

Bus service wrestles with drop-off chaos

Written by MARK JAEGER

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Northern Ozaukee School Board balks at request to establish policy limiting route changes for families

Northern Ozaukee School Board members told representatives of Riteway School Bus Service they are reluctant to put tight restrictions on where students are picked up and dropped off by bus drivers.

Citing the challenge of keeping track of frequently altered routing requests from the parents of about 300 young bus riders, Riteway officials initially asked that the district to adopt a policy allowing families only a single stop for school bus rides.

The problem, according to company officials, is that some parents ask that their children be dropped off at different locations depending on the day of the week.

The matter is further complicated when parents call with last-minute changes, such as leaving a child at a grandparent's house because of a late work schedule change.

"We have noticed an increase in the requests to change locations on a weekly or daily basis," said Colleen McKay, Riteway's regional operations manager.

"The probability of a student being placed on the wrong bus at school or dropped off at the wrong location increases when multiple locations are involved. This is not a safe practice for the child."

The company asked that a single location be identified for the pick-up and drop-off of each child using the bus service.

The bus company's current policy requires three days notice when a route change is requested.

Ozaukee Elementary School Principal Cindy Dallman said such a policy would eliminate the late calls schedule changes coming into the school office.

"We get phone calls coming in at 3:45 (p.m.), saying my child is supposed to be dropped off at day care or grandma's house tonight," Dallman said.

Board member Stacie Stark said she understands the difficulty schedule changes can pose, but said accommodating parent requests is part of the job.

"It is a question of customer service to parents," Stark said. "I doubt parents are making these changes willy-nilly. They make the changes because they have to."

Supt. Bill Harbron said the district needs to focus on any steps that can be taken to keep students safe.

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“There has been a whole shift in culture, with a greater responsibility to ensure that children are dealt with safely. We can’t put the safety of children in jeopardy,” Harbron said.

Board President Paul Krause said children who split their time between multiple homes is increasingly common, creating the need for flexibility in increasing frequency.

“I support the sentiment, but implementing it is going to be a bear,” Krause said.

Board member Kendall Thistle said limiting students to a single drop-off site might cause even more problems.

“By supporting this we may actually be forcing the bus company to leave the child at an empty home,” Thistle said.

Ultimately, the board told Riteway to stop short of implementing the single drop-off policy. Instead, parents will be asked to minimize drop-off options when making arrangements with the bus company.