

Great Ways to Improve Your Operation

Stahlke Bus Service in Delano, Minn., and her aide Dorothy Shepard have landed on the next best thing.

Zieske implemented a program on her bus in which her aide, Shepard, reads to her special-needs passengers from the *Harry Potter* book series. Prior to the program, there were behavioral problems, but now the students listen attentively.

The students suffer from a range of disabilities, and some prevent them from reading the books on their own. But Zieske and Shepard read the books, ask questions, make up games and hand out prizes that correspond with the book chapters.

Zieske has been a driver for 18 years and was honored for the innovative program with a Friend of Education Award by the Delano Teachers' Association.



Patty Zieske (left) and Dorothy Shepard use a reading-aloud program to help improve passenger behavior on their special-needs bus.

38. Safety with a side of learning

As a former teacher and bus driver, Suzanne Oliver attests that an invisible wall stands between school district education and transportation departments. But the bus ride, she says, with its captive audience, offers a golden opportunity to combine the elements of safety and instruction. Out of this rationale, Oliver created the Traveling Minds program.

Traveling Minds is an incentive-based program offered by both educators and transporters to students riding the school bus. Essentially, students get textbooks, flash cards, newspapers and other learning materials to read or study on the way to and from school. Over time, the students' efforts earn them points, which can be traded in for rewards.

The program, says Oliver, promotes learning to the students while breaking down the invisible wall between departments. It also encourages safety, as students engaged in onboard activities exhibit less disruptive behavior.

39. Cut costs to a minimum

With the rising cost of everything these days, transportation directors are hard pressed to find ways to cut costs without sacrificing service and safety, among other things.

Mark A. Walsh, a certified management consultant and a partner in Transportation Advisory Services, has seen various challenges in his years in the transportation industry. With his experience, Walsh has accumulated cost-cutting tips to save districts money in this high-priced world.

An obvious issue that transportation programs have is fleet maintenance. Walsh believes that computerizing your garage can help to track parts and labor costs, which is critical in benchmarking expenses. The key is identifying buses that are chewing up the most time and money. These might be the oldest buses in the fleet, but they might not.



Consultant Mark Walsh recommends identifying buses in your fleet that incur the highest maintenance costs, which may not always be the oldest.

Also, remember that buses aren't only used to take students to and from school. With field trips, the cost should be budgeted for the school or department requesting the trip. Districts also need to consider how they compensate drivers for trips in terms of driving times and waiting times.

According to Walsh, an often-overlooked source of cost-cutting strategies is the people at the ground level of the operation. An open program should be created that encourages employees, especially drivers and mechanics, to submit cost-saving measures. It helps to offer a reward to those who come up with the best ideas.

Battling against absenteeism is another effective method of keeping costs down. Perfect attendance programs with monetary rewards can help to minimize absenteeism. In addition, drivers need to be constantly reminded that their attendance is greatly appreciated. Let them know.

If spending on supplies is getting out of hand, try bulk purchasing. Check to see if the district can participate in a purchasing bid for supplies such as parts, tires and fuel.

Finally, use the marketplace to bid on proposals for transportation requirements. Make sure to conduct the bids early enough in the school year to maximize competition.

40. Choose the right software provider

When you're considering new fleet maintenance software, you should follow a well-defined process that includes the following steps supplied by Chevin Fleet Solutions.

- Document your current and desired processes as well as goals and objectives.
- Compare your desired functionality to the capabilities delivered by the proposed system. Fleet management systems should be easy to learn and operate and should be adaptable to your organizational processes.
- Carefully review the supplier's credentials. Also take into account their attitude and approach.
- Make sure the supplier offers comprehensive support.

GREAT THOUGHT

"I've always got such high expectations for myself. I'm aware of them, but I can't relax them."

Mary Decker Slaney