



BY DAN ROBERTS

# Pathway to school transportation success in tough budget times

School districts across the country are facing tough budget times. Transportation as a related service is often considered for budget reductions to avoid direct classroom cuts. There are almost always savings in transportation, but the savings may be politically difficult to achieve, which is why adhering to a process is critical. The key to successful change is to understand that no one likes it, and that you must take extra precautions to minimize its impact.

If you are allowed to pick or suggest cost saving changes, where do you start?

## Collect Data

Unless you know where your department stands, you cannot determine the effectiveness of potential changes. This is why you should benchmark your data against best practices and peer districts to determine which cuts are possible to meet your reduction goals.

## Determine Budget Reduction Areas

The primary area that determines overall efficiency is routing and scheduling. This determines the number of buses and drivers required by the transportation department as well as all other needs — from the number of mechanics to the size of the office staff.

To determine potential routing and scheduling savings, there are several areas that should be considered. They are:

### *Tier scenarios*

There are often significant savings achieved in transportation by staggering school bell times to allow individual buses to serve multiple schools. Savings from one tier scenario to two may eliminate as much as 40 percent of the bus fleet needs. Moving from two tiers to three tiers could add an additional 20 percent in fleet reductions.

### *Bell time windows*

The amount of time between school bell times in multiple tier scenarios can often lead to significant savings. Creating as little as five additional minutes between bell times may allow additional buses to be removed from service.

### *Student ride time*

Limits on the amount of time that students are riding the bus may create situations that limit the ability to reduce buses. It takes time to maximize



the number of student riders. Therefore, ride time limits may inhibit routing efficiency.

#### **Number of riders per bus**

True routing efficiency occurs when as many seating positions as possible are actually utilized on every bus every day. Scheduling buses only for potential riders leaves unused capacity on the buses and usually forces you to use more buses on a daily basis.

#### **Walk-to-stop parameters and routing parameters**

There is almost always an inverse relationship between student walk to stop distances and bus efficiency. The farther students are asked to walk to a bus stop, the more likely the bus can make a more direct route through the area in the shortest amount of time. The more time allowed for the bus to pick-up and deliver students in the neighborhood, the easier it is to fill the bus with actual riders and reduce the total buses needed by the district.

#### **See if You Can Really Make it Happen**

A major mistake that transportation administrations make when planning budget reductions is not considering the history of the district and department. If reductions contradict the historical per-

spective, additional time must be spent communicating the potential savings and impact to the public, superintendent, and school board.

#### **Determine the Impact**

Do any changes in the department negatively affect other areas of the district? Do bell time changes work well with athletics? Does shortening the load times for students at schools create issues for the principals? Can schools handle early arrivals and unloading to meet tight route timelines? Any problem can sink a budget reduction plan so take the time to analyze every potential problem to work out a solution for each one.

#### **Build Consensus**

Everyone needs to be on board to make budget reductions work. This means bouncing the plans off staff, administration, and school boards so that there are no unexpected surprises. While change is possible without everyone being "on-board," it will become more difficult without the support of the entire district.

#### **Monitor the Process**

The best plans will fail without constant monitoring and adjusting. Changes such as the reduction of service often are undermined by staff responding to

public complaints. Drivers will make extra stops to avoid parents complaining at the bus stops; schedulers will add service to keep parents from calling and complaining over and over. The more changes you monitor, the more the plan will be followed.

#### **Document Results**

All of the pain involved in making budget reductions should actually result in cost savings. Be sure you are able to show what you have achieved so that you can respond to the potential negative feedback that may come from a variety of sources. Document exactly what was modified and what was accomplished to be able to defend the process and show the results.

Follow this pathway to success, and you will be able to make changes that result in savings in transportation that will benefit your district in these tough budget times.

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