



NY Districts Share Bus Garages, Drivers to Reduce Costs

Politicians push to merge schools. Districts fight back by sharing transportation services.

By JODY L. BUSH

Rural school districts in New York are sharing transportation services to circumvent a current campaign by local politicians to consolidate schools. Some districts are working with villages and cities to share maintenance and other services in an effort to head politicians off at the pass.

A decade-old state grant program to encourage schools to improve operating efficiency has been revived as districts attempt to avoid dreaded school mergers.

In 1985, the state developed a study grant program to inspire schools to become more efficient by sharing instructional programs and services. The program failed to generate enough support from local schools, so the state changed its strategy and focus.

"We tried to steer districts this past year toward looking at non-instructional functions in general and specifically transportation," says Suzanne Spear, associate for district organization at the New York

State Education Department in Albany. "I was more successful than I expected to be."

Part of Spear's success can be attributed to an aggressive effort by local politicians to consolidate school districts as policy-makers compete for limited funds to finance state programs. Districts are fighting back by sharing bus garages, routes, management and drivers.

There are 742 school districts in New York. In addition to providing regular and special education trans-

portation, districts are required to transport students up to 15 miles who attend private and parochial schools. About 10 percent of students in the state attend non-public schools, and half of them are transported by districts. Transportation costs, Spear says, average 5.5 percent of urban school district budgets and 6.1 percent of rural budgets.

Districts participating in the grant program can receive an annual stipend of up to \$50,000 to study ways to reduce costs and improve efficiency. Virtually all of the districts that have applied for grants to study transportation this school year are rural districts with fleets of fewer than 50 buses.

"One school district is building a single bus garage to serve two districts," Spear says, "and that's utterly unique in our state."

Marcellus Central School District and Skaneateles Central School District received two grants totaling \$36,000 to study the benefits of sharing a maintenance facility. The districts are about 20 miles east of Syracuse. "Our current bus garage needs to be either completely overhauled or torn down and a new one constructed in its place," says Marcellus Assistant Superintendent Jerry Tuning.

Marcellus plans to build a facility and lease space to Skaneateles. Tuning says residents living near Skaneateles' maintenance facility have complained about fumes from buses, and the district wanted to find an alternative site.

It will cost about \$2.5 million to purchase the land and build a garage that can accommodate at least 100 buses, Tuning says. Both districts combined currently operate 70 buses.

Marcellus plans to buy more land than it currently needs because it wants to contract with other districts for maintenance work. That would provide additional revenue to the district, and give smaller districts the option of reducing operating costs by contracting maintenance work, Tuning says.

Cities join fight against mergers

About 30 miles northwest of Albany, Gloversville Central School

District and Johnstown Central School District are studying the feasibility of sharing various aspects of transportation. "We also have two other partners in this process, and those are the cities of Gloversville and Johnstown," says Gloversville Superintendent Don Lomanto.

The cities and districts are re-

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Chautauqua and Southwestern Central School Districts

viewing 31 options. They include establishing a central fueling and maintenance facility for school and city vehicles. There also is a potential for cost savings if the cities and districts pool their bargaining power by developing a cooperative purchasing program to buy parts and materials.

According to Mark Walsh of Transportation Advisory Services (TAS), a consulting firm in Fairport, NY, which is currently conducting 11 efficiency studies for the state, cooperative parts purchasing has often been unsuccessful because too few districts participated.

"There have been problems where the cooperative purchasing program has required a drop-ship once a year," Walsh says. "If you are running a small district you may not have enough storage space to handle that bulk cargo."

A joint purchasing program can greatly reduce costs, he says, and there are a number of ways districts can overcome obstacles such as limited space. One would be for parts vendors to commit to a percentage off the manufacturer's listed price and agree to maintain that price year round, so districts don't have to order such large quantities at one time.

"Another option would be to have all those parts go to a central warehouse which is run by the schools which are participating in

the program," he says. "If the volume is sufficient, the economy of scale may more than pay for the staff." Walsh recommends that districts install a computer inventory system, which would offer further savings by eliminating the potential for ordering too many parts.

Walsh says districts are also contemplating shared vehicle painting facilities because of growing environmental concerns and federal regulations, which have driven up operating costs. "Centralizing a paint facility where a large number of districts can utilize it should save them money," he says.

Because districts are required to provide transportation for students who attend non-public schools, another opportunity to save money is for districts to pool routes. Several rural districts have been doing that for years.

For instance, if a district transports three students to a non-public school and another district has only one student attend that school, it would make sense for the first district to transport that student, if the student lives along the route.

For several years, districts in the state have worked with local Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) to coordinate special education, preschool transportation and other services for schools. Some districts contract with BOCES to provide services such as special education, vehicle maintenance or management.

"Some of the things we're talking about might be BOCES-oriented services," Walsh says. "BOCES' basic purpose is to provide services for two or more districts that either can't readily find those services in the marketplace, or can't afford to do it on their own."

Districts share supervisors

One of the more controversial shared service options districts are reviewing is shared management. Rural districts are currently exercising that option by taking advantage of early retirements to combine district operations.

Pete James, transportation director of Chautauqua Central

School District, found his workload doubled when the transportation director of the Southwestern Central School District retired last August just before the school year began. James is now transportation director for both districts which are roughly 20 miles east of Lake Erie.

"Four districts in my area went together to share food service about four years ago and that has been working fairly well, so that's how it started," James says.

The superintendents of both districts decided that James would take over when the former transportation director retired. James travels 14 miles each day, dividing his time between both district transportation offices. He manages a 50-bus fleet, two office staff (one at each district office), 3.5 mechanics and 50 bus drivers.

"Right now I am building budgets for two different districts and there are a lot of differences in the way the districts do things," James says. "We know the buses are yellow, but that's about where the similarity ends."

Combining operations for small districts where it makes sense, he says, is a good idea; however, a central transportation facility and management staff would increase productivity and reduce costs. If the operation was centralized, a district could pool its substitute drivers, vehicles and spare buses.

School districts involved in the grant program are looking at substitute driver pools and shared management, which might include shared training programs and drug testing programs for drivers.

Wanted districts to merge

During the 1992-93 school year, the state allocated \$310,000 to districts for transportation efficiency study projects. Thirty-six of its 75 programs were for shared service studies. Another 14 were for district reorganization.

The concept of shared services among districts has received widespread support in rural areas. However, some school officials say the push from politicians for districts to participate in the grant pro-

gram could be part of their master plan to merge schools.

There have been several unsuccessful attempts to merge school districts in the past. In New York, voters have to approve local school budgets, and the fear of lost jobs has fueled the resistance to consolidate schools and school services. There have been several efforts to

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consolidate school services on a county and regional basis that weren't approved by voters.

"There are basically two things that I've found in my tenure that get in the way of progress, and one is turf and the other is money, and historically they have been in that order," says James.

W. Francis Keating, superintendent of Kortright Central School District located in the Katskill region of the state, says school mergers aren't practical for rural school districts. "Geographically, we are one of the biggest districts (in the area)," Keating says. "For our district to enlarge, some of our kids would be on the bus one hour and a half."

The district transports 470 students on 11 buses. The district has participated in the state grant program to study the feasibility of sharing a bus garage with two neighboring district that don't have one.

"There has been a lot of political pressure in New York to take a look at whether consolidation of school districts makes sense," says Walsh of TAS. "We see sharing of services as an opportunity to generate savings and eliminate the need to consolidate."

Guy Elmore, president of the New York Association for Pupil Transportation and transportation director of Byram Hills Central School Districts in Armonk, says school districts have informally shared services for some time. "We've lost a tremen-

dous amount of state transportation aid in New York and we have to be creative or we are going to lose our jobs," Elmore says.

Byram Hills performs transmission repairs for neighboring school districts while another district specializes in seat repair work and another in vehicle body repairs. Elmore uses a third district that has a healthy film library and training materials to conduct driver training programs for his district.

State budget looks healthy

The state budget picture looks brighter than a year ago, says Dick Ahola, state director of pupil transportation, and funding for pupil transportation is an issue receiving a lot of attention from local politicians.

At press time, the governor and state Board of Regents introduced two separate funding proposals which included changes to the transportation aid formula. "There are a lot of senators and assemblymen representing rural districts who see our current 90 percent formula as a necessary aid in doing business as a rural central school district," Ahola says.

The governor's proposal would decrease funding levels from last year. The regents' proposal offered a healthy increase in transportation funding from last year. Ahola says there will most likely be a compromise between the two, and districts will receive a slight increase in transportation aid. "But what we spend as a result of the World Trade Center explosion could wipe that out," he says, "and we may end up with the status quo in terms of dollars."

Regardless of what state funding package will be finally approved, school districts will continue to look at shared services as a means to avoid district mergers.

However, Walsh says: "It solely rests with the taxpayers in the various communities. We firmly believe that transportation should be a support service to the education function and not the other way around.

"Unfortunately, some districts have had the tail wagging the dog, and I think that's wrong." ■