

SOLUTIONS MAKE TRANSPORTATION AFFORDABLE AND MANAGEABLE FOR CHOICE SCHOOLS IN ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

An integral part of any successful school desegregation program is the ability to transport students from one area to another, often at far distances. For more than 20 years, TransPar has partnered with St. Louis, Missouri's Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation (VICC), which oversees the implementation of the metropolitan area desegregation program that transports city students to suburban school districts and county students to magnet schools in the city. This case study shares highlights from that long-term partnership.

THE CHALLENGE: MAKE TRANSPORTATION MORE MANAGEABLE AND AFFORDABLE

Early in 1983, after a legal complaint had bounced around U.S. District Courts for nearly 10 years, a program finally emerged to rectify the disparity in the quality of education received by African American students attending St. Louis city schools and those attending predominantly white schools in the surrounding county.

The voluntary plan to increase racially integrated learning opportunities for students was implemented under federal court jurisdiction with the State of Missouri managing student transportation until 1999. At that point, the non-profit VICC was created to continue the St. Louis Student Transfer program. VICC is governed by a board of directors comprised of superintendents of the participating school districts who decide policy and make decisions about the program in accordance with the provisions of the governing Settlement Agreement.

Providing public school choice for the St. Louis metropolitan area since 1981, the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation (VICC) oversees the implementation of the metropolitan area desegregation program, with responsibilities for facilitating transfers of city students to suburban school districts and suburban students to city magnet schools.

DAILY STUDENT RIDERSHIP

Regular Education Students
4,151 per day
Special Education Students
62 per day

DAILY FLEET LOGISTICS

Regular Education Buses
811 bus trips per day
Special Education Buses
5 bus trips per day

THE CHALLENGE

Unmanageable Routes
Shortage of Drivers
Lack of Transportation Expertise

THE SOLUTION

New Zone-based Busing System
Phased-in Implementation

THE RESULTS

Manageable Routes
Shorter Rides
Efficient Routing
More Affordable System
Safe & On-time Performance



“Choice Schools was always viewed as a two-pronged program,” explained VICC CEO, David Glaser. “To increase integration overall, we needed to bring African American students from the city to attend suburban school districts, and give non-African American students in the county the chance to attend magnet schools in the city. This meant transportation was crucial to the program’s success.”

When VICC assumed responsibility for transporting students participating in the program, the company partnered with TransPar to plan, coordinate, and oversee all student transportation.

“Transportation is an integral part of the Choice Schools program,” said Glaser. “School districts don’t have to worry about doing all the bus routes, taxi routes, and everything else it takes to transport a student... that’s our job and we bear the cost. TransPar was brought in to come up with a solution to make transportation affordable once the state relinquished control of the program.”

“The value of working with TransPar is tremendous. More than most school districts, transportation for the Choice Schools program is a big deal. It’s important it be done with excellence and is cost-effective. The way we’ve all been able to work together has been great. It’s more of a partnership than a vendor relationship.”

- David Glaser, CEO Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation, St. Louis, MO

Prior to TransPar’s involvement Glaser said, transportation was inefficient and costly, with half of the program’s entire budget used to pay for student transportation.

THE SOLUTION: ALLOW TRANSPAR TO REIMAGINE ST. LOUIS STUDENT TRANSPORTATION

At the height of the program in 1993-94, about 15,000 students participated in the transfer program. At that time, students could live anywhere in St. Louis and attend any school in any participating district. To facilitate that program, the state ran 650 buses making more than 800 bus runs a day to transport students from city to county and vice versa.

According to Glaser, this large program ran 30 to 40 drivers short every day. That’s when VICC and TransPar were charged with coming up with a solution to make the transportation more manageable and affordable. Continuation of the entire program depended on it.

TransPar’s plan divided the city and surrounding metropolitan area into a series of zones, so students who lived in certain areas could only attend schools that were available in that zone. The plan was accepted by the state and VICC hired TransPar to oversee the transportation and implementation of the zones.



THE RESULTS: SHORTER RIDE TIMES, MORE EFFICIENT TRANSPORTATION

TransPar's zone strategy quickly reduced the 800 bus runs to something much more manageable and affordable. It also mitigated the driver shortage issue.

"When we started implementing zones, we cut out a couple hundred bus routes and took about 150 buses off the road," said Tami Webb, Transportation Operations Manager for VICC.

In addition to making the program more affordable and sustainable, the new zoning reduced the student ride times, some of which were as long as 90 minutes. Webb said the shift to the new zone format was made gradually, as students moved up between schools to be sensitive and minimally disruptive to each student's life.

Since the launch of the zoning concept in 1999, TransPar and VICC have served more than 70,000 students and reduced the number of attendance zones from 4 to 3. This has resulted in a more effective and efficient transportation system, and reduced ride times for students.

"Students travel a fair distance between the city and the suburbs," said Glaser. "Some average ride times approached an hour, so anything we could do to make those ride times as short as possible, we wanted to do.

"In the past, getting kids to school on time was a challenge for the program. But today, late arrivals rarely happen. And because transportation is in our hands, it's one more burden off the school districts' shoulders," he said.

In fact, 80 to 90 percent of principals who responded to VICC's most recent annual survey said they are "Satisfied" or "Very Satisfied" with VICC's student transportation service. An important barometer, since transporting students is the lifeblood of the Choice Schools program.

Since 1999, St. Louis County districts have approved extensions of the program, currently ending new enrollment after the 2023-24 school year, but continuing the program until those students graduate from high school in 2036. At the time the program ends, it will have operated for more than 50 years, making it one of the longest operating school desegregation programs in the nation.

"We've accomplished too much and come too far for it to just end," said Glaser. "St. Louis seldom has the reputation of being at the forefront, but in this case we are. The program works for kids, works for families, and it works for the community."

As VICC looks toward a future with fewer student participants, controlling transportation costs becomes increasingly more important and even more challenging.

"In order to make things fit into our budget, we need to keep operational costs in balance: 36 percent for transportation, 62 percent for tuition reimbursement and 2 percent for administration. If we spend more on transportation, we'd have to reduce the number of students in the program," Glaser explained. "Without TransPar, my life would be miserable. I can't imagine doing this job without their support. I see TransPar as being part of the equation until the program ends in 2036."

Current TransPar projects include updating the antiquated 30-year-old, custom-written software system VICC has been using to track parent calls, monitor buses, and document information.

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