on a bus to a stop on the route – usually to spend time at a friend's house. There is no desire to change the way in which this courtesy has been extended in the past.

**District Programs:** Our district has a number of district programs run at various locations around the city. Transportation is not provided for students who enrol in district programs such as French Immersion, Montessori, Traditional, or Aboriginal Choice. If transportation were to be extended to these students, costs should be covered by user fees. The additional routes and stops required would add to the current costs of providing transportation to students. It is thought that the use of more sparsely situated collection points would work well for this service.

**Custom Bussing:** Custom bussing services are established on a case by case assessment. When the student requires extraordinary support to travel to and from school this is appropriate. When some additional equipment is required to provide transportation for these students, where possible, the regular transportation system should be utilized. This is particularly so in the more remote rural areas. It does not make financial sense to send more than one bus into the area to service a single student. If the support required is beyond that which can be provided by regular transportation staff, then custom bussing may be the only option. Whenever possible, integration should be sought.

**Administration:** Examining the administration of the transportation system was beyond the scope of our analysis, yet never far from mind. The purpose of our analysis was to find savings, not additional expenses. It was felt that many of the improvements would require more administrative hours and possible solutions were sought. Technology is advancing rapidly and exploring how it could be used to administer the transportation system seems promising. Two ideas worth exploring would be electronic registration for transportation services and software available to assist in the development of routes and stops.

### **Recommendations**

After all the research CORES found that overall the transportation system is performing adequately, but there may be room for some improvement which could result in savings. Following are our suggestions for your consideration.

1. *No fees for regular riders.*
2. *Consider a nominal fee for out-of-catchment courtesy riders.*
3. *Evaluate routes and stops for efficiencies more regularly. (In order to facilitate this practice, it may be necessary to explore the software options developed to assist in the creation of transportation systems.)*
4. *Establish a set of guidelines for the creation of collection points that would result in consistent service across all routes.*
5. *Review policy to enable the establishment of community stops at catchment boundaries for out-of-catchment riders.*
6. *Review the registration process for transportation services. (Possibly implement an electronic registration system that would allow for annual registration and direction of use options.)*

