

Sharing Services Saves Transportation Consortium Cuts Costs

By Richard G. Timbs

In recent years, many states have targeted pupil transportation in an effort to reduce aid to school districts. New York state is no different, except that it also provides districts with grants to study transportation and determine practical ways to reduce costs.

By making this investment, the state's objectives are to reduce its financial assistance to districts and to help individual districts save transportation money so that it can be reallocated for instructional items such as computers and in-service training for teachers. It is proving to be an effective way of economizing while maintaining the mission of educating children.

Prior to 1992, all school districts in New York state received the same percentage of allowable expenses for transportation. Ninety percent of every district's allowable transportation costs were reimbursed by the state.

However, when pupil transportation became the focus of New York state funding cuts in 1993, new legislation was enacted. It created a property-wealth-adjusted aid formula in which a poor school district would receive a lot of state support while a wealthy district might receive as little as 5 percent.

In anticipation of reductions, superintendents in the Oneida-Madison region, which is com-

prised of 11 districts, searched for ways to save money. In 1992, they decided that a comprehensive study of pupil transportation in the region could best determine possible solutions. Oriskany Central Schools agreed to serve as the local educational agency (LEA) for the study.

Consultant Study

A New York state efficiency grant for \$25,000 was received.

Soon after, the Oneida-Madison region began looking for a consulting firm that could prepare a comprehensive study on various aspects of transportation including fleet maintenance, shared services, alternative fuels, cooperative purchasing and route consolidation.

Robert Bradley, superintendent of the New Hartford Central School District, noted that it's often hard to see the issues and alternatives because we're too close. A consultant has the advantage of seeing the dis-



tricts objectively and considering the many possible combinations for shared services.

The consultant conducted in-depth research into the Oneida-Madison region's transportation system, including the 11 school districts as well as the villages, towns and counties in the geographic area covered by the study. After holding separate meetings with participating business officials, superintendents and transportation supervisors, the consultant developed a data collection instrument and distributed it to each participating district.

Once the survey information was provided, the consultant made on-site visits to each of the participating districts to inspect equipment and garages and to interview personnel.

Personal contact with each district allowed the consultants to understand their individual needs and concerns as well as develop profiles and analyses of each district. In addition, the research brought to the surface issues such as efficiency and effectiveness. Delicate handling of workers' concerns was required to assure them that their work ethics and abilities weren't being questioned.

The process also required an atmosphere of trust among superintendents and other district personnel. Fortunately, districts in the region had worked together successfully for years.

Recommendations

After the necessary data was collected, an interim report was issued that outlined some of the areas that held the potential for shared services. A database for the region, which was used as a basis for financial and operational recommendations, was included in the report (Figure 1).

Further research included meetings with other interested entities including the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), utility companies and the Secretary of State Division of Local Governments. A master report was then prepared for the LEA, as well as individual reports for each of the participating districts. A summary report for the New York State Education Department was also submitted.

Shared Special Education Transportation

A recommendation that affected many of the districts was to share out-of-district transportation, including private, parochial and special education students. Before the study, many districts were routing buses through other districts to reach special education facilities. Now that districts have combined routes, picking up and discharging each other's special education students, the number of bus runs has been dramatically reduced.

According to Dr. Robert Hanna, superintendent of the

Sauquoit Valley School District, eight districts now have combined 75 daily bus runs into 29 to transport special education, private school, vocational and BOCES students. "We've eliminated crisscrossing through districts which has resulted in substantial savings," said Hanna.

Hanna said a conservative estimate of savings for his district alone amounts to approximately \$200 per day based on a cost of \$2.00 per mile and a decrease of 100 miles. Over a year of 180 transportation days this means Sauquoit Valley saved \$36,000 in the 1993-94 school year. He believes that the other seven districts are realizing similar savings.

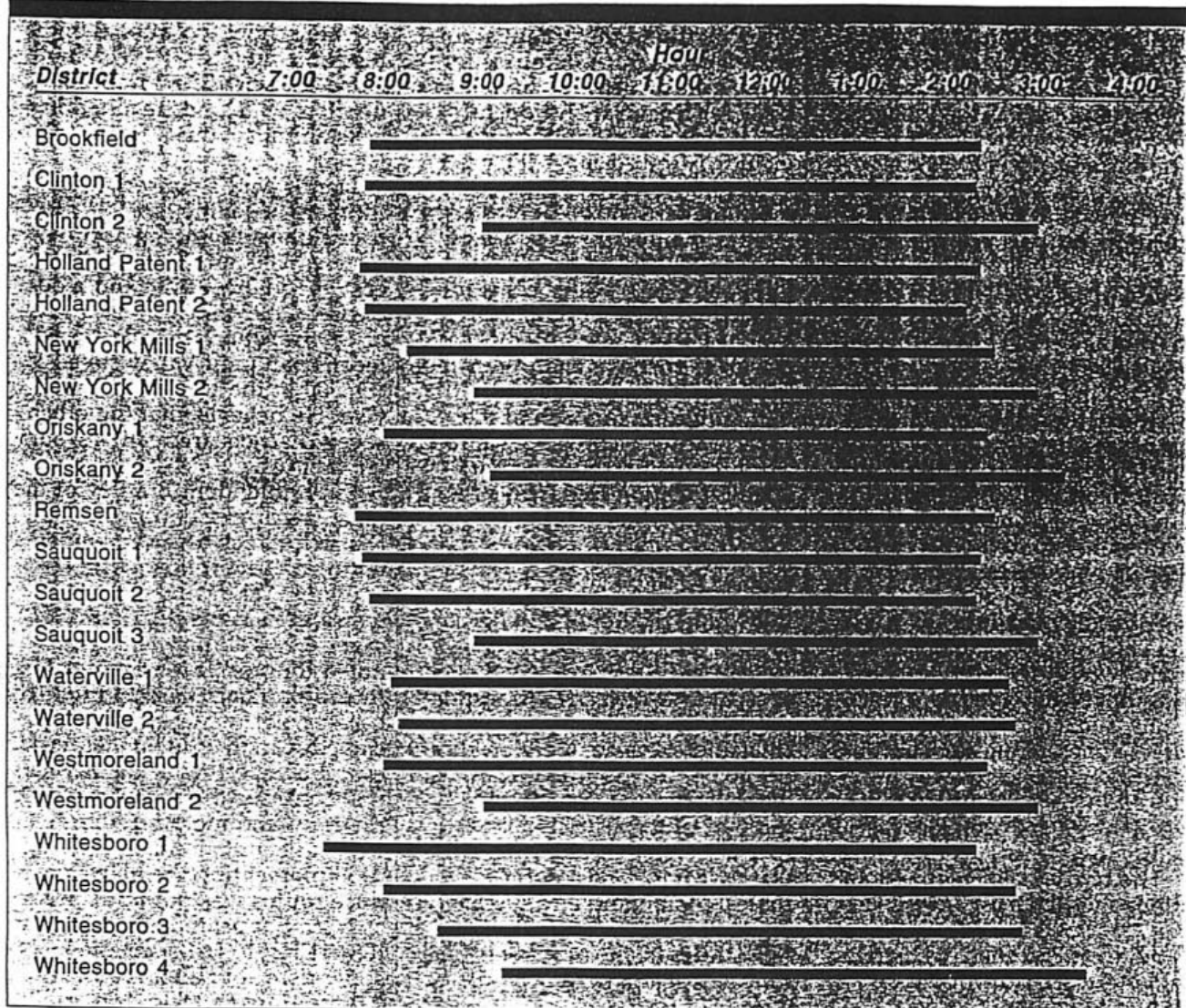
Superintendent Bradley of the New Hartford Central School District, which also consolidated out-of-district routes with Sauquoit Valley and six other districts, said his district has saved \$20,000 this year. He noted that projected savings for future years are hard to predict because of the placement of special education students. However, he expects that the districts will continue the current sharing program and look for other ways to combine routes.

Implementing the plan to reduce routes was not as difficult as it first appeared according to Robert Hryb, transportation supervisor for Sauquoit Valley. All the transportation supervisors involved got together at the beginning of the school year.

FIGURE 1
Sample School District 1991-1992 Transportation Analysis

Category	Actual District	Range for Subregion	Range for Entire Study
Transportation Aid Ratio	83.5%	74.2%-83.6%	72.4%-87.0%
Parts Cost Per Mile	\$0.11	\$0.11-\$0.15	\$0.08-\$0.17
Extra Trips Miles as Percent of Total Miles	5%	5%-14%	2%-14%
Total Operating Cost Per Route Bus	\$23,214	\$22,803-\$32,544	\$19,428-\$32,544
Total Operating Cost Per Student	\$407	\$330-\$505	\$330-\$671
Total Operating Cost Per Mile	\$1.80	\$1.53-\$3.10	\$1.93-\$3.10
Mechanic to Bus Ratio	14:1	3:1-16:1	10:1-16:1
BWADA	829	993-829	993-850
Route Buses as Percent of Total Fleet	81%	90%-91%	80%-93%
Miles Per Student	227	141-329	111-502

FIGURE 2
Bell Times for Oneida-Madison Region



They brought relevant data from each of their districts including children's ages, needs, destinations and times.

For instance, bell times had to be considered, as they vary considerably from district to district (Figure 2). "It was a real jigsaw puzzle," said Hryb, "but we came up with logical route combinations."

It is anticipated that reduced runs also will translate into more years of service for each bus. Previously, each bus lasted about seven years with 100,000 miles driven. Now, Hanna expects each bus to last at least eight years, requiring less maintenance and less frequent replacement.

Shared Maintenance

The study also recommended that Oriskany and New York Mills Central Schools work with Westmoreland Central Schools to reduce maintenance costs and better use existing personnel. As a result, the Oriskany District has already realized significant savings by having its fleet maintained at the Westmoreland garage. In 1990, Oriskany spent \$65,000 for bus maintenance. Three years later, the cost has been reduced to \$59,000.

Not only is it costing less to maintain the buses, but the buses are maintained better. Oriskany now has much better records to make sound decisions regarding replacement, repairs

and costs. The change has made the district more efficient in a number of ways.

New York Mills also has seen improvements in the maintenance of its fleet since teaming with Westmoreland. "New York Mills is a smaller district with a good maintenance facility, but they didn't have anyone in a supervisory capacity to monitor work and keep records," said Marilyn Pirkle, superintendent of the Westmoreland Central School District.

The two districts implemented the study's recommendation to share a transportation supervisor. Although New York Mills won't realize savings immediately since it is working to

Grants for Transportation Studies

New York state's efficiency grant legislation was enacted in 1985, but most grants were initially used by districts to study sharing and services in instructional areas. However, when the state reduced pupil transportation funding, many districts began using grants to study transportation.

According to Suzanne Spear, supervisor for district organization for the New York State Education Department, many of the state's districts are studying transportation efficiency. The state awarded \$309,000 for 18 transportation studies in the 1993-94 school year, said Spear. That's the largest number of transportation studies ever in New York state. Approximately 100 of the state's 714 districts are involved in transportation studies.

All of the studies are conducted by consultants, Spear added. Consultants are evaluated by the state at the end of each year based on district reports. The state makes districts aware of consultants who have received satisfactory marks, but choosing a consultant is the district's responsibility. □



revitalize its current fleet, Westmoreland has saved a minimum of \$4,000 during the first year. "New York Mills has very good mechanics that run the shop, order parts and complete repairs," said Victor Cardillo, the transportation supervisor who splits his time between Westmoreland and New York Mills. "It's just that without a supervisor to coordinate maintenance, their fleet became outdated."

All three districts are benefiting by combining other services too. Driver records are now all maintained in one facility. The districts' drivers are all trained and certified together, eliminating repetition of classes and testing. Cooperative purchasing enables the districts to qualify for quantity discounts. Two instead of three garages are being operated, creating savings in utilities, tools and building maintenance.

Sharing with Municipalities

Sharing services with municipalities was also investigated in the study. Suzanne Spear of the New York State Education Department explained that the 1993 New York state legislation broadened the scope of the state's efficiency grant program to include villages, towns and counties.

"Two of the 18 transportation grants made in the 1993-94 school year involve school districts looking at cost-saving measures with municipalities," said Spear.

For Sauquoit Valley Central Schools, the sharing encouraged by the study has resulted in a cooperative agreement with the town of Paris, where the district's schools are located. The school district is supplying maintenance and a repair shop for the town government's vehicles. In exchange, the town removes snow with front-end loaders from school grounds.

"The state of New York and politicians are really encouraging schools and governments to

cooperate," said Hanna of Sauquoit Valley. "The local boards of education are also very positive about sharing and people working together."

The Oriskany Central School District is also working with government agencies to study municipal fuel sites. Storage-tank liability is a big concern, so it makes sense to look for ways of reducing those liabilities with other entities sharing the same concerns.

Study Stimulates Cooperation

By cooperating, many creative opportunities for sharing services and saving money have emerged. It was the transportation study that helped suggest specific ways the participants could work together to implement the recommendations.

Hanna of Sauquoit Valley said that in addition to generating immediate cost savings and being a long-term planning tool, "the study has stimulated a lot of good discussion. It has enhanced valuable communications by being practical, not theoretical."

Even though the region has a long history of working together, the study has encouraged the climate for cooperation even more. Most important, it is creating more faith in schools on the part of taxpayers and constituents. □

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