



HOW TO WIN YOUR NEXT SCHOOL START-UP

Transportation tips to help you succeed and avoid common pitfalls



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TRANSPORTATION TIPS TO HELP YOU SUCCEED & AVOID COMMON PITFALLS

It's easy to downplay the troubles that plagued the first weeks of the school year. But while people like to think, "This start-up wasn't any worse than any other", the reality is that no worse also means no better.



For many operations, the first day of fall brings not only a change in the seasons, but a sigh of relief as the chaos of school start-ups has begun to subside. It's the time of year when transportation managers and directors look around and say, "Well, that wasn't so bad."

Or was it?

It's easy to downplay the troubles that plagued the first weeks of the school year: late buses, missed stops, unanswered phone calls, driver shortage and attrition. While people like to think, "This start-up wasn't any worse than any other", the reality is that no worse also means no better.

Year after year, there are a handful of pitfalls and missed opportunities that happen the same way, every time. So how do you accurately evaluate your district's start-up performance? What you need is an "after action" process to help you realistically measure the degree of difficulties experienced during start-ups, while avoiding common hindsight bias (no one thinks it was as bad as it was after they get through it) and status quo bias ("Let's just not do anything -- we got through it this year we'll get through it again") that often causes

transportation professionals to look back on their start-ups through rose colored glasses.

The following is a list of universally common problems across school districts of all demographics and sizes. While each transportation operation is going to have its own set of unique troubles, the information here should be able to help you begin to rethink your school start-ups and determine if a complete “after action” review process developed with TransPar can help you identify additional trouble spots and build a program to avoid them in the future.

YOU CAN'T MANAGE WHAT YOU DON'T MEASURE

BAD GPS DATA: While two-thirds of vehicles in the school transportation industry are still without GPS technology¹, an increasing number of districts are equipping their fleets with these data-rich units. However, a number of these school districts are still not getting the full value out of their GPS units because they either can't or don't take the time to ensure that their school buses are assigned to the correct routes. Why is this so important? You can't manage what you don't measure, and inaccurate bus assignments prevent the GPS from matching valuable planned route data versus actual route data. This tends to particularly be a problem with contracted operations. The first step to eliminating bad GPS data is to establish a process that both encourages daily bus assignment updates, and penalizes lack of compliance with the new process.

INACCURATE OR INCOMPLETE STUDENT DATA: School registrations occur throughout the summer, and often up until the last minute. An updated list of students should be provided to the contractor as early as possible. This will help the transportation provider during their route development to verify the school's registration list against the route manifest, ensuring that buses are not overloaded (or significantly underused) and that no children are going to be left behind due to unexpected students on the school's roster. To be successful, one of the big mitigating factors from a planning perspective is to leave enough capacity to be flexible with the routes. You should also think about opportunities to gather data around what actual changes might occur. For example, if 80 percent of things stay the same from one year to the next, then plan on that portion and leave capacity for the other 20 percent.

¹ *School Bus Fleet: 2015 Equipment Survey*
Bobit Media, Sept 2015, p26

COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWNS: This is one of the most prevalent issues across the board, and the reason why is often a simple one. The majority of calls coming into a school or transportation department are received by administrative or support staff – part-time workers who, in many cases, don't come back to school until about a week or two before the new year starts. So calls are coming in, but many of them don't go back out. How do you resolve that? Establishing a call center or call tracking system based on prioritization and return can help ensure that high priority items are being addressed. An “after action analysis” of call types can also help reduce call volume the next time big changes are made. If you don't track the phone calls, by the time you get to the next year's start-up, it is impossible to truly remember what happened without a degree of thinking, “It wasn't as bad as everyone thought.” Because it probably was, or worse.

DRIVER SHORTAGE: Driver numbers should be tracked year-round, and especially during the summer, so a shortage at the start of the school year should never be a surprise. Keep in mind there will likely be some natural attrition as candidates drop off throughout the rigorous training process. However, if you find yourself with a driver shortage at the start of the year, you will need to be honest with yourself about how likely it will be to close the gap on the number of drivers your operation needs versus the actual number of drivers you have. From there, it may be necessary to analyze your routes for any underused bus stops or low capacity buses that can be removed or condensed with other routes, and then design a new route schedule to reflect the driver shortage. As drivers complete training and come onboard, the operation can roll back to its “idealized state”.

SO WHAT DO YOU DO NEXT?

Time and time again, we see transportation professionals and school administrators alike getting so geared up for school start-ups, and grinding through those first several crucial weeks of chaos, that once it is over, a pervasive sense of stasis begins to settle in. Rather than having a plan for looking at new efficiencies or how to better implement technology, it's nice to breathe a sigh of relief and look around at one's colleagues and say, “Well that wasn't so bad.” But remember, *no worse* also means *no better*. And whether this is a case of common hindsight or status quo bias, or due to a sense of exhaustion, it is more likely that productivity can increase and improvements can be realized if a plan for post-school start-up activities is made before start-ups even begin. Doing this will also create a better “after action” review process to assess how your

operation's school start-up actually went, and what can be done to not only improve it, but to avoid common mistakes that slip through year after year.

TransPar knows that running efficient student transportation isn't as straightforward as it sounds. That's why we offer help with simple steps, such as an "after action" review process, that you can take to ensure problems do not repeat themselves. If you're ready to make a change and put down the rose-colored glasses, contact us today to learn more.

About TransPar

TransPar is a leading organization that offers an array of products and services representing the most comprehensive and responsible services in the student transportation industry. And we do this all while keeping your students safe and improving the cost and quality of your school transportation operation.

Our experience with student transportation programs of all sizes includes school districts that own and operate their own school bus fleet, school districts that utilize contractors, and school bus contractors themselves, thereby allowing us to provide innovative solutions to the entire spectrum of student transportation needs.

TransPar provides Management and Staffing Services to develop solutions for difficult operational questions and problems; Advisory Services to deliver resources and expertise that transportation contractors and organizations often cannot access on their own; and Fleet Management Services and Technology Products to help customers create the strong foundation necessary to support effective service delivery. So no matter your needs, we are your all-inclusive solution to creating a successful, reliable, and profitable student transportation program.