



# Strategic Solutions to Private Transportation Needs

by Merri Rosenberg

Providing transportation for school district students who attend non-public schools is a logistical and expensive burden for public school districts. Given the already rigorous financial constraints that districts confront because of the state-imposed tax cap, figuring out practical, efficient solutions to this on-going issue has become more important than ever.

"With the tax caps, districts may be willing to take on historical barriers," said Mark Walsh, CMC, a transportation consultant with Transportation Advisory Services based in Walworth, NY. "There's been an aggressive approach to regionalization with districts sharing out-of-district placement information, to integrate runs, share resources, and share drivers and buses."

Districts such as Herkimer and Genesee Valley are among them.

Walsh added, "There's definitely more interest in central control and coordination." For example, in Rensselaer County several districts have been quite active in their efforts to computerize, coordinate data collection, and develop procedures for cooperation and coordination,

Whether it's a question of rural districts providing busing, mostly for special education students, or downstate small city and suburban schools providing busing for both special education as well as private and parochial

schools, developing these cooperative and collaborative approaches are increasingly necessary. The density in urban and suburban districts, Walsh noted, offers "more potential for sharing."

While many of these relationships were previously informal, now there is more of an impetus to formalize these relationships. Some of that increased comfort level with cooperation may have to do with the State Legislature allowing a district to provide almost unlimited transportation for another district, a relatively recent development during the past two to three years.

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Still, Walsh cautioned that "there are lots of limitations and hurdles, " especially in regards to labor agreements with busing companies. He said, "A district cannot jump on a contract."

Even with these limits, several districts have figured out smart ways to handle transportation for students attending non-public schools.

In Nassau County, the Roslyn district has been aggressive in maximizing its own transportation routes to take in students from neighboring districts.

"We have our own bus fleet, so we want to share our capacity," said Joseph Dragone, Assistant Superintendent for Business in the Roslyn Union Free School District.

For example, if there are 20 kids on a route, with capacity of 30 extra seats, through inter-municipal agreements Roslyn will agree to stop in a neighboring district to bring those students to non-public schools.

Dragone said, "Districts could be paying up to \$ 10,000 a year to a private bus contractor. We'll charge the district \$ 5000, they save \$ 5000, and we get \$ 5000.

Given the tangled thicket of regulation, labor agreements and logistics, many districts have turned to their local BOCES for help.

Colleen Lipponer, manager of administrative services at Eastern Suffolk BOCES, explained that her organization provides a Regional Transportation Service for its member districts, for students transported out-of-district to private schools. On average, districts have saved 40 % by using BOCES this way.

"We coordinate with neighboring districts, where we combine bus routes with out-of-district needs," she said. "We manage all the aspects of that route, we coordinate with districts and we have contracts with various companies." If a district requests transportation for a student in a situation where Eastern Suffolk BOCES doesn't have an existing route, BOCES works with their contractors to place the student on a route they may have with another district.

The process starts in August, when Eastern Suffolk BOCES reaches out to its member districts to see if they want to join the Regional Transportation Program. The routes are maximized for efficiency, and to keep the time that students are on the buses to a reasonable amount.

As Lipponer said, "We want to provide the quickest ride with the most kids. The districts share the cost of the routes."

A suburban district that's taken advantage of its location

to use a distinctive approach is Rye Neck, a Westchester suburb north of New York City. Rye Neck uses public transportation, issuing train passes for the Metro-North Railroad and bus passes for the Westchester County Bee Line, although the district also uses a shuttle to deliver students to a transportation hub in nearby White Plains.

"Here in Rye Neck we're so close to so many private and parochial schools," said Kim Bucci, Assistant Superintendent for Business. "The law says that children as young as five years old can go on the bus. During the past three years we've been converting private and parochial students onto public transportation. It's a huge savings. We started this before the tax cap."

The district doesn't provide busing to its own students (the district is contained within New York State limits of K-8 and three miles for 9-12), except for special education students who require it. State law, however, requires the district to provide transportation within 15 miles for resident-students who attend non-public schools. The community has pushed back.

"We hear, 'why is transportation going up so much when we don't give it to our own kids?'" said Bucci. "Everyone is struggling with these soaring transportation costs."

Whatever specific approach districts take, the ultimate goal is to keep finances focused on curriculum and instruction.

As Roslyn's Dragone said, "Every dollar you don't spend on transportation is a dollar you could spend on education in the classroom. We try to do as best we can in all our services." ◀

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