

Customer Q&A with Connecticut Department of Education, Bureau of Choice Programs

The Connecticut Department of Education's Bureau of Choice Programs and interdistrict magnet schools are designed to attract students from different school districts to learn together in settings that offer unique, high-quality, themed educational opportunities. In the Hartford region, the program provides School Choice and magnet school students with transportation along routes that stretch up to 40 miles. In 2007, School Bus Consultants was engaged to assess the Regional School Transportation System supporting Sheff Programming and, in 2016, the company was asked to provide an updated assessment of the current shared services agreement and the organization coordinating transportation services across the region.

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What problems, issues, or needs led you to engage School Bus Consultants?

Our transportation system for School Choice and magnet school students in the Hartford region was inefficient and costly. Our territory stretches from central Connecticut to the Massachusetts border, covering nearly one-sixth of the state. We provide transportation for nearly 13,000 students to 41 magnet schools. Our goal is to get students to school safely and in a reasonable amount of time. We wanted to increase efficiencies and control costs while maintaining the quality of our transportation services.

What made you choose SBC? What made their services stand out from others?

Earlier, SBC reports had outlined steps to set up smaller transportation zones, align bell times between the operator districts, and fix our transportation financing, and we were working to implement those recommendations. Choosing SBC for this follow-up project was easy. They are national experts and we were very happy with their previous work. SBC was uniquely qualified to facilitate the conversations necessary to support each of the operator district's transition to a strategically aligned bell schedule for the start of the 2019-2020 school year.

What have been the greatest benefits of working with SBC?

It's really their expertise. It was clear that the members of the SBC team had long histories of working with school districts. They spoke to our team of school district leaders and transportation operators from personal experience and connected with them from the perspective of people who have done their jobs. Our local leaders know SBC's experts speak from a place of real knowledge of the day-to-day challenges and obstacles they face. I have been a Principal for 16 years, but I could never have connected with them on this level. SBC took data about our bus runs and used specialized software to build models and present various scenarios and the related costs of different bell times. This was really important. That's expertise that we do not have internally. The graphics that they produced, relating to bus runs and efficiency metrics, were really great.

How is SBC to work with?

The SBC team is great to work with. They are very accommodating and very professional. They respond to our requests very quickly and are easy to work with. Our project was on a fast-track and they rose to that challenge, making sure all the participants in this process had all the follow-up information needed to buy-in to the new plan.

Can you share specifically how SBC helped you reach your goals?

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How has SBC helped make your operations more efficient? What kind of cost savings have you realized through working with SBC?

At this point, we have taken the first steps to operating more efficiently with a two-tier bell schedule for the 2019-2020 school year. The process will begin in August and our hope is to cut approximately 150 buses with a projected savings of \$6 to \$9 million over the next year.

How is the company aligned with the values that drive your operation?

SBC's recommendations were focused on the same goals of safety and efficiency that drive our organization. They laid out the strategic plan as transportation professionals and left the value judgments, regarding length of the bus rides and the impact on local educators, to us.

How has working with SBC made your job and/or work life easier?

We absolutely could not have facilitated these meetings with the local operators without SBC's level of expertise. Because they are so credible, attendees were less challenging, more willing to listen, and more open to the changes we have proposed.

What surprised or pleased you the most about working with SBC?

I was very pleased with the pace at which the SBC team moved from a rough plan in the summer of 2018, to setting up local meetings and completing them by the end of January 2019. They did exactly what we needed them to do.

Would you recommend SBC to others? What positive benefits would you emphasize?

Yes, I do recommend SBC to other education professionals charged with managing student transportation. I emphasize SBC's expertise in route analysis. We operate a \$50 million transportation operation, but could never do in-house what they have brought to our various projects.