

## **4. ANALYSIS OF GROTON DUNSTABLE REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT TRANSPORTATION SERVICES**

The analysis of the Groton Dunstable's transportation services is designed to examine the efficiency and appropriateness of the current system while considering alternative ways of providing the same services. Included in this analysis is the current routing, loading and scheduling of the current operation. Dee Bus Service is the contractor for regular bus routes and Van Pool is the contractor for special needs. We have reviewed the current contract and looked at its appropriateness, making recommendations on how the contract should be modified prior to the next bid.

GDRSD's special needs transportation is handled separately from the regular school transportation by the Pupil Personnel Services Director. We have reviewed how this transportation is provided, and will make recommendations on improving the operation.

Finally we will consider alternative methods of providing both forms of transportation. Should GDRSD purchase busses and operate their own system? Should they have the contractor have a larger role in administering the service? Can they save by collaborating with other districts through the Valley collaborative or other resources?

### **1. Staff**

GDRSD does not employ any staff for transportation other than administrative assistants who have some transportation duties.

### **Findings**

Regular transportation is managed by the Director of Business and Finance with assistance from a school administrative assistant. Special needs transportation is managed by the Pupil Personnel Services director and her administrative assistant with some assistance from the business office. Dee and Van Pool have their own management teams that run the daily operations of the transportation services.

The District works with Dee to design routes and publish a bus schedule for the school year.

All other staff, for regular busses is employed by Dee Bus, the contractor. This includes a dispatcher, based in Pepperell but dedicated to GDRSD, and approximately 21 regular and substitute bus drivers. Dee has a major facility in Shirley. The dispatcher takes and resolves complaints from GDRSD and their parents. The Shirley office provides shared staff including the president, general manager, and safety officer. The safety officer trains drivers, enforces safety procedures and investigates accidents. Shirley also houses a maintenance facility.

Special Needs vans are driven by Van Pool employees.

## **Recommendation**

This arrangement seems appropriate and typical. We have no recommendations.

## **2. Routing, Scheduling, Loading**

The best way to reduce bussing costs is to reduce the number of busses needed. The best way to do that is through efficient routing, scheduling and loading of busses. We have reviewed the GDRSD bus operation and interviewed the staff in order to assess this efficiency.

## **Findings**

GDRSD operates a three tier bus system (three routes per bus morning and afternoon) with some single and double tier busses. High School students ride busses arriving at the school at approximately 7:30. Busses arrive at the Middle School at around 8:10. Busses arrive at the two elementary schools at around 9:00.

The district was unable to provide us with bus counts per bus route or per school. In their FY16 EOY report the district reported busing 2,372 students, virtually 100% of the student body. The Director of Business and Finance reported that he polled the principals, and found an estimated total of 900 to 1200 students bussed. As shown in Appendix 4.1 if the district is transporting 100% of its students, the busses are approximately 70% full on average. The elementary busses are only 60% full. If the total bussed is 1,200, the high figure in the survey, then the busses are less than 41% full.

## **Recommendation**

Given the current school schedule, the routing and scheduling seems reasonably efficient. We recommend that Director of Business and Finance continue to be involved in the scheduling of busses. Our experience is that when bus companies do the scheduling they often solve problems by adding busses at a cost to the school district.

However, the statistics indicate that busses may be significantly under loaded. The District needs to collect actual bus counts for each bus on at least three random days and determine the actual loads. There are two possible explanations.

1. Groton and Dunstable cover over 50 square miles. The task of scheduling these students efficiently is a very difficult. It may not be possible to load busses to capacity and stay within the time schedule.
2. Some districts schedule a bus seat for every eligible rider, even though they know they are not riding. This is neither necessary nor required by any state regulation. It is particularly not necessary at the high school. If GDRSD is using this method, they may be spending an exorbitant amount for busses that are not needed.

### **3. Contractual Concerns**

One of the best ways to reduce costs is to have a clear contract that allows bidders to know what their responsibilities are and for what they will get paid extra. Unclear or unnecessary language in a contract will lead bidders to increase their bid to cover the possible financial impact of this language. It can also lead to potential bidders not bidding, leading to lack of competition.

#### **Findings**

We have performed a review of the GDRSD contract and bid specifications. We find that it is generally a good document but has some provisions that could lead a contractor to increase their bid. Of particular concern to us are the following:

- The listing of actual busses to be used in the future contract gives the incumbent bidder an unfair advantage. A new bidder would not necessarily have the busses they intend to use for the contract. The incumbent bidder would have those busses.
- The per bus cost appears to be reasonable compared to the current market. See Appendix 4.2.
- We are concerned that Dee's athletic and charter rates are escalating by over 10 % per year, while the daily bus rate is only rising by about 4% per year.

We note that the contract calls for the busses to be garaged in Groton or Dunstable, but the busses are actually parked in Pepperell.

#### **Recommendations**

We recommend that the bid specifications be reviewed before each rebid with emphasis on making all language clear, eliminating unnecessary and/or confusing language and ensuring compliance with M.G.L. Chapter 30B.

We recommend that the method for determining the low bidder be clearly stated as required by M.G.L. Ch. 30B with an illustration of the calculation involved.

The School Committee should determine whether the lettering of busses is necessary. It is an added cost and an advantage for the incumbent.

We recommend that the district review language in the contract that reiterates existing laws, regulations and RMV requirements of school busses. If unnecessary language is not in the contract it may make the contract clearer to prospective bidders.

We recommend that rather than requiring a list of actual busses to be used for the contract, that bidders should provide evidence that they can provide the necessary busses. It is unreasonable to expect prospective bidders to own 21 busses prior to having a contract for them. The current

requirement gives the incumbent contractor an unfair advantage. The successful bidder should be required to provide an actual list by August 1 of the contract year.

## **5. Alternative Transportation Options**

There are essentially three models for operating school busses:

- 1) A school district can own (or lease) and operate its own busses.
- 2) A district can own (or lease) its own busses and hire a company such as Dee Bus to operate the busses. Boston did this for many years.
- 3) The district can hire a company such as Dee to own and operate its busses.

GDRSD uses method 3.

### **Findings**

In the school year 2015-2016 Dee operated 20 busses in the morning and at afternoon dismissal. According to the GDRSD End of Year Pupil and Financial Report, they expended \$1,244,692 for regular transportation. This works out to about \$ 345 per vehicle per day.

GDRSD does not have a facility that could service school busses.

A new school bus costs in the area of \$90,000. If GDRSD were to buy its own busses they would need to buy 20 along with used busses for spares. Thus GDRSD would need to purchase or lease around \$2 million worth of busses.

### **Recommendation**

The average bus cost of \$334 per bus per day is reasonable in today's market for a three tier system. Our most recent study of bus rates yielded a range of \$305 to \$379.50. See Appendix 4.02. We would hope that an improved bid specification would yield more competition in the future.

We would not recommend that GDRSD go into the business of owning and operating its own busses until such time as they can service them themselves. Our recent study in Beverly, MA indicated that it is possible to save money operating your own busses if you do not have to pay benefits to drivers. Therefore, if GDRSD feels they can accomplish the benefits savings and finance 20 busses they could study this possibility as part of a plan to build a maintenance garage.

## **6. Special Needs Transportation**

Special Needs transportation is managed jointly by the Pupil Services Department and the business office. Special needs transportation consists of providing the type of transportation mandated in a special needs student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The transportation

may be as simple as regular school bus, or can be by small vans or sedans up to 8 passenger (7D vehicles), larger 16-20 passenger mini-busses or wheel chair lift vehicles. The wheel chair vehicles can be any size. The transportation can be to the students regular school, a special program in the District or an out-of-district program provided by another public school, an educational collaborative or a private special needs approved program.

### **Findings**

In school year 2018, special needs transportation is being provided by Van Pool under a recent bid. The bid is organized so that all routes are awarded to one bidder.

The District relies on the contractor to determine if ride sharing with another district is feasible for out-of-district transportation.

### **Recommendations**

We recommend that the Special Education Department assure that their students are being properly transported under their IEP. However, we recommend that the business office should be the primary monitor of the operation of the services.

It should be noted that it has been determined that special needs transportation does not need to be formally bid under Chapter 30B. Given the flexibility needed in this type of transportation, we suggest using a formal quotation system that allows individual routes to be awarded to different companies. This also allows for changes when the district needs to add or delete students.

We strongly feel than out-of-district transportation should be managed by a regional collaborative so that efficient trips can be arranged across several towns. Lower Pioneer Valley and other educational collaboratives have demonstrated substantial savings using this method. GDRSD should reference DESE's study of collaboration.

We note that Merrimack bid unsuccessfully on the current contract. Outside of a formal bid situation, GDRSD may be able to negotiate a favorable contract with Merrimack or CASE.

**Bus Counts****Appendix 4.1**

<b>Bus Loading</b>	<b># of bus routes</b>	<b>Number of students</b>	<b>Average students per bus</b>	<b>Bus capacity</b>	<b>% load</b>	<b>Survey Estimated Students</b>	<b>Average students per bus</b>	<b>Average students per bus</b>
GDRHS	19	812	42.7	51	0.84	NA	NA	NA
GDRMS	20	791	39.6	51	0.78	NA	NA	NA
Florence Roche	11	476	43.3	77	0.56	NA	NA	NA
Swallow Union	6	280	46.7	77	0.61	NA	NA	NA
Totals	56	2359	42.1	na	0.70	1200	21.4	< 41%

**Current Bus Rates Per Day**

<b>Regular Day (AM &amp; PM)</b>	
<b>District Name</b>	
<b>Cost per Day per Bus</b>	
Groton -Dunstable	\$ 334.00
Easton	\$ 379.50
Chelmsford	\$ 305.00
Grafton	\$ 354.00
Mansfield	\$ 360.00
Marshfield	\$ 324.00
Walpole	\$ 360.00
Wilmington	\$ 326.00