Clearing Communication Hurdles with Parents

Barriers to clear communication, such as parents being less available, overwhelmed with information and not understanding the rules, can be overcome by meeting in person whenever possible, laying out specific rules and consequences, and providing access to real-time arrival information.

BY NICOLE SCHLOSSER, MANAGING EDITOR



ommunicating with parents to alleviate their concerns and ensure they have the information they need about the safe transportation of their child to school can be a lot of work, whether addressing concerns over who is driving the bus, complaints about the bus not being on time, the location of a stop or questions about a student behavior incident or safety rule.

School transportation operators constantly face the challenges of communicating policies and ensuring they are understood. To overcome these hurdles, it's important to understand the barriers to reaching out to and coming to an understanding with parents and ways to work through those barriers.

Parents' concerns

Years ago, parents may have had a more relaxed attitude toward their child's school transportation, but times have changed, says Paul Mori, New York School Bus Contractors Association (NYSBCA) board member and director of safety and training at Huntington Coach Corp.

These days, parents constantly ask about procedures and hiring practices, he adds, acknowledging that they are rightfully protective.

Pete Meslin, director of transportation for Newport-Mesa Unified School District in Costa Mesa, California, agrees, adding that parents' concern for their child's safety is one that transportation departments share.

"We are taking custody of the most precious thing in their lives," he adds. "If they're not 100% sure that we're safe, we've going to have issues."

Additionally, parents are concerned about efficient service and whether their child is being treated fairly.

Barriers to clear communication

Pupil transportation operators have found that even in this age of potentially immediate communication that can alleviate those concerns through texts, email, social media and websites, parents are overwhelmed with information and not as easy to reach as they once were. Many parents are working longer hours outside the home and are more preoccupied as a result. On top of that, they have their children enrolled in more extracurricular activities.

Because of their busy schedules, asking parents to take an action that they would not normally take may result in less compliance, Meslin says. However, communicating the purpose of the rules can increase compliance.

For example, Newport-Mesa requests that parents dropping off students in the morning arrive five minutes before the bus is scheduled to arrive, and in the afternoon, for students who are required to be met, that parents arrive five minutes before the bus is scheduled to arrive.

"That requires parents to set aside their life to do transportation-related stuff," Meslin points out. "It's for the safety of their child, but they have all sorts of things going on in their lives. If they understand why we created this rule, they're much more likely to comply."

The transportation department explains to parents up front that arriving late for pickups or drop-offs impedes safety and service for other students.

An obvious communication barrier is language differences. The community that Newport-Mesa serves is comprised of a variety of cultures; for many parents, English is a second or third language. Using jargon, long words and speaking too quickly could lose them, Meslin says.

The transportation department tries to partially solve that problem by hiring a very diverse driver workforce



New York School Bus Contractors Association members, Suffolk Transportation employees and the Suffolk Region PTA showed parents and district officials bus safety features and safety training requirements for school bus drivers. Shown far right is Hilma Hammer, regional director at Suffolk Transportation, discussing evacuation procedures.

from the community and bilingual staff in customer service positions.

For example, a few years ago the department was trying to discuss a situation with a parent from the Marshall Islands who did not speak English, and the child wasn't able to translate. They found that one of the bus drivers spoke the parent's language — Marshallese — and he was able to translate.

Newport-Mesa also publishes a set of guidelines in English and Spanish and makes it available online and in a flyer that staff distributes with every bus pass so parents can read it. District staff can also translate it into other languages for parents.

Meet in person, deal with problems up front

When distributing information in print and online isn't enough, taking the time to meet parents face-to-face and addressing their issues right away — when they are available — can make communication easier.

Particularly on the first day of school, when, as Mori puts it, "the phones are jammed," he finds dealing with issues with parents up front is better in the long run.

"I would rather have [the complaints] when they first get the route two weeks in advance than wait for when school [has been in session] for two weeks and have to change things at that point," he says.

Mori and his staff members prioritize getting back to the hundreds of parents who call at the beginning of the school year as soon as possible.

For example, he says that many parents call and express a bias against male drivers. If a parent gives him time, Mori will explain "everything from fingerprinting to [checking the] sexual predator registry and the Department of Criminal Justice Services and FBI," he says. "Then, they're very confident in the driver and attendant selections."

Also, parents often feel that it takes too long for their child to get to and from school.

"They don't see how complex it is and how many people this affects," Mori says. "They see things through the lens of their child or school, when a district is seeing multiple schools and special needs. We show them routing maps, and generally that works."

Get face time through events

Since meeting one-on-one isn't always possible to discuss general concerns, holding events that focus on explaining school bus procedures is a good way to keep parents informed and alleviate their fears.

Last March, NYSBCA members, Suffolk Transportation employees and the Suffolk Region PTA shared

COMMUNICATION

with parents and district officials bus safety features and safety training requirements for school bus drivers in an event at Suffolk's training center in Bay Shore, New York.

School board members and PTA members were taken through five separate school bus stations, each focusing on a different aspect of safe pupil transportation.

Event organizers showed attendees school buses and vans, how the Child Check-Mate system works, aspects of the physical performance testing and the steps it takes to become a school and students, says Kim Crabtree, director of transportation at Greater Albany Public Schools.

The transition will change drop-offs for kindergartners from nearly door-to-door service to group stops, since they will now be on the buses in the afternoon, ending their school day with the other elementary school students. Because of that, transportation department staff members will talk with parents and students about safely waiting at a stop, when and where the bus will drop off students, and that for the first two weeks, students will have lanyards

seconds with a bus' location on a map and its estimated arrival time, as well as instantaneous real-time alerts from the school district on delays or bus maintenance issues.

The app can be activated any day of the year, not just right before school starts, with some school districts scheduling October, November and January releases, Gallagher adds.

Sharing the information with parents not only gives them peace of mind but the convenience of being able to plan, Gallagher says. "We found that parents don't necessarily mind if the bus is five



Greater Albany Public Schools transportation staff talk to parents at events as Oregon schools start switching from half-day to full-day kindergarten. Shown here are a student and a driver trainer at an event held over the summer that let students and parents see the school bus.

bus driver or monitor. They also explained the reasons for some safety practices, such as why bus drivers stop 10 feet away from the stop.

"When we explain [procedures] and show them some of the technology we use to enhance safety, they're fascinated," Mori says.

Greater Albany Public Schools is getting in front of parents at events to transition as smoothly as possible as Oregon schools start switching from half-day to full-day kindergarten, a requirement passed by state legislators in 2011.

After communicating the change through the school newsletter, the transportation department offered to visit elementary schools on their "kindergarten day" — when the students and parents meet the teachers — with handouts on bus safety rules and coloring books, and to talk with parents

with their stop location and assistance from bus monitors.

"The first two weeks are pretty hands-on, but parents of kindergartners don't necessarily know we're doing that," Crabtree says.

Provide access to data

Many apps are now available from companies such as Seon, Synovia Solutions, Zonar and SafeStop to help school transportation providers with GPS on their buses keep parents in the loop on buses running late, route changes and other updates.

"We can use GPS data that's already [available], analyze it in real time and give parents information that beforehand had only been available to transportation professionals," says Patrick Gallagher, director of sales for SafeStop Inc.

The SafeStop app updates every 30



Apps, including SafeStop, help school transportation providers with GPS on their buses keep parents in the loop on buses running late, route changes and other updates, alleviating concerns and cutting down on phone calls.

minutes late; they just want to know so they can plan around it."

Campbell Hall in North Hollywood, California, a school that contracts its bus service with Mission School Transportation, launched the SafeStop app in January and immediately saw the calls from parents about bus arrival times drop significantly, says Katie Jesensky, scheduling and services manager at the school.

Now, calls about bus locations and times usually only come from parents who have not downloaded the app. Jesensky re-sends them information on how to download and use it. She also sends an email to every student's parents about bus and route changes just in case they are not using the app.

Present clear ground rules

In 2014, Danville (Va.) Public Schools launched a new conduct policy for its

school bus riders to better inform and involve parents, says Michael Adkins, director of transportation services at the district.

The conduct policy includes bus behavior expectations, a way to help administrators deal with behavior issues and consequences, and an agreement between schools and the parents and students to ensure understanding of expectations. It went into effect for the 2014-15 school year.

The policy also includes a redemption clause, which gives parents a way to interact with their child's school principal and administrators to develop a strategy to modify the behavior of a child who breaks a rule and may face a period of time off the bus.

Some parents were also involved, as stakeholders, in helping to develop the policy, along with school bus drivers, teachers, and school administrators and board members.

The policy lists, in simple language, specific infractions and outlines possi-

ble consequences. It is sent to parents as part of the student code of conduct. All parents and students are required to sign an agreement that they read and understand the policy and will abide by it.

"The idea is to change behavior characteristics," Adkins explains. "We know punitive alone doesn't work, so we're trying to get parental involvement. We feel [if we] offer parents an opportunity to talk with the principal and work with their children, we'll have a much better chance of changing that [behavior]."

Adkins also made sure the policy is consistently and fairly applied across the district, which tends to have a mobile population.

Overall, most parents are happy with the policy and understand that it's a safety issue, he says.

The district tracked data, comparing the number of referrals issued from the transportation office in the 2013-14 school year to that of the 2014-15 school year, with the conduct policy in place. Elementary schools had about a 20% drop in the number of referrals issued from the transportation office, and middle schools, high schools and specialty schools saw a dip of about 10%, Adkins says.

Repetition is key

Of course, we all need refreshers from time to time, as Kristi Voelker, safety director for Kobussen Buses Ltd., notes.

Kobussen staff will talk with parents at student registration and hand out bus expectations — which will also be posted in every bus — and a reminder about stopping for a school bus with red lights on, danger zones and school zone speed limits.

"Repetition will be the key," she says. "We need to keep this information in front of students and parents as much as possible throughout the entire school year."

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