

**Policy Committee Meeting**  
**November 10, 2009**  
**5:00 p.m.**

**MINUTES**

**Attendance:** Commissioner Elliott (Chair); Commissioners White, Powell, Williams, Brennan (joined meeting at 6:09 p.m.), Evans (joined meeting at 6:17 p.m.), and Campos (joined meeting at 6:19 p.m.).

District Staff: Superintendent Brizard (joined meeting at 5:12 p.m.), John Scanlan, Jim Fenton, and Jerome Underwood.

Board Staff: Debra Flanagan

Commissioner Elliott convened the meeting at 5:07 p.m.

**I. Discussion regarding Transportation Policy**

Commissioner Elliott thanked John Scanlan and Jim Fenton for attending to respond to questions raised at the last Policy Committee Meeting of the Whole on November 5<sup>th</sup> regarding a proposed policy amendment and associated costs. She explained that the amendment would revoke language in the existing Transportation Policy (8400) to provide transportation to all students from kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Commissioner Elliott requested that Mr. Fenton further explicate the cost estimates he had provided to Committee members earlier in an email.

Mr. Fenton explained that the estimates provided in his earlier email were based on a per-student rate, which did not take into account the fact that some students could be transported on buses with additional capacity on existing routes. To the extent that students can be absorbed within existing routes and buses, there would be no additional cost. However, to the extent that a new route would have to be created to accommodate students, the cost of each new route would be \$54k.

Mr. Fenton provided a handout of a map which plotted the location of all of the students' residences that attend Wilson Foundation Academy. He noted that these students reside in all areas of the City and stated that this is the case for all schools, reflecting the School Choice Policy. He referred to the complexity of routes and schedules to ensure that all students arrive at school on time.

Mr. Fenton presented several additional handouts: "Walkers By Grade", "Yellow Buses", and the "Estimated Cost per Grade". He explained that the first chart reflects the number of children who walk to school currently in each grade level, and is based on current enrollment data. Mr. Fenton stated that an average of 30% of students in kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade is currently walking to school.

The “Yellow Bus” chart indicates the estimated number of additional children who would take the bus if transportation were offered to them. Mr. Fenton stated that approximately 20% of those students currently walking to school would continue to do so even if transportation were offered. Consequently, bus service would be needed for an estimated 80% of the students currently walking to school. Mr. Fenton explained that the District’s current transportation capacity could absorb approximately 20% of the kindergarten students now walking to school, and 10% of the first grade students who are currently walking to school. Based on these estimates, the District would need 11 new buses to transport the additional kindergarten students and a total of 14 new buses to also transport first-grade students.

Considering that each bus can accommodate 40 students and each bus costs \$54,870, Mr. Fenton reported that the total estimated cost for transporting all kindergarten students would be \$603,570 ( $\$54,870 \times 11$  additional buses); \$768,180 for all kindergarten through first-grade students; and \$823,050 for all students in kindergarten through fourth grade. Mr. Fenton explained that this analysis provides a more accurate estimate of cost than the per-student rate because it allows for some of the students to be absorbed into existing routes and buses with capacity.

Commissioner Williams expressed concern that capacity on existing buses is not being maximized.

Mr. Fenton replied that beyond maximizing capacity, consideration must be given to the length of time that the first student on the bus has to ride. He also explained that the District’s contract with transportation providers is based on time. These factors make it imperative that the District limit the ride time on buses.

Commissioner Williams inquired whether a hub model has been considered, in which buses depart from regional terminals rather than one central location on Hudson Avenue. Mr. Fenton noted that First Student has its own four terminals and the District would not be able to dictate to providers regarding the structure of their facilities.

Commissioner Williams asked about the impact of restoring transportation to the 700+ students who have been denied bus service this year. Mr. Fenton stated that this would depend on the residential location of these students, and expressed concern about providing equity in transportation services rather than basing these decisions on those who are upset with the current practice. Superintendent Brizard pointed out that the existing practice was developed to establish an objective way of granting exceptions to having all students within a 1.5 mile radius walk to school. He emphasized the importance of equal access and consideration of parents’ concerns, rather than focusing on those who know how to work the system. The Superintendent stated that no exceptions are allowed in the Buffalo School District and that the current model was based on the process followed by the Syracuse School District.

Commissioner Elliott asked about the criteria used by the Transportation Exception Review Committee to deny transportation services to students. Mr. Fenton reported that there are two primary reasons for granting exceptions: 1) ELL students and parents unable to access the process due to limited English proficiency; 2) safety concerns due to construction in the area in which the student would have to walk to get to school.

Commissioner Elliott took issue with the fact that the Transportation Exception Review Committee does not consider other types of safety issues, especially given the fact that Rochester has the highest rate of homicides and other violent crimes outside of New York City. Mr. Fenton replied that State regulations do not consider crime or neighborhood safety as factors in granting transportation exceptions and therefore will not reimburse the District for these costs. He stated that the only considerations granted by the State in reimbursement of transportation costs is for construction and road safety, which do not accommodate urban districts very well.

In considering providing transportation to additional students, Superintendent Brizard underscored the importance of considering specific areas in which funds are to be cut to cover these costs.

Commissioner White inquired whether the Administration has had an opportunity to speak with Mayor Duffy and/or Police Chief Moore about these issues, pointing out that these entities have considerably greater control over safe neighborhoods and streets than does the District. Superintendent Brizard replied that there have been ongoing discussions with the Mayor and Police Chief about these issues, and that this is an agenda item for a meeting with them next week.

Commissioner White asked about the selection process for members of the Transportation Exception Review Committee. Mr. Fenton responded that this Committee includes parents and staff from schools in each zone and with the recommendation of the Zone Chiefs.

Commissioner White questioned the total cost for transporting all students in kindergarten through sixth grade. Mr. Fenton stated that these costs would amount to an estimated \$5.3m for K-6 and that the cost for K-8 is uncertain because some of the high schools include 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade and high school students are riding RTS buses to school.

Commissioner Elliott clarified that the intent of the proposal was to transport all elementary students, and some of the elementary schools are from kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

Commissioner White inquired as to the status of proposed legislation in Albany regarding reimbursement for school district transportation. Superintendent Brizard replied that he has been advocating maintenance of the transportation reimbursement from the State at the same level for next year, even though RCSD has realized a savings by utilizing the two-tiered system. Maintaining the existing level of reimbursement would allow transportation of pre-K students.

Commissioner White asked about the 3.5% mid-year cut in State aid to RCSD, which the Superintendent confirmed. Superintendent Brizard pointed out that the District is also facing an additional budget cut due to State reductions in Medicaid reimbursement.

Commissioner White questioned where the funds would be obtained to cover the cost of transporting additional students. Superintendent Brizard replied that almost 80% of the aid received by the District is categorical and slated for specific programs, so that programs and staff would have to be reduced to finance this proposed transportation plan.

Commissioner White asked about the possibility of reducing Central Office staff to realize cost savings. Superintendent Brizard stated that he believes RCSD is overstaffed, although 100 staff

in Central Office was cut over the last year or so. He explained that another 75-80 FTE may have to be reduced to cover the \$3.4m reduction in State reimbursement for transportation. The Superintendent noted that staff reductions will be necessary also from the loss of federal stimulus aid.

Mr. Fenton pointed out three possible opportunities for cost savings in transportation: 1) picking up students at corner stops rather than at their home; 2) adding a third tier to the transportation system and schedule; 3) requiring students to stay within their zone so that they would not have to be transported so far.

Commissioner Williams indicated that there may be unintended consequences from enforcing existing rule of not transporting students who live within 1.5 miles of their school. He suggested that parents may select a school farther than 1.5 miles from their residence to ensure that their child gets transportation and that this would lead to increased cost.

Commissioner Elliott contended that moving to neighborhood schools would provide considerable cost savings through reduced transportation.

Commissioner Powell objected to this analysis, emphasizing that it is the prerogative of parents to choose their child's school based on any criteria they feel is right for their child and their situation. She pointed out that transportation is a significant and valid concern, given parents' work schedules and the fact that social systems do not provide child care. Commissioner Powell asserted that parents who make decisions regarding school choice based on transportation are solving their own problems and moving to neighborhood schools would deny parents rights of choice. She pointed out that choice was available in the past only to those parents with the time and access to key decision-makers. She contended that school choice has prevented the District from dictating where a child will attend school and provided equal access to all parents. In addition, Commissioner Powell pointed out that the previous neighborhood school model led to some schools being over capacity by 200% and 40% of students still requiring transportation.

Commissioner Williams expressed concern regarding certain areas of growth in District spending, particularly for professional and technical services and consulting. He stated that these services do not add much value for the cost and suggested examining ways in which the City has reduced overhead expenses.

Superintendent Brizard explained that the District's funding system is quite different from that of the City, particularly since the vast majority of funds (80%) are categorical and designated for specific programs. He stated that many of the professional and technical services are to support a program or mandate that the District has not chosen. The Superintendent also emphasized the importance of considering the cost savings and benefits generated by the work of consultants to obtain a clear perspective.

Commissioner Powell inquired about reductions in Medicaid funding, noting that federal regulations had changed to prevent New York State from retaining the high percentage of funds (20-25%) as had been the practice in the past. She asked whether this change would lead to additional funds being provided to the District to reconcile these past practices. Mr. Scanlan stated that Medicaid reimbursement to school districts have been frozen so that these funds have not been flowing to RCSD.

Commissioner Powell asked how the State could justify withholding these Medicaid reimbursements, particularly after the federal government has determined that this should not have been allowed in the first place.

Commissioner Powell questioned the extent to which the District is currently using the pre-K allowance from New York State. Superintendent Brizard replied that he did not have the exact figures at this time, but that RCSD is outperforming the other Big 5 districts in this respect. He estimated that the District is only short by approximately a dozen students, and explained that the New York State level could be exceeded if RCSD could shift to a full-day pre-K program. The Superintendent stated that this has been a major issue because of the needs of working parents.

Commissioner Powell asserted that the major obstacle to the District's ability to adopt these changes is Speaker Sheldon's opposition to a full-day pre-K program and to transportation reimbursement. She contended that he is opposed to these initiatives because of concern that districts would misuse funds to subsidize transportation rather than provide pre-K services.

Commissioner Evans discussed safety issues in certain schools, pointing to Jefferson High School as an example of a situation in which transportation had to be provided to all students. He recommended establishing an emergency transportation fund to cover the costs in these types of situations, as an immediate measure to address safety issues. Superintendent Brizard replied that the problem at Jefferson High School is that students do not want to wait for RTS transportation because they do not feel safe waiting at the bus stop in this part of the City. He offered to look into the situation, but emphasized the importance of considering the root causes and involving the City and Police Department.

Commissioner White expressed appreciation for this forum in discussing education and safety as a way to better understand each other's policy positions. He noted that issues regarding poverty, social and economic breakdown, loss of community ties arise continuously and cannot be addressed by the City School District alone. Commissioner White emphasized that these issues extend far beyond transportation of students.

Commissioner Elliott requested a motion to restore transportation services to those students who have been denied this year. The Superintendent replied that this would also involve identifying specific items to be cut to cover these costs. He also contended that this is not an objective or equitable method for providing transportation services, in that criteria are not being applied equally to all students in making these determinations.

Mr. Fenton suggested examining opportunities to absorb students in kindergarten through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade on existing routes and buses, and then reporting on the number of students for which additional services would be needed.

Commissioner Elliott inquired why these services could not be provided to the 700 students who have been declined this year. Mr. Fenton explained that these students could have obtained exceptions in the past for any one of a number of reasons which may or may not correspond to the concerns for student safety.

Commissioner Powell contended that this could establish a more inequitable system in which a 6<sup>th</sup> grade student takes a seat that could be provided to a kindergarten student. She pointed out the need to apply agreed upon criteria so that the youngest and most vulnerable students receive transportation.

**Action Item:** Mr. Fenton will analyze the number of kindergarten through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students that can be accommodated on existing routes and buses. He will report to the members of the Policy Committee regarding the number of students in these grades that are not able to be accommodated within the current transportation structure.

**Motion** to adjourn by Commissioner Powell. Seconded by Commissioner White. **Adopted 7-0**

Meeting adjourned at 7:22PM.

**Next Policy Committee Meeting: November 17, 2009**