

Multiple factors drive schools' busing plight

Immediate crisis eases, but problems aren't gone

Justin Murphy

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

After five emergency meetings in six days and a 24-hour delay to the first day of school, the Rochester City School District on Thursday managed to send school buses for nearly all eligible students.

The district needed a timely intercession from Regional Transit Service (RTS), which made space for several thousand more students than it had anticipated.

The two sides still need to sign a contract, and much work remains in stabilizing the driver workforce, both internally and among the district's key contractors.

The immediate crisis appears to have passed. But why did it get so bad? Here are partial answers to some complicated questions.

Why have so many drivers resigned?

The first question is not complicated at all. For years, districts have struggled to recruit people to drive school buses – and that was before the pandemic.

Bus drivers wake up very early in the morning to drive several dozen children, mostly unsupervised, to school. Signing up for the job requires a commercial driver's license, a background check and significant training. And the money isn't great.

This year, the job comes with an additional hazard: All students under age 12 are unvaccinated. And with seemingly every business in Monroe County looking to hire, prospective employees can be choosy about what work they take.

The result: Existing drivers are deciding the pay is not worth the risk, and potential new hires are either looking elsewhere or staying home.

Why is Rochester faring worse than other districts?

Districts across Monroe County – indeed, across the country – are scrambling for bus drivers. But only RCSD made headlines by nearly canceling inperson classes for high school students.

As is often the case, the crisis is rooted in the structural disadvantages that large urban districts like Rochester face.

A suburban school district may have half a dozen school buildings; RCSD has closer to 50. It also transports students to another 60 or so out-of-district placements. Those include charter schools, private and parochial schools, Urban-Suburban destinations and special education providers. Young students are dropped off at their door, not at communal bus stops.

“That really increases the degree of differentiation for us,” RCSD Chief of Operations Mike Schmidt told the school board Wednesday. “Many of our suburban colleagues don't have that differentiation of arrival and departure times to deal with. When they have a gap, it's easier to plug something in.”

The vast majority of the Rochester children attending private, charter or Urban-Suburban schools do not have disabilities requiring special transportation. In fact, there is some evidence that suburban and charter schools have pushed students with disabilities back into RCSD.

Nearly a quarter of RCSD students are in special education, one of the highest marks in the state and a great driver of transportation costs, among other things.

What could RCSD have done differently?

At least two things, one having to do with choosing vendors and the other with crisis management.

For years, RCSD has sought unsuccessfully to lower its transportation costs, in particular its contract with RTS. A lack of qualified local contractors, though, meant the district had little bargaining power.

When Shelley Jallow arrived in 2020 as academic and fiscal monitor, transportation spending was one of the areas she highlighted. She and the state pressured the district not to continue its RTS contract for high school transportation but rather to go out to bid.

Earlier this year, RCSD signed a new contract with Ontario Bus Inc., taking much of the high school busing away from RTS and saving some money in the process.

Ontario reported last weekend that it was not missing any drivers, but vacancies at the other two contractors, First Student and Monroe, caused the district to scramble routes and providers to cover all its schools. It is possible that having RTS as a major partner throughout would have made the district more able to weather the storm.

At the same time, it is clear that RCSD and Superintendent Lesli Myers-Small were late in reacting to the situation, even as they recognized it coming.

According to a July 30 memo from Myers-Small obtained by the Democrat and Chronicle, First Student and Monroe told the district July 27 that they were down more than 100 drivers combined. The superintendent then proposed changing school start times to create “a more efficient use of our current fleet” (and to save a projected \$5.5 million). That proposal was not adopted and made public until Aug. 10.

Then, in another confidential memo sent Aug. 30, Schmidt, the chief of operations, explained the situation had become more dire. He reported to the board and district leaders that there might not be enough buses for all students on the first day and said it was important to have “realistic expectations.”

By the time board members received that memo, Myers-Small had left on vacation, though she continued to hold some meetings remotely.

On Aug. 31, RCSD spokeswoman Marisol Ramos-Lopez told a gathering of reporters that the driver shortage was a major issue. Three days after that, the superintendent made her proposal to start high schools in remote learning.

Earlier this week, Myers-Small said the district still has not created incentives to hire bus drivers, though its contractors have.

Why don't more kids walk to school?

The majority of children in Rochester could walk from their homes to a school building in around 15 minutes. Why don't they just do that?

Like other urban districts, RCSD moved away from a strict neighborhood school policy starting in the mid-1960s in response to concerns about racial segregation. The idea was that school placement could partially counteract virulent discrimination in housing.

Housing is more segregated than ever, though the dividing lines are largely municipal boundaries, not neighborhood ones. Most of the erstwhile white student body has moved to the suburbs. About 85% of RCSD students are Black or Hispanic, meaning there is no way to shuffle them and create a desegregated system.

The idea of returning to neighborhood schools, where they could be community anchors, has strong advocates, notably school board member Amy Maloy. Most other urban districts have stricter neighborhood school placement policies than Rochester.

There are some challenges, though. For one, state law requires that students living near low-performing receivership schools be allowed the option to attend somewhere else. There are many such schools in Rochester.

Children in Rochester are more likely to move or become homeless in a given year than their wealthier peers in other districts. The fear is that making them shift schools when they move would sever important relationships.

Lastly, parents often do not want their children to walk to school even if it is quite close to their home because their walking routes often include crossing busy streets or areas with drug use and violence.

For the past several years, RCSD has granted waivers to those families liberally, providing a bus for short trips even though it is not required to do so.

“The recent advocacy for school safety zones and transportation for all students is rooted in good intentions but unfortunately, the marketplace cannot sustain those requirements at this time,” Schmidt wrote to the board. “We have to create safer neighborhoods for students to walk to school.”

Contact staff writer Justin Murphy at jmurphy7@gannett.com.



School buses arrive at School 45 on Clifford Avenue in Rochester on Thursday. It was the first day of school in the city, as well as in a few other area school districts. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

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