



SMFCSD TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE REPORT

I. THE SMFCSD TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE

On August 26, 2019, The SMFCSD Board of Education passed a resolution to form a committee to examine procedures, policies and other factors that impacted the performance of the SMFCSD Transportation System. This report is the result of the Committee's work.¹

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Before 2015, the district relied on secretaries in each school building to register/enroll new students and forward that information to the Transportation Department (there was no central registration process involving Central Office). As expected, this system was fraught with delays and errors, and allowed for significant human error. This process was flawed in many respects:

- Student information was regularly not forwarded to Transportation until mid-August.
- Families had to actively contact Transportation to get busing information.
- Last minute registrations exacerbated delays and caused frequent changes to routing.
- Transportation personnel manually entered student information into routing software rather than importing it from the district's Student Information System.

In 2015, the district transitioned registration and enrollment from the individual buildings to the Office of Teaching and Learning in Central Office. There were immediate benefits: new student registrations could be forwarded to the Transportation Department on an on-going basis throughout the summer, rather than waiting until secretaries reported back to work in August. Transportation worked to get route information to parents at least 10-14 days before the first day of school.

Prior to the 2019-20 school year, routing practices included frequent use of side streets and cul-de-sacs (where weather and traffic conditions did not always permit drivers to follow best practices), and frequent exceptions to the "1-mile walk zone" for student safety reasons.²

District inefficiency had several negative impacts:

- Sometimes, buses arrived at elementary schools up to 30 minutes after student dismissal.
- Buses were often late to pick up students for transport to away extra-curricular activities.

¹ Handling of potential employee discipline, in most cases, is governed by administrative contracts, collective bargaining agreements, and state law. Therefore, the report, and the Committee's work, will neither focus on, nor highlight, any issues with specific personnel.

² District policy dictates that students who live within 1-mile of their school building are not guaranteed busing. However, when students within that walk zone must walk on unsafe or undesirable conditions, exceptions were made on an individual basis.

- Many students who were assigned routes never used busing services, resulting in more assigned routes than necessary.

III. SUMMARY OF 2019 SUMMER/FALL EVENTS PERTAINING TO TRANSPORTATION

The Committee investigated the events which led to the transportation issues that beset the district at the beginning of the 2019-20 school year. The Committee's investigation revealed issues in both the Transportation Department and Central Office.

Due to anticipated long-term budget challenges, Central Office previously issued a general directive to district departments, aiming for more efficiency. Unfortunately, Transportation's attempts to comply with that directive were not coordinated through Central Office. Though its goals included increasing route efficiency and ensuring drivers could make safe, lawful maneuvers while staying within Board-driven policies, several issues plagued that effort:³

- Distinguishable, periodic goals with timelines were not established for work during the summer.
- Routes were not physically inspected for safety or for practicality.
- Test runs of routes were not performed.
- There was very little collaboration and communication between Transportation and Central Office, and there was no attempt to involve the community in changes.
- There were no established guidelines for preferred stop conditions, acceptable stop conditions, and escalations to Central Office when a stop was defective or unsatisfactory.
- Personnel lacked adequate training and preparation for new routes, new systems, and new stops.

Transportation was beleaguered by other problems as well. Over the years, Transportation has been through several directors, and handling of employee disciplinary issues have not mirrored other departments within the district. Examples include: failure to adequately review and discipline personnel within the collective bargaining agreement, hamstringing ongoing efforts to ensure compliance with district policy. The chain of command has not always been observed, and failures to document escalating discipline precluded reassignment or removal of offending personnel as desired.

Central Office also contributed to the information delay. A supervisory change left a gap in supervision of Teaching and Learning. As a result, the department's temporary lack of direction regarding transmission of data to Transportation caused a delay in transmission of data to Transportation. Further, existing policies and practices within that department were already inadequate and did not permit much room for the errors which ultimately occurred.

Due to these issues, bus routing information to parents/guardians was mailed late, and in some cases received after the school year had already begun. As a result, there was no time for the community and the district to engage in a productive, joint effort to correct problems created as a result of the new routes. There was a general lack of notice of planned changes, and the community, Central Office, and

³ Issues created within the Transportation overhaul were exacerbated by hardware and software difficulties. Equipment malfunctions with a sealer/folder machine further delayed mailing of bus routes, and software failures contributed to internal delays and incorrect or blank notifications.

the Board of Education were unaware of route changes in time to fix them. There was also a failure to explain the need for, and benefits of, these route changes, such as additional flexibility in winter months when buses break down and drivers become ill, taxpayer savings, and bus availability for extracurricular transportation.

IV. THE DISTRICT’S IMMEDIATE RESPONSE TO THE PREDICAMENT

As the scope of the problem became more widely understood, the Superintendent, with the backing of the Board, issued a call to the community. It became immediately apparent that Transportation lacked the appropriate human and technological resources to satisfactorily respond to parent issues of this scale. That call, coupled with district social media efforts, encouraged parents with concerns and questions to submit them uniformly through an online platform.

In addition to countless phone message and emails, the district received at least 218 submissions of issues. Staff from numerous departments was assigned to address these concerns, and an estimated 90% of those concerns have been resolved positively.

Routes and stops were hand-reviewed to address parents’ concerns, and changes have been methodically made to tackle problems without creating new ones. The process of building safe and effective routes will continue for the next few weeks.

V. THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE

The Committee categorized the problems encountered as ‘immediate,’ ‘short-term,’ or ‘long-term.’

A. IMMEDIATE ISSUES

Immediate issues, explained above, have been addressed and that process will continue throughout the year if new issues are identified. Those issues, and their solutions, included:

- Replacement of the malfunctioning and jamming sealer/folder machine.
- Review of community concerns and issues for resolution. Priority was given to ensure students were arriving to school timely and careful consideration was given to ensure compliance with student IEPs.

B. SHORT-TERM ISSUES

To the extent the issues have not already been addressed, below is a list of identified short-term issues, and the status of their resolution:

ISSUE	SOLUTION
Issues with routing software.	New routing software, which had already been purchased, is being implemented and tested in advance of its use. Additional software training is ongoing to reduce and eliminate human error.

Discrepancies between changes to routes in the routing software and information available to drivers.	Establishment and adherence to internal communication procedures. Ensured route sheets comply with the Ohio Revised Code and are up to date to prevent information gaps when a substitute driver is needed.
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C. LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

ISSUE	SOLUTION
Late notifications to families for bus routes.	Establish and adhere to parent notification timeline. Provide families to advance deadline to register and ensure day-one busing. Examine Central Office policies and inter-software communication to improve route establishment procedures.
Lack of cross-training of employees.	Establish procedures for effective handling of duties in case of staff absences.
Lack of comprehensive route/stop change process.	Design and implement processes for changes. Establish district policy as to an “ideal bus stop” and escalation processes when that ideal is unachievable.
Failure to meet community expectations on routes and stops.	Articulate and standardize the balance between efficiency and community expectations on stop location and route length. Permit adequate time after route notification to work through community requests for changes.
Driver-specific errors.	Establish procedures for route implementation to ensure driver success, including test runs of routes and ongoing professional development.
Child safety protocols not followed or inadequate.	At next meeting of Security Committee, share district policies with committee first responders for input and review. Re-establish community-wide procedures, re-train all affected personnel, and require that all personnel re-certify understanding of updated procedures.
Late notifications of new registration by Central Office to Transportation.	Superintendent is to convene affected administrators and report to the Board of Education at its first meeting in December 2019 on existing policies and recommend needed changes to ensure earlier notification of routes to families.

VI. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO BE ALLOCATED AND THE WAY FORWARD

The Committee determined that the Transportation Department would benefit from improvements or enhancements in technology, professional development and planning.

District administrators will evaluate and adopt technological solutions including:

1. a more robust GPS system
2. a system to more effectively and efficiently daily track student ridership
3. effective and efficient digital video camera systems on each bus
4. full implementation of and staff training on new routing software
5. examination of new registration / enrollment software

The Committee asked that the administration and Transportation collaborate on permanent, ongoing professional development resources for affected personnel. For example, the Ohio School Boards Association (OSBA) offers the Master of Transportation (MTA) training series. The MTA was designed to provide district administrators with the specific knowledge and competencies needed to manage transportation services safely, reliably and efficiently. The three-year MTA curriculum includes classes in three proficiencies: compliance and safety; operations management; and governance, including policy and fiscal matters. Transportation supervisors are the obvious choice for MTA training, however, other administrators including Superintendents, Treasurers, Business Managers, and Board Members should consider attending this training series. It is recommended that the District consider purchasing a yearly training-level subscription for multiple administrators with the goal of increasing district-wide knowledge in transportation issues. Further, cross-trained administrators will be better prepared to engage in strategic planning with regard to transportation issues and provide a contingency for transportation services when faced with unanticipated challenges.

The Committee recognized that various problems at different levels need to be addressed. Therefore, a “stratified” problem-solving and planning framework will be used to match problem type (immediate, short-term, and long-term) with the appropriate personnel to resolve each issue. Personnel have already been tasked to deal with day-to-day (operational) issues, while others focus on long-term (strategic) solutions. The stratified planning framework assigns an administrator/supervisor to be accountable for implementing the planned solution.

District administrators are encouraged to employ consultants to review problem-solving efforts and/or assist in the design of a new transportation system. OSBA and related professional associations provide many transportation-related services including: transportation operation cost and benchmarking studies, routing analysis, fleet management assistance, general operations evaluations, in-service presentations for drivers and administrators, driver qualifications compliance review, transportation emergency plan development, development of local student transportation handbooks and technical advice.

Improvements in technology, professional development, and a deliberate planning process with external review by qualified consultants will facilitate a way forward to the goal of a safer, more reliable and efficient transportation system in the Stow-Munroe Falls City Schools District.