

District poised to revamp busing program

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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School Board takes aim at changes in response to financial concerns, desire to make routes more efficient

Spurred by a looming budget deficit and a desire to make student transportation more efficient, the Grafton School Board on Monday agreed to explore ways to revamp its busing program.

Board members asked Supt. Mel Lightner to prepare new busing options — including reconfiguring attendance areas, consolidating routes and changing school start and end times — after a 90-minute presentation that included input from administrators, bus company officials, parents and other residents.

During the presentation, Lightner said the changes are driven by needs to reduce students' riding times and pare costs.

“We will have tough budget choices, so we're looking for more efficient ways to do things,” he told more than 50 audience members.

Because the school district faces a preliminary budget deficit of \$850,000 for the 2014-15 year, cutting expenses is imperative, Lightner said.

The district currently spends \$650,000 per year on student busing that provides 24 morning routes and 25 afternoon routes. Included in the cost are several dozen elementary students shuttled between schools because they attend schools outside their attendance areas.

Under state law, school districts are required to provide transportation for students who live two miles or more from the nearest public or private school they are eligible to attend as well as for students closer to schools who live in hazardous areas, such as high-traffic zones.

Grafton's transportation policy provides busing for all students in kindergarten through fifth grade who live more than one mile from school.

In addition, the district has allowed more than 160 students to ride buses even though they live within walking distance and has buses pick up students at day-care facilities within walk areas, Lightner said.

“This means that there are extra students on the bus and extra stops for routes, adding to time on the bus for students and costs to the district,” he said.

Transportation inefficiencies have forced some students to spend more than an hour on buses before they reach school, sparking complaints from parents.

In response to a School Board directive in September, Lightner and Business Services Director Kristin Kollath met with Go Riteway, which provides Grafton's bus service, to upgrade the transportation system.

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Lightner's recommendations include:

- Eliminate busing for students in walk areas and at day-care facilities.
- Use a "double run" routing system that would first transport middle and high school students and then use the same buses to transport elementary students.
- Reconfigure attendance areas to balance the numbers of elementary students living in areas for Woodview, Kennedy and Grafton Elementary Schools.

The change would pare the Grafton Elementary area and expand the Woodview and Kennedy areas. Each area would then have about 300 students.

- Establish walk limits to bus stops of a quarter-mile for elementary students and a half-mile for middle and high school students.
- Instruct Go Riteway to use routes that limit bus rides to 45 minutes.
- Change the start and end times of school days to accommodate bus runs.

Grafton High School would be virtually unchanged, with a 7:30 a.m. start and 2:40 end, compared 7:29 a.m. and 2:41 p.m. now.

John Long Middle School would change from its 8:05 a.m. to 3:16 p.m. schedule to 7:40 a.m. to 2:50 p.m.

All elementary schools would change their 8 a.m. to 2:40 p.m. schedules to 8:40 a.m. to 3:50 p.m. The change would add 30 minutes to the school day.

Lightner said the district is working with the YMCA to provide morning and afternoon day care at schools where parents would have to drop off or keep students outside regular hours.

The changes, Lightner said, would allow the district to cut 24 morning routes to 18, resulting in a significant cost saving.

"Our goal is to save more than \$100,000, but we can't guarantee it," he said.

Although reconfigured attendance areas are designed to balance student enrollment, students will not be required to change schools they currently attend, Lightner told the audience.

However, the requirement would be in effect for new students, including those enrolling in the district's 4-year-old kindergarten program that starts this fall.

"This isn't a perfect science. It's more of a jigsaw puzzle, but we're trying to be as fair as possible," Lightner said.

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Several parents who spoke at Monday's meeting said they support transportation changes, especially to reduce bus times for students. However, a number questioned delaying the starting time for elementary schools.

"Starting at 8:40 a.m. is too late. Kids that age are already up for two or three hours," one parent said.

Board member Carrie Wall, who has children attending elementary school, also voiced concern about the proposed time change.

"I support having more time at school, but I can't picture my 5 or 6-year-old doing an after-school activity until 5 p.m.," Wall said.

Other parents said they want to see how much transportation time the route changes will trim and exactly how much money the district will save before endorsing any new plans.

The board took no action on the recommendations, instead asking Lightner to continue to fine-tune the proposals.

Lightner agreed, saying he and other officials will continue to work out details in the next few weeks.

"I think we can agree that whatever we change will be an improvement over what we currently have," he said.

Because families are required to register their children for kindergarten in February, Lightner asked the board to approve reconfigured attendance areas at its Monday, Jan. 27, meeting.