

Superintendent's Report

To: Board of Education
From: Dan W. Cox, Superintendent of Schools
Re: Monthly Board of Education Report
Date: September 20, 2023



Gratitude & Celebrations

We're thrilled to announce that the RHS journalism class is embarking on an exciting venture to revamp and elevate our district's social media presence! With a fresh perspective and a dedication to student voice, they're taking charge to enhance communication and engagement within our school community. It's a fantastic step forward in ensuring that our students' voices are heard and celebrated throughout the District. Exciting times lie ahead as we embrace this innovative approach to community building and communication!

Summary of Transportation Challenges and Strategic Initiatives

Introduction

In response to the challenges faced by our transportation department, the Rochester School District has embarked on a comprehensive effort to improve transportation services for our students. This report summarizes the challenges identified, strategic areas for improvement, input from bus drivers, actions taken, and the feedback received from the community.

The Building and District Administration recently convened for a design thinking session with the objective of enhancing our transportation services. This approach adheres to the principles of design thinking, which encompass:

- Identifying the Problem
- Brainstorming Solutions
- Prioritizing and Focusing Solutions
- Developing a Framework for Solutions

Challenges Identified

Our leadership team has diligently identified several critical challenges confronting the transportation department. These challenges encompass:

- Instances of students arriving late to school and home.
- Difficulties faced by students in identifying their assigned routes and bus numbers.

- Ensuring bus availability for student-athletes attending events.
- Frequent mid-day and mid-week changes in transportation schedules, often stemming from driver shortages or early departures.
- Communication issues, both within the transportation department and with families, especially concerning double routes, late student arrivals at home, and student identification on buses.
- Coordinating communication regarding athletic trips.
- Functional concerns with the "Here Comes the Bus" app.
- Ongoing driver recruitment and retention challenges, exacerbated by the absence of a dedicated Transportation Director.

Addressing these multifaceted challenges demands concerted efforts and improvements in communication, coordination, and staffing within the transportation department.

Strategic Areas for Improvement

To chart our course toward improvement, strategic areas have been identified:

- Driver Recruitment & Retention
- Logistics
- Communication
- Fleet Quality

Driver Input

During the 2021-2022 school year, a strategic roundtable convened with 16 bus drivers to formulate a strategic plan and vision. The top priorities to be implemented and enhanced by 2027 include:

- A fully staffed Transportation Department.
- Competitive Pay & Benefits.
- Integration of Cutting-Edge Technology (e.g., Cameras, GPS Devices, Scanners for Attendance, Parent App, Electric Buses).
- Increased Collaboration Between the Transportation Department and the District Administration.
- Enhanced Employee Morale.

Near-term priorities were also identified to aid in the realization of these strategic goals:

- Increased Hourly Pay
- Aggressive Advertising for Driver Recruitment
- Recruiting Teachers as Bus Drivers
- Implementation of Efficiency-Boosting Technology

- Increased Trip Pay
- Providing Educational Opportunities for Drivers
- Offering Benefit Options

Actions Taken

Since 2021, the Board of Education and administration have proactively pursued solutions to ensure reliable transportation services for our students. Key actions undertaken include:

- **Recruitment and Retention:** Actively recruiting and retaining qualified bus drivers to support student safety and well-being.
- **Compensation and Benefits:** Consistently raising starting driver pay by 31.25% over three years, with the current starting rate at \$21.00 per hour. Additionally, compounded raises of 17.8% for current drivers have been given during this period, along with guaranteed hours, an IMRF retirement pension, and comprehensive insurance benefits.
- **Signing and Retention Bonuses:** Providing a \$1,000 signing bonus for new drivers and an annual \$1,000 retention bonus for veteran drivers.
- **Paid Training and Physicals:** Extending paid training to all bus driver recruits, regardless of hiring status, and offering paid physical examinations to prospective and current drivers.
- **Advertisement:** Implementing prominent banners on buses, distributing flyers, and engaging in strategic advertising efforts.
- **Safety Measures:** Prioritizing student safety through rigorous bus maintenance, driver training, and adherence to health guidelines.
- **Fleet Upgrades:** Purchasing four new school buses and awaiting the arrival of an activity bus to enhance the overall fleet.
- **Efficiency Improvements:** Continuously exploring avenues to improve transportation efficiency, including route optimization and technology integration.
- **"Here Comes the Bus" GPS Mapping:** Integrating GPS mapping for improved communication with families and route monitoring.
- **Student/Route Tracking:** Introducing a student scanning system to expedite boarding and disembarking.
- **Transfinder Routing Software:** Upgrading routing software for improved route design.
- **Open Communication:** Enhancing communication through daily transportation updates, accessible on the district's website and live school feeds, and push notifications via the District app.
- **Community Engagement:** Soliciting community input and feedback to inform transportation service improvements.

Community Feedback

Based on input from our community, priorities have been established to:

- Enhance the efficiency of the bus driver hiring process and ensure competitive compensation packages.
- Elevate the quality of before and after-school programs for students.
- Strengthen safety measures, including optimized routes and neighborhood pick-up stops.
- Optimize routes by adjusting the start and end times of the school day at different campuses.
- Address concerns related to the "Here Comes the Bus" app and foster improved communication between school buildings.

A comprehensive summary report of community input can be found [here](#).

Board Action Recommendation

It is proposed that the Board of Education establish an ad-hoc transportation committee with the purpose of meticulously examining feedback from various stakeholder groups, conducting a thorough analysis of potential solutions, and formulating a strategic vision for the future of the transportation department.

The Rochester School District remains committed to addressing these challenges and continuously improving transportation services for our students and community.

REA Co-President/Superintendent Huddles

The REA Co-Presidents and I are pleased to announce the resumption of our monthly huddle meetings. These meetings are designed to foster open and effective communication, eliminate barriers to participation, and promote collaborative problem-solving.

Positive Launch

I am pleased to announce that I have been selected as the Abe Lincoln Division representative for Vision 2030 Working Group for the Illinois Association of School Administrators. As part of the Vision 2030 Working Group, I will engage in in-depth discussions on critical education policy and issues that will shape priority platforms and advocacy efforts led by the Illinois Association of School Administrators (IASA). These discussions, facilitated by ECRA Group, Inc., will encompass topics such as literacy, school safety, Tier 2 pensions, and the teacher shortage.

IASA is also actively involving statewide education associations and stakeholders in the Vision 2030 initiative. Vision 2030 is a vital effort aimed at realizing the promise of public education, fostering collaboration, and uniting educational organizations and school districts to articulate the principles educators stand for and aspire to achieve.

Drawing inspiration from the success of Vision 20/20, which brought about significant changes in school funding, teacher recruitment, 21st-century learning, and accountability, Vision 2030 seeks to achieve transformative goals.

It's a great day to be a Rocket!!! 🚀
"A Tradition of Excellence!"