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Julia Steiny: Finally, R.I. gets serious about consolidated school busing

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Little Rhode Island has roughly 145,000 public school children and 36 distinct school districts, using 36 unrelated bus systems. Picture half-empty yellow buses crisscrossing the state to carry the kids who go to school out of their home districts, to private, charter or special-needs schools. It's nuts.

Honestly, for the last 10 years or so, my column has annually bemoaned this student transportation insanity as a particularly clear illustration of our state's death-wish addiction to inefficiency.

But lo. After all these years, there's excellent news. Last fall the Department of Education (RIDE) implemented a small, pilot transportation program, limited to busing the out-of-district students. Despite the current fiscal crisis, only 14 districts, none large, joined the effort. But even that tiny program saved \$1.5 million in just the first year.

Starting this fall, 14 more districts are onboard, which will bring down costs even further.

In fact, RIDE's maiden effort in the transportation business was so successful, six East Bay districts asked RIDE to help them negotiate busing for their in-district kids. By creating a single bus system for themselves, the six districts now need fewer depots for bus storage and have consolidated functions like data collection, routing and billing. Most importantly, they will share a help-desk for parents that is well-informed and actually dedicated to being helpful.

Projected savings for the six East Bay districts next year: about \$1 million.

Finally! Economies of scale.

Mind you, the pilot was not without its problems. The initiative started at the most emotionally difficult point. Busing private and charter students is straightforward enough, but it's a bigger deal for students with disabilities, some of whom are beyond the capabilities of mainstream schools and need programs that can educate children with severe

cognitive or emotional challenges. Naturally, changes in routines worry their parents.

Carolyn Dias, director of the Office of Statewide Efficiencies (formerly Finance), says, “Our over-arching concerns [for the new transportation system] were first, the quality of safety and service, and only secondly savings. It was a very challenging year. There was a huge surge at the local level for the carriers to hold onto their business, resisting the program altogether. But what we found was that even when districts didn’t join the statewide contract, their vendors were working hard on efficiencies and getting them. But by far our toughest challenge has been to reassure parents that the services would be right for their children.”

Certain bus drivers had longstanding relationships with the families. One father had been driven to school himself by the same driver who was now transporting his special-needs child. Dias says, “Where possible we made every effort to keep the previous driver with the student.”

Still, the worst is over; the parents are growing to trust the system.

This work grew out of legislation passed by the [General Assembly](#) in 2006, allowing RIDE to work with the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA) and Statewide Planning to wrest efficiencies from student transportation. They assembled an advisory group that included parents whose children would be affected.

Their first excellent decision was to split the contract between the carrier itself — the yellow bus company — and a company to do all the routing, data collection and help-desk work for parents. Previously, bus companies had no incentive to be efficient about how they routed buses. And the responsibility for dealing with parents’ concerns was dispersed to many people, including each school’s harried principal.

Then as it turned out, much of the data the districts had given RIDE was plain wrong. The school districts included only the per-pupil cost of the bus contract itself, and none of the auxiliary costs such as fringe benefits, supervision and administration. So some districts were furious when it seemed their costs had gone up under the consolidated system. RIDE appeased them by promising that no district would pay more than they had before, while working with them on determining the real price.

Districts like Jamestown were a huge challenge. It is an island, after all, and doesn’t operate its own high school. Unfortunately, the districts that continue to operate their own bus systems negatively affect everyone. For Jamestown, it’s a serious pain that North Kingstown is not in the mix, since North Kingstown High is where most Jamestown students go.

Even so, Dias says, “We didn’t anticipate how efficient it would be to have a single, outside help desk. The districts are beginning to see what a benefit it is to have the transportation headache taken entirely off their hands.”

Elliot Krieger, a spokesman in the commissioner’s office for nine years, reports that each year he’s flooded by irate phone calls about bus problems as school opens. “I want to talk to the commissioner TODAY,” was a particularly memorable one. This year he had one phone call.

Kudos to you, RIDE. Not only does the system provide better, more responsive service, it will save gobs of money. The public needs more such good work.

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