

BECOMING PART OF THE COMMUNITY

West Shore School District - New Cumberland, Pa.

About West Shore School District

West Shore School District is one of the largest districts in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, covering approximately 78 square miles of Cumberland and York counties. Enrollment in its nine elementary schools, four middle schools and two high schools totals 8,000 students. The District also provides transportation for resident students attending non-public schools located within the District's boundaries and up to ten miles beyond.

Challenge

West Shore School District had always managed its student transportation in house. However, in late 2012, the District began to consider contracting management of bus drivers as well as its custodial, maintenance and food services. Among the many reasons to contract, the financial security they could glean from doing so was primary. The District also wanted to free up more time for the transportation department to focus on routing, programming and other projects. West Shore School District released a Request for Proposal (RFP) for student transportation in January 2013.

As in many communities, one of the primary contracting concerns was that it would cost the District employees their jobs. Drivers, parents and students questioned how involved a contractor would be: would they employ the current drivers who have vested interest in the District's children? Would new drivers care wholeheartedly about the students they transport? Community members also questioned how the nation's largest transportation company would fit in to the Cumberland and York county communities.

Partnering for Success

In October 2013, the Board of West Shore School District voted 7-1 to award a 5-year contract to First Student, starting in December 2013. First Student came onboard immediately, investing time upfront to understand the operation and ensure a smooth, seamless transition. As West Shore School District Coordinator of Transportation Anthony McNaughton says, "Nothing was going to change, and that was my goal with the drivers and First Student. Don't change anything up. What we do, we do it really well, and let's just continue to do that, but now we have a contractor doing it for us." Following McNaughton's directive, the First Student team acquainted themselves with the operation. This included learning about the needs of the District as a whole and those of each individual school; the West Shore School District routes and routing software; and how behavior issues are handled. From the beginning, West Shore School District and First Student collaborated and worked as a team, with the same goal and mindset – taking care of the students and getting them to and from school safely.



When First Student Location Manager Kim Paternoster first came to West Shore School District, she was impressed with the location, the drivers and the school district overall. One of her main goals was to meet, interview and hire all eligible drivers, thus alleviating the concern about a 'new' driving core. During the process, she worked hard to build relationships with these drivers — local faces with personal investments in the community. While the community had initially been somewhat uncomfortable about the mid-year start-up, Paternoster and her team took over the daily student transportation operations without a hiccup. "I don't know that [the students or parents] really noticed at first, or even at all, because there was no change. It was their drivers; they were their buses. So there was no change and there was no concern for the parents," says Paternoster. Driver Trainer Tami Gesner summed it up well when she says, "We can all work together as a team because we are a team."

While First Student handled the daily student transportation operations for West Shore School District, McNaughton could focus on other needs in the transportation department. From McNaughton's perspective, he believes the collaboration between the First Student team and the District built a trust within the community, "We're very passionate about what we do, and by being passionate and having somebody beside you who's just as passionate, it brings a great thing to the table." The students and parents of West Shore School District, as well as the entire community, can only benefit from a passionate team and a commitment to safe transportation.

One of the ideas that McNaughton developed was the potential of bringing the Intermediate Unit (IU) Transportation for special needs students under one contractor – First Student. At the time, special needs students were being transported by numerous contractors and West Shore School District wanted to see greater consistency and efficiency. Paternoster was immediately onboard with this idea, and First Student expanded its West Shore School District fleet to include students with special needs. "If [special needs students] are within our [First Student] fleet and we are transporting them, we have that direct contact with the driver, with the child, with the parent. So, it's that unbroken line of communication," says Paternoster. This gave cohesiveness and peace of mind to the parents, District, principals and teachers.

Engagement

Naturally, there is some concern when a district considers contracting. To the community, it feels like bringing an unknown into their world. However, West Shore School District was confident they were gaining a partner with First Student, which helped to ease the initial concerns. First Student understands the importance of being part of the communities served.

"The community is a big part of who we are and what we do on a daily basis. We need to be in touch with what's going on out there. We not only participate in school functions, but outside functions, as well," says Paternoster.

When the local little league team – Red Land Little League – earned a spot to play at the Little League World Series in Williamsport, PA, the whole community was excited, and the District wanted to do



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something for the team. Since Williamsport is approximately two hours from New Cumberland, some of the parents wondered how they were going to get there. “And, you know, Kim [Paternoster] says, ‘I can get them. We can get one bus, two buses. Whatever we need to do, we’ll do that.’ And that’s what First Student did. They stepped up to the plate and donated the buses. They also provided drivers to go there,” says McNaughton. First Student transported over 100 people from the community to Williamsport over the course of several days until Red Land Little League won the championship.

When West Shore School District was given an opportunity to create a summer program to help feed the students a free lunch each day, they also faced a challenge in reaching the community. The Central Food Bank of Pennsylvania provided all of the food and the District prepared it, but there was no transportation for students to get to the high school to eat the lunch. Collaboration and community commitment again became front and center: First Student volunteered the buses, the drivers volunteered their time, the District volunteered fuel, and everyone made sure students in need had lunch during the summer break. “The summer meal transportation program allowed us to double the number of students, or children in the district, that ate summer lunch,” says Paternoster.

“We just try to help the community in any way we can to enhance the operations and do great things for students,” says McNaughton. Whether it’s meeting with the local Girl Scout troop that wants to know how to ride a bus, helping the District with an active shooter emergency evacuation drill, or when a driver participates in a marathon raising money in honor of a student on her bus and his disability, it’s First Student and West Shore School District together making it happen. The First Student and West Shore School District team that gets the students to and from school safely every day is the same team that comes together outside the school day to care for the families in the community.

Like in so many other communities, First Student has become a trusted partner for the West Shore School District. First Student is called upon when needed and the District trusts that the First Student team will provide leadership and solutions. Together, West Shore School District and First Student are one team – a seamless integration of transportation provider and District. Contracting with a student transportation service doesn’t mean the community connection is lost. Conversely, it means enhancing your team and creating an even bigger positive result for your community.

