

Breaking Barriers

Long seen as far-fetched, coordination efforts between public and school transportation yields great benefits. Are more on the way?

by Sheldon Crum and Scott Bogren

Imagine a bus full of people; some going to work, others going to a local senior center while others are going to junior high school. Next, imagine all these people riding in a bright yellow bus. Hard to picture?

For about 180 days each year our nation's largest publicly supported vehicle fleet rolls onto the streets each weekday morning and afternoon. America's school bus fleet covers nearly every area within our cities, traverses our suburban communities and reaches out to the remotest portions of rural America.

According to School Bus Fleet magazine, there are about 393,000 school buses in the U.S. According to CTAA's Status Report on Public Transportation in Rural America 1994 and the Federal Transit Administration's National Transit Summaries and Trends Report, there are 98,000 rural and urban public transportation vehicles in operation. The school vehicle fleet outnumbers the nation's public transit vehicle fleet by four to one.

In the past decade, public transportation has seen a significant surge in coordination efforts. Communities are looking to bring human services and public transportation efforts under one umbrella.

School and public transportation seem, in theory, to be a perfect match for coordination. Rarely, however, have school districts offered to put their considerable transportation resources into the coordination mix.

But it has been done. Several communities have successfully integrated these two public-supported services, providing adaptable models for other areas.

It's Worked for Years

Altoona, Pennsylvania, home of the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) bus testing facility, has successfully integrated its school pupil and general public transit programs.

Pupil transportation is operated by the Altoona Metro Transit Authority (AMTRAN), a small-urban transit agency providing general public fixed-route service. Through an arrangement between AMTRAN, the Altoona Area School District and local private parochial schools, the authority operates 15 routes which carry students and others in the morning and afternoon. This arrangement has been in place for 28 years!

"It's a historical situation here in Altoona, the school district wasn't providing the service," says AMTRAN General Manager Phil Fry. "If we tried to jump in and do it now, it might not be so acceptable."

In Altoona, only secondary and high school students are transported for the school district, although AMTRAN provides transportation for elementary parochial school students. The school district uses yellow school buses to transport public elementary students.

AMTRAN Executive Director Phil Fry, expressed some reservation about transporting elementary students, "I believe that elementary students should be transported in vehicles with flashing lights and other special features. Junior and senior high students have a certain amount of personal responsibility that elementary students lack."

The unique arrangement between the school district and AMTRAN developed out of necessity. Beginning in the late 1960s, public schools were required by federal law to provide access for students. Since AMTRAN was already providing the transit for school children, the school district simply opted to formalize the service.

Fry also acknowledges that AMTRAN's school transportation is, in part, political.

"The school district is doing its part to make sure public transportation and the transit authority stay in Altoona," says Fry.

AMTRAN delivers this coordinated service using regular transit-style coaches. Each of the 15 school routes is open to all persons and timetables are published. Everyone pays a fare except certain students in the district who are eligible for free passes.

"We develop routes specifically for school transportation, so the kids don't have to go far," says Fry. "Though all our routes are open to the general public, the school routes are almost 100 percent children."

The agency has overcome any negative perceptions about safety through in-depth and regular training for its staff. AMTRAN provides special driver training upon hire with a refresher course for all drivers prior to the start of each school year.

The school district also provides two types of training for students; one for students who ride school buses and the other for pupils who ride AMTRAN's public transit system. For example, the public transit student training program teaches students to not cross in front of the city bus.

"Safety has not been a question," says Fry. "My gut reaction is that our accident statistics compare well with the school district's."

A school district spokesperson says, "The current arrangement is very satisfactory and the training provided to drivers is also very satisfactory. Only about six parental complaints per year are received and there have never been any serious accidents or incidents."

There has been little initiative to prioritize school transportation in Altoona. The school district feels it can't provide the service any more economically and has been against providing a duplicative service.

Providing transportation for school children has an added bonus: it builds AMTRAN's positive community image. More than 1,400 students use the system every day and they grow up familiar with public transit and AMTRAN.

Recent market research by the agency found that almost 90 percent of non-transit users in Altoona know of AMTRAN by name. Fry attributes this high recognition rate, in large part, to the school transportation system and its service to both parents and students. Ironically, only 75 percent of AMTRAN's riders knew the agency by name.

For 28 years, this public transit provider has successfully provided safe, dependable and cost-efficient transportation for the general public including school students.

Pooling Students

The school pupil and public transit coordination program in Nashville, Tennessee, differs from Altoona. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) has recently started a bus pool program which targets students as well as the general public. Still in its infancy, six bus pools serving nine neighborhoods have been formed using regular public transit vehicles. The bus pools target students attending magnet schools, which attract pupils from across the Nashville region. They give students a transportation option they wouldn't otherwise have because regular school bus service is not offered to magnet schools.

"Parents came to the MTA complaining that they couldn't always drive their children to school," says MTA Interim Operations Director John Cannon. "We decided to work with parents to design routes."

The magnet school phenomena illustrates a potential benefit public transit operators offer students and their parents. Magnet schools draw from an entire region as opposed to the traditional neighborhood model. School transportation

providers, however, have often been limited to bringing children from a single region to a single school. Magnet school setups, which are becoming increasingly popular, throw a wrench into single neighborhood service.

The Nashville program relies upon parental involvement through their willingness to help design the routes and secure the required number of riders. To establish a bus pool, the MTA requires a minimum of 48 passengers and a fare charge of \$0.75. This enables the MTA to provide the service and fully recover its operating costs. Of course, the routes are also open to the general public.

The parental involvement in the program is pivotal to its success. Groups of interested parents hold their own meetings, design the routes and help the MTA deal with disciplinary problems should they arise. The MTA also communicates regularly with the magnet schools' principals.

"So far, the bus pools have been a real success," says Cannon. "The parents and the schools have been real supportive."

MTA officials are also starting to see a long-term benefit for the agency as children become conditioned to using public transportation services.

"It (the bus pool) exposes the kids to transit at an early age and gets them used to riding with adults (the routes are open to anyone) and paying fares," says Cannon.

Parents, too, see great advantages for their children in becoming acclimated to using public transit. Many parents told MTA officials that their kids can now get around town better than they can. The benefits of the bus pools for the MTA will grow every year.

"It opens up a whole new world of mobility options for the students," says Cannon.

Sturdy Barriers

A logical question ensues: If coordinating public and school transportation has been so successful in the preceding localities, why is it not more widespread? The answers to this question go to the root of the coordination debate.

Federal regulations certainly inhibit coordination efforts. There are a series of strict federal laws governing the transportation of students by schools.

According to Donald Tudor of the South Carolina Department of Education, the Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards have 10 additional regulations for school vehicles than for buses (e.g. rollover cages, emergency exits, passenger seating and crash protection, etc.). These requirements, however, only apply to schools transporting students for educational purposes and do not apply to pupils who are

transported by public transportation operators charging a fare. Additional state laws also govern pupil transportation.

Money and control issues also play a prominent role in separating school and public transportation. In 1993, according to School Transportation News, funding for school transportation topped \$9.8 billion. For comparison, in 1995 the Department of Transportation and Department of Health and Human Services combined spent just more than \$6 billion on transportation. With that much money at stake, school transportation providers will not agree to coordination without a struggle.

Safety is another very real concern. Terry Van Der AA, of Vancom Transportation in Villa Park, Ill., says his company's data on safety indicates that incidents on paratransit vehicles are double that of school buses. He asserts that such figures are standard across the industry. Vancom operates both school and public transit services.

The National School Transportation Association (NSTA) asserts that there are no reasons to coordinate public and school transportation. In terms of safety, the association cites four key issues: (1) school transportation is currently designed for students; (2) door-to-door routing; (3) more safely built vehicles; and (4) specially trained drivers.

Financially, NSTA argues that the cost-savings of coordination are negligible, pointing to an unnamed study which shows transit buses to cost 48 cents per mile to operate while school buses run at 15 cents per mile. Additionally, NSTA points to increased liability issues and the law to make its case.

Times Demand Innovation

Clearly, there are powerful groups mustering considerable resources to fight coordinating public and school transportation. The collective strength of these organizations will indeed prove a sturdy barrier. But the current environment demands innovation.

Though anecdotal, the experiences of Altoona and Nashville seem to refute many of the school transportation industry's assertions about compromised safety and increased costs.

With the recent cutbacks in federal transit funding and the prospects for additional cuts, community transportation providers, human services agencies, and schools throughout America will need to explore old and new solutions to mobility. For some communities, coordinating school and public transportation may be the answer.