



SOMERS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

TRANSPORTATION REVIEW

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PREPARED BY:

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Background and Disclaimers

In December of 2019, the Somers Central School District requested Altaris Consulting Group, LLC, to conduct a review of transportation policies. This request was made as a result of an incident of a bus driver being arrested for driving a bus while intoxicated. The consultants initiated off-site document reviews as well as on-site interviews of select district and contractor employees. This process should not be interpreted as an investigation. Human resources are also beyond the scope of this review and not a function of our firm. In addition, students and parents were not interviewed as part of the policy and procedure review.

This report is designed to address opportunities for improvement in transportation policies, procedures, and technology. This report reflects the findings, observations, and recommendations of the consultant team. Every fact can change a recommendation, and the recommendations herein are based on facts collected within the time and parameters noted in this report. The client has acknowledged that the consultants' services and reports are not offered as legal advice, that the client is responsible for seeking legal and administrative advice before implementing any measures or programs referenced in the consultants' reports, and that school safety involves human behavior and, therefore, cannot be an exact science.

While the consultants agreed to perform the services in a professional and competent manner, the consultants do not assume, and hereby specifically disclaim, any and all liability to any person or entity with respect to claims for losses or damage alleged to have been caused by the client's implementation of recommendations resulting from the items contained in this report. This report, as a school safety document, may be exempt from public records disclosure under state law. The school may wish to investigate this option further in the interests of protecting details related to security vulnerabilities and areas for pending improvements.

Any school administrator who wishes to discuss this assessment may do so by contacting John LaPlaca, CEO at jlaplaca@altarisgroup.com or 866-960-8739, Ext. 703.

Transportation Overview

Somers School District currently contracts with Royal Coach Lines for bus transportation services. Currently, Royal Coach Lines supplies the Somers Central School District with 76 vehicles and 60 drivers as follows:

- 37 full-size buses
- 39 vans
- 60 NYS 19-A certified drivers

Transportation is managed by the vendor at a bus compound within the Town of Somers that is owned by the district and leased to Royal Coach Lines. The facility provides dispatch, bus storage and other support services for the Somers operations.

The district utilizes a Director of Transportation to oversee this function for the district. At the time of this review, the Director of Transportation, Mr. Joseph Bernardi, also serves as the district's Chief Emergency Officer.

Incident Overview

On December 9th, 2019, a parent reported to the district's transportation office that "something was wrong" with the driver of a bus. The bus was returning students home from the Somers Intermediate School. The driver of the vehicle was later arrested for driving while intoxicated by the New York State Police. The incident is currently being investigated internally by the district's legal firm. In addition, the arrest is being prosecuted by the Westchester County District Attorney's office.

A review of the events subsequent to this notification revealed the following opportunities for improvement related to this incident that should be added as documented district procedures:

Notification to 911

The person receiving a report of suspicion that a student, passenger, or driver on any school bus is in danger, sick, or at risk of harm should immediately report the incident to 911 and the on-site School Resource Officer if available. Police can respond expeditiously to both locate the vehicle in question, investigate the nature of the erratic operation and provide the necessary law enforcement and/or medical interventions as needed.

In addition to notification of emergency responders, the incident should be reported immediately to the bus dispatcher and the Director of Transportation (or his/her designee) and District Administration. Both the dispatcher and the Director of Transportation should verify that police have been contacted and by whom. If there is any ambiguity of police notification, the person should contact 911 to verify police are responding.

The bus driver should be contacted immediately via radio and instructed to:

1. provide the current location of the bus
2. cease operation of the vehicle by pulling off the roadway in a safe location and providing this location if different from above
3. the transportation dispatcher should contact/remain on the line with 911 to provide real-time location information and any other relevant information

Police should be notified even if contact is made with the driver who denies any issue. While representatives from the district and the contractor should also respond to the scene to assist with the safe transfer of students, this should be secondary to police notification and should not delay emergency response.

Scene Management

A bus driver who is alleged to have been operating in an unusual manner, has the appearance of an altered medical state or appears to be suffering from another medical condition, should be evaluated at the scene by police and emergency medical services (EMS) as needed. Drivers should not be removed from the scene until they have been cleared to do so by emergency responders.

Students and any other passengers on the school bus should be immediately evaluated by district personnel to verify there are no injuries, which require the attention of EMS and/or the school nurse. Special consideration should be given to the potential for mental trauma that may be experienced by passengers as was apparent in the December 9th incident. When possible, mental trauma is identified, a formal parent reunification process should be initiated, whereby students are reunified one-on-one with parents. Students suffering from mental trauma should not be permitted to continue to their destination on their bus without close supervision. Specific plans for mental health intervention and follow up should be coordinated through the district's mental health team.

Communications

Prompt communication with parents and guardians in a critical incident is essential. Information should be relayed from the scene to central administration and parents updated promptly with information including:

- the nature of the incident
- notification of any delays in transportation
- arrangement for parent reunification (if applicable)
- anticipated time of future updates

While not the focus of this policy review, our firm reviewed provided paperwork documenting a bus accident that occurred on October 5th, 2018 involving the same driver as the December 9th, 2019 incident. The procedure followed in this incident included the following:

- Police responded to the scene to investigate and completed a NYS MV-104A Police Accident Report form. There is no indication on the form of operator impairment.
- A U.S. DOT Alcohol Testing Form was completed by Robert Damico of the district bus contractor, Royal Coach Lines.
- A “DOT Drug Screen” form was completed by D.R.S. Medical Review Service.

Many of the improvement opportunities identified in relation to the December 9th, 2019 incident also would apply to this 2018 incident as well.

Transportation Procedures

Driver Observation

Transportation Office

- Our review with representatives from Royal Coach revealed that greater interaction with drivers when obtaining their vehicle keys should be considered. The physical issuance of vehicle keys by the dispatcher or his/her designee will afford a greater opportunity for driver observation. Currently, there is limited interaction between drivers and the bus dispatcher when drivers are obtaining their keys.
- Training of personnel in the identification of signs of impairment should be considered. Training may be provided by law enforcement or an approved transportation training vendor.

School Dismissal

- Both Primrose and Somers Intermediate School have initiated a procedure where “School Dismissal Manager” sheets for each bus are presented to each bus driver. This initiative was to allow for direct contact between school personnel (*that currently receive a stipend for bus duty*) and each driver. There is an ongoing discussion on acceptable roles for district personnel and School Resource Officers for this function. There are both ongoing union issues as well as contractual limitations with law enforcement that must be considered.
- Training for non-law enforcement personnel in the identification of signs of impairment should be considered. Training may be provided by law enforcement or an approved transportation training vendor.

Student Accountability

Our review of student accountability on school buses revealed no significant deviations from the industry standard. In addition, our firm surveyed 10 area districts who all reported similar procedures related to student accountability. While younger students are assisted in boarding the correct bus, there

is no full-proof system in place amongst districts to verify boarding and disembarking of students from the bus, particularly when substitute drivers are utilized.

There are several technology platforms that exist that the district could evaluate to enhance student accountability. An all-in-one platform such as **Transportant** provides a real-time stop-by-stop visual display for drivers to reconcile students boarding and disembarking. A review revealed no area districts that are currently using this platform.

Location Tracking

Royal Coach reported “passive” GPS systems installed on each bus used in the Somers operation. Passive GPS does not provide real-time monitoring of bus location but rather a downloadable history that may be used for investigative purposes.

The district may wish to consider “active GPS” that would allow for real-time monitoring of bus locations as well as other information such as vehicle speed. The availability of active GPS would have been of benefit in locating the bus involved in the December 9th incident.

There are several technology platforms that exist that the district could evaluate to provide active GPS monitoring. An all-in-one platform such as Transportant provides real-time access for dispatchers and district administrators. In addition, the platform has the availability of a smartphone application that alerts parents when the bus is a user-defined distance and time from the bus stop.

Surveillance Cameras

Royal Coach reported “passive” cameras systems installed on each bus used in the Somers operation. Passive cameras do not provide real-time monitoring of a bus but rather a downloadable recording that may be used for investigative purposes.

The district may wish to consider active surveillance cameras that would allow for real-time monitoring of both the bus interior and exterior. The availability of real-time surveillance cameras would have been of benefit in evaluating the condition of the bus involved in the December 9th incident.

There are several technology platforms that exist that the district could evaluate to provide real-time camera monitoring. An all-in-one platform such as Transportant provides real-time access for dispatchers and district administrators. The application also allows the driver to timestamp an incident with the click of a button for later review. A typical installation has up to 6 cameras on both the interior and exterior of the bus.

Technology Platform

As mentioned above, the Transportant technology platform provides an all-in-one solution for many bus transportation challenges. In addition to the above features of the platform, the system additionally provides unlimited Wi-Fi access for all passengers.

Cost for the platform at the time of this review was as follows. All prices are per bus and based on a 6-camera bus installation:

• One-time equipment fee	\$2,500
• One-time installation fee	\$500
• Monthly subscription fee	\$50
• Total one-time cost based on a 57-bus fleet	\$228,000
• Total annual recurring fee	\$45,600

As part of our transportation review, our firm reached out to the company principal who is happy to provide a video conference overview presentation of the application for task force members.

Policy Updates

A review of district and contractor transportation policies identified opportunities for improvement including:

- revision of contractor policies
- adoption/revision of district policies

The following policies appear in the Royal Coach Lines ***“Policy Manual for Driver’s and Monitors”***:

Policy: Article III, Section 3: “Investigations” - *“All accidents will be reviewed and investigated by “Risk Management” and / or the Terminal Safety Supervisor to determine whether such incident was either preventable or chargeable. Any driver involved in a preventable accident is subject to disciplinary action, not limited to suspension or termination at the discretion of management”*

Recommendation: Although this is a Royal Coach Lines Policy, it should be reviewed, and a similar policy adopted by the Somers School District. The District Transportation Director and / or designee should be involved in the review of all accidents. A recommendation for any disciplinary action should be discussed in collaboration with the contracted transportation company utilized by the district. This would allow the District to be involved in the decision, rather than just allow any contracted transportation company in making the sole decision discipline.

Policy: Article IV, Drug and Alcohol Testing: Section 1: Policy - *“Employees are forbidden to consume or carry any alcoholic beverages or illegal contraband on Company property or vehicles at any time. A driver should not consume any alcohol beverages for at least eight (8) hours prior to reporting to work. Infraction of this policy will not be tolerated and will result in termination”*

Recommendation: A modified policy should be adopted by the District to include the revision, *“...not consume any alcoholic beverage, alcohol-based medications or other medications that may impair the operation of a motor vehicle, for at least twelve (12) hours prior to reporting to work.”*

Policy: Article IV, Section 2: Drug & Alcohol Testing - *“Prior to employment, all applicants are subject to drug and alcohol testing. Once employed, employees are automatically enrolled into the Company’s random Drug & Alcohol testing program. Drivers have the right to refuse such test conducted by the Company. However, according to the US Department of Transportation’s rule 49 CFR Part 40, a refusal to submit to testing will result in termination of employment as it is considered a positive test. The Company maintains the right to request that a drug and/or alcohol test be conducted in conjunction with any accident. The NYS Vehicle and Traffic Law, Article 31, Sections 1192 and 1193 state that a police officer may request a drug and / or alcohol test be performed on a driver at the scene of an accident.”*

Recommendation: A modified policy should be adopted by the District to include the revision, *“...random drug/alcohol testing **“periodically”** throughout the year, while working in the duties of transporting staff and or students to and from any school building or school event.”* It is further recommended the *Director of Transportation or his/her designee is present when an alcohol test is conducted* be added to the policy (see equipment recommendation below).

Equipment

Royal Coach currently uses a *rapid oral saliva test* to estimate blood alcohol content when conducting on-site screenings. The district should consider acquiring and mandating the use of a portable [commercial-grade breathalyzer](#), that continues to be the standard for driver impairment investigations.

Summary

While this report has identified areas for improvement, the presence of these opportunities should not suggest the district and its transportation contractor are operating in an unsafe manner. While the criminal actions of a single contractor employee will serve as a catalyst for change in procedures and

possibly technology, transportation operations continue to be run in an efficient manner and consistent with other school districts in the region.

We are confident that the Somers Central School District has the desire and ability to address the findings in this report. Although we have identified numerous opportunities for improvement, we continue to remain confident in the readiness and willingness of district personnel to address issues of safety, security and emergency management. We look forward to working with the district and the soon to be formed Transportation Safety Task Force on review and implementation of accepted improvement opportunities.