

Safely Transporting Students as State Transportation Subsidies Decline

The challenge for the CR transportation department, led by Supervisor of Pupil Transportation Jack Pinheiro and Transportation Coordinator Charles Rehm, is to maximize the state subsidy while maintaining a safe environment for students.

Council Rock (CR) transports 13,334 students to over 90 schools, over 770 square miles each day. The buses and vans traverse nearly 2.5 million miles per year and use 300,000 gallons of diesel fuel. For 2013-14, the total cost for transportation is approximately \$10.3 million. About \$9 million of that total is paid to First Student, the district's bus contractor.

The percentage of CR's cost for transportation that is state subsidized has been steadily decreasing. The loss of state subsidy increases the share of transportation cost paid by the local taxpayer. The subsidy is paid in the year following when the costs are incurred. Below is a chart of the transportation cost, the state subsidy, the percent of the transportation budget that is subsidized, and percent change in subsidy year to year.

Operational Year	2012-13	2011-12	2010-11
Payable in Year	2013-14	2012-13	2011-12
First Student Payment*	8,893,596.00	9,158,880.18	8,338,004.83
Total State Subsidy	1,918,286.86	2,009,003.75	2,069,063.02
% of costs subsidized	21.6%	21.9%	24.8%
% change year to year	-4.7%	-3.0%	-10.0%

*buses used for field trips are covered either in the building budgets or through the parent organizations and buses used for athletics are covered in the athletic budget.

The formula for determining the state subsidy is complicated and, much like our state basic education subsidy, relies in part on the real estate market value of homes in the district. In other words, because the CR community includes homes with higher property values, CR's state subsidy is lower. As part of the calculation, CR also receives an additional \$385 per student for non-public school students that Council Rock is required to bus; however there is no additional subsidy for Special Education student transportation, which often carries the highest cost.

Over the past decade Jack Pinheiro and Charles Rehm have kept students safe and ride times reasonable, while finding routing efficiencies that have decreased transportation's bottom line. The number of bus routes has decreased from 185 to 130. This year, locking in a bulk price of diesel fuel at a good price point contributed to lowering the cost of transportation by \$300,000.

Mr. Pinheiro shared some forward thinking ideas to improve bus operations:

- The ability to go to a greener fleet of buses (i.e. natural gas)
- Owning our own bus lots. This would allow CR to put in natural gas refueling stations as well as automatic bus washing and snow removal devices.
- Staggering the starting times of half the elementary schools would save money by lowering driver down-time in the morning.
- Since half of CR's population is in the secondary schools and half in the elementary schools, starting the high schools at the same time as the middle schools would yield efficiencies in routing and in the amount of hourly driver wages.

Some budget cuts in transportation were made a few years ago when the district experienced millions of dollars in budgetary shortfalls due to the downturn in the economy. The 5 pm buses were cut from the budget, and the district went to a model of providing after school high school busing only at 4:15 pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays (with drivers having prior elementary runs, it is sometimes closer to 4:30). Parents are now responsible for the transportation for students involved in music, athletics and other activities that traditionally run until 5 pm.

Since a recent school board vote allows the high school libraries to be open longer on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and students have a place to go following clinic hours, Citizens recognizes that it would be helpful to parents to eliminate the 4:15 buses on Tuesday and Thursday, and provide the service instead with 5 pm buses. When specifically asked about that change, Mr. Pinheiro thought that would be a good idea because it will increase the amount of time bus drivers have to drop off elementary students and return to the high school in time for 5:00. Since this time shift would incur no cost unless there is a significant increase in ridership, **Citizens For Education is advocating that the Administration and school board explore the idea of having 5 pm, instead of 4:15 pm buses at the high schools only on Tuesday and Thursday, to accommodate students in activities and the needs of working parents.**

Despite decreasing state subsidies, the CR Transportation Department continues to safely transport students at the lowest possible cost, through the diligent management of all transportation processes. Citizens For Education would like to thank Jack Pinheiro for his valuable insights into this important district function.