

**ROCHESTER BOARD OF EDUCATION**  
**Policy Committee Meeting of the Whole**  
**November 15, 2011**  
**6:00PM**

Attending: Commissioner Cruz (Chair); Commissioners Elliott, Campos and Powell. Parent Representative: Victoria Robertson. District staff: Charles Johnson, General Counsel; Jerome Underwood, Senior Director of Operations; Vicky Ramos, Director of Student Placement. Parent Council Member and Volunteer Member of Transportation Exception Review Committee: Yolanda Green. Board staff: Debra Flanagan.

Commissioner Cruz convened the meeting at 6:01PM.

Commissioner Elliott thanked the members of the Policy Committee and District transportation staff for addressing the issue of expanding transportation services for elementary school students. She noted that she has been championing this issue for the last few years out of concern for children's safety, particularly in neighborhoods with high rates of crime and violence. Commissioner Elliott stated that she would like to eliminate the restriction on providing transportation only for elementary school students residing 1.5 miles or more from school. She acknowledged the District's need for fiscal restraint, but not in terms of compromising children's safety.

Jerome Underwood noted that the current Transportation policy is based only on distance and does not consider other factors, such as student safety. He stated that the District has a Transportation Exceptions Review Committee to consider these factors and grant waivers to the 1.5 mile restriction. He noted that homeless students have to apply for exceptions because transportation services are based on the distance of the student's residence from school. Mr. Underwood stated that there are various reasons for granting exceptions, including for children whose parents have to be at work before school starts. He noted that the number of exceptions to the 1.5-mile transportation restriction has been increasing, with 882 exceptions granted in 2009-10; 923 in 2010-11; and 820 as of November 3<sup>rd</sup> for the 2011-12 school year.

**I. Overview of Transportation Options**

Jerome Underwood gave a presentation of various transportation options, estimated costs, and the underlying assumptions with each option:

1. Current State: provide transportation to elementary students who reside more than 1.5 miles from school. Currently 18,214 students are enrolled in elementary school, with approximately 75% receiving transportation services and 4,368 who walk to school. Of the elementary students who walk to school, 44% are in grades K-2 and almost 94% are in grades K-6.

RCSD currently uses 278 buses (mostly through First Student) for 509 routes daily; 273 of these routes (53.6%) follow considerable distances across zones. Mr. Underwood reported that if students attended school within their zone (except for City-wide schools),

the District could eliminate 199 buses and realize an estimated savings of \$11.245m. This savings would only be for one year because as the District's transportation costs decrease, NYS reimbursement would also decrease. Currently NYS reimburses RCSD for 90% of transportation costs, with 10% paid with District funds. Mr. Underwood stated that enforcement of zone boundaries would still reduce transportation expenditures and enable the District to use these funds for classroom and instructional purposes.

2. Provide transportation to all K-8 students (phased in over 3 years): Mr. Underwood noted that RCSD would have to pay the entire amount of these additional costs because the State only reimburses for transportation services for students residing more than 1.5 miles from their school. He stated that the estimated costs are based on 2011-12 student enrollment with the same percentage of students walking to school (4,368 out of 18,214, or 24%):

	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>
Year 1 (All K-2 students)	\$1,623,666	\$2,568,634
Year 2 (All K-4 students)	\$2,143,360	\$3,426,397
Year 3 (All K-8 students)	\$3,542,390	\$5,634,091

Mr. Underwood explained that an estimated cost range is presented because actual costs will depend on student enrollment and the percentage of students that walk to school or ride the bus.

Commissioner White inquired about the information used as a basis for calculating these estimated costs for each year.

**Action Item: Mr. Underwood will provide information to the Board regarding the assumptions underlying the cost estimates for each of the three years over which transportation services would be expanded.**

3. Transportation for Elementary Students within their Zone:

Mr. Underwood explained that these cost estimates were based on the following assumptions: City-wide schools would not be affected; all students eligible for transportation at 0.75 and 0.5 miles from school would take the bus; corner bus stops would be utilized; and the costs for Special Education restrictive service are not included.

- a) Distance policy remains at 1.5 miles: eliminate 199 buses and 273 routes across zones for a one-year savings of \$11,244,683. After one year, the District would continue to have reduced transportation expenses, but NYS reimbursement would also be reduced.
- b) Amend distance policy to 0.75 miles: 141 buses would be eliminated for a one-year savings of \$4,976,318.

- c) Amend distance policy to 0.5 miles: 84 buses would be eliminated, but there would be a net cost to the District of \$952,992 because the number of buses eliminated would not be enough to compensate for the loss of NYS reimbursement.

Commissioner Elliott inquired about the distance or radius for bus transport within each zone, as this would affect travel time, the number of stops that can be made, and the number of buses and routes needed.

**Action Item: Vicky Ramos will provide information to the Board as to the distance/radius required for bus transport in each zone.**

Commissioner Elliott expressed concern regarding children's safety in utilizing corner bus stops because walking to the corner could be quite hazardous in some neighborhoods. She urged her colleagues to consider placement of these corner stops very carefully.

As a basis of comparison, Mr. Underwood presented information regarding transportation practices in other school districts:

- Buffalo City School District and the Syracuse City School District only provide transportation for elementary school students who reside more than 1.5 miles from their school
- Gates-Chili has no distance limit and picks up all elementary students at their home
- Greece has no distance restrictions for transportation of students in grades pre-K to 5 and a 1.0-mile restriction for students in grades 6-8 - all students are picked up at corner bus stops
- Fairport provides transportation to all K-6 students residing at least 0.25 miles from school and uses corner bus stops
- Rush-Henrietta picks up students in community driveways and provides transportation to K-5 students residing more than 0.1 mile from school and 6-12 students residing more than 1.5 miles from school

## **II. Questions and Discussion of Transportation Options**

Victoria Robertson questioned the reasons that so many bus routes cross zone boundaries. Mr. Underwood replied that there are many reasons for parents to select a school across a zone boundary, such as ensuring that their child will receive transportation services to enable them to get to work on time and/or to alleviate concerns for their child's safety in the immediate neighborhood.

Ms. Robertson pointed out that the District has a lottery for entry into the school system in kindergarten and the student's place is guaranteed in the selected school until they move on to high school. She stated that the lottery requires parents to select from schools in their zone, and asked how their child could end up being transported to a school in a different zone. Ms. Ramos

responded that the District does not require a child to change schools when their family moves to another part of the City, and also a student may be attending a school in another zone because of a program to which they are entitled (e.g. ELL programs). She stated that this situation is exacerbated by the fact that siblings are given first priority for entry into a particular school – even if it is across zone boundaries.

Commissioner Powell explained that in developing the Parent Preference/Managed Choice policy, experts informed the Board that most families in the District only move within a 10-block radius of their former residence. For this reason, she stated that it was not anticipated that families' residential moves would increase cross-zone transportation. She asserted that the District has not adequately informed parents of the need to consider changing their child's school when planning to change their residence. Commissioner Powell also noted that the District has not enforced the 1.5-mile restriction in the past on providing transportation services or requiring students to change schools when the family moves.

Commissioner Elliott contended that the Managed Choice policy has created a great deal of confusion for parents in selecting schools and understanding the ramifications of school choice.

Commissioner Campos noted that the Board has to make decisions about changes in policies/practices earlier in the process to enable parents to plan and adapt.

Yolanda Green stated that the zones and managed choice are part of the issue, but most of the concerns brought by parents to the Transportation Exception Committee are due to economic circumstances. She suggested that the Board conduct a forum for parents to provide input regarding transportation concerns.

Commissioner Cruz requested a summary of the "Other" 431 exceptions (i.e. not for medical reasons or due to homelessness) granted by the Exception Committee so far this school year.

**Action Item: Mr. Underwood will provide the Board with a summary of the transportation exceptions granted so far this school year which were not due to homelessness or for medical reasons.**

Commissioner White reflected on the options for changing Transportation policy and the proposed closure of School No. 6 because this school was selected least by parents. He asserted that even if the distance to school is less than 0.5 miles and parents believe they live in a dangerous neighborhood, they will choose a school some distance away to ensure that their child receives bus services for their own safety. Commissioner White stated that from his experience in addressing crime in the City, the safety issue will not be resolved by reducing the transportation distance restrictions because parents will not want their children to walk even to a corner bus stop if they reside in a dangerous neighborhood. He suggested that the members of the Parent Council discuss this issue and the transportation options, and present their advisory opinion to the Board.

Ms. Green concurred that reducing the distance restrictions would not be sufficient to address the safety issue, stating that parents would not choose a school across the street if there is criminal activity in the neighborhood.

**Action Item: Ms. Green will present the transportation options under consideration to the members of the Parent Council and ask for their recommendation to present to the Board.**

Mr. Underwood stated that he and his staff are aware that changes in transportation will not resolve safety concerns because public safety is essentially a community issue. But he wanted to present all of the options available in terms of actions that can be taken to help ameliorate safety issues.

Commissioner Elliott declared that she is a strong proponent of fiscal restraint, but not at the expense of children's safety. She pointed out that safety issues affect attendance and ability to focus on learning while at school.

Commissioner Cruz suggested obtaining data from the Rochester Police Department regarding the number of incidents involving RCSD students in grades K-8 to get an idea as to the extent, location, and possible patterns regarding threats to children's safety.

Commissioner Powell suggested analyzing the number of incidents for students in grades K-8 who reside within 0.5 miles of school, and the extent to which these incidents occur just before and just after the school day. She emphasized the importance of distinguishing between parents' perception of a dangerous area versus data based on actual events. She also urged her colleagues to present the data to the City to request their collaboration in addressing public safety concerns.

Commissioner White concurred that data is critical to promote collaboration with the City, but he contended that parents' perceptions of potential threats to their child's safety have a greater impact on their decisions than data of actual incidents. He asserted that long-term solutions must be considered, such as tailoring transportation services according to data of actual incidents in neighborhoods. Commissioner White suggested that distance restrictions on transportation services be eliminated entirely for neighborhoods shown to have a greater risk to child safety.

Commissioner Elliott stated that when she first brought this issue to the attention of the District, she had already received a great number of calls about safety concerns from parents and the majority of these calls were from those residing in the NE section of the City (i.e. "the crescent"). She expressed appreciation for Commissioner White's "hybrid" suggestion to address these problems.

Commissioner Powell suggested that data demonstrating significant safety risks in some parts of the City could be used to advocate for NYS reimbursement of transportation costs for students in these neighborhoods, regardless of the distance to school. She pointed out that the NYS Education Department considers walking routes that require crossing highways to be a threat to child safety, so why shouldn't this also be the case for criminal activity?

Commissioner Cruz noted that there is homework to do in terms of gathering and analyzing data. He stated that the “hybrid” suggestion may be the most effective, and may be a moving target in terms of the specific neighborhoods found to present the most risk to student safety. He also asserted that there is a shared responsibility for addressing these concerns among the Board of Education, Parent Council, District staff, the City, and the Rochester Police Department.

Commissioner Cruz suggested that a follow-up Policy Committee Meeting of the Whole be convened to continue this conversation after all of the data has been obtained. He asked Mr. Underwood for an estimate as to the timeframe for obtaining the data. Mr. Underwood replied that he is not certain because the information resides with his colleagues at the Rochester Police Department and the City, and further analysis would have to be done by the Placement Office to evaluate the impact on student placement within the District.

Commissioner Cruz asked about the latest date that a decision could be made to change transportation services, so that the new plan could be implemented in the 2012-13 school year. Mr. Underwood stated that changes would have to be determined by the end of December for implementation in the next school year. Ms. Ramos explained that if the zone boundaries were to be more strictly enforced in terms of the school placement, the kindergarten lottery would be affected.

Commissioner Elliott inquired which transportation option would be the least burdensome in terms of student placement. Ms. Ramos replied that the impact of the transportation options will vary for each zone. As an example, she pointed out that the NW zone has greater transportation distances on average and therefore may be less affected by the proposed changes than the NE or South zones. She stated that a process would have to be developed for notifying parents of these changes, with March as the deadline for parents of secondary school students and April for the parents of elementary school students.

**Motion** by Commissioner White to adjourn. Seconded by Commissioner Powell. **Adopted 4-0, with concurrence of parent representative.**

Meeting adjourned at 7:13PM.