

CUSTOMIZING SERVICES

Berrien Regional Education Service Agency - Berrien Springs, Mich.

Overview

Berrien Regional Education Service Agency (RESA) provides opportunities for educational institutions in Berrien County, Michigan to access high-quality, regionally-delivered support services while realizing cost efficiencies. Its members include public school districts, parochial schools and public school academies. In 2005 the agency was weighing the benefits of contracting its special education (SPED) transportation services with that very goal in mind. They were facing state funding reductions and had to achieve significant cost savings. The district's leadership found that could be accomplished through contracted SPED transportation. To move forward, its member districts and the communities they serve wanted to feel confident RESA's prospective transportation partner could capably handle the complexity of transporting children enrolled in alternative education programs, including children with special needs and severe behavioral challenges.

Challenge

Approximately forty schools and agencies across Berrien County are members of Berrien Regional Education Service Agency (RESA). Each member benefits by accessing a greater pool of resources, research and best practices, and educational services to provide the very best care available. Blossomland Learning Center provides education programs for students ages 3 to 26 with moderate to severe cognitive impairments. Lighthouse Education Center is an alternative education facility designed to provide programs and services for autistic and severely emotionally impaired students.

Familiarity with students, parents and communities is vital to any student transportation program — but especially one serving such vulnerable passengers. Parents and caretakers want to feel confident their child is being treated fairly and is properly cared for when making transitions through their day. For that reason, concerns over safety, job loss and management control were raised by parents and community members when Berrien RESA began to investigate contracting its transportation services. Would students be transported by the driver they already knew and trusted? Would managers provide the same level of professionalism and accountability they were used to? If the agency were to pursue this solution, all decision stakeholders wanted to see more than cost efficiencies; they wanted a partner who clearly demonstrated it shared RESA's core values for safety and student care.



Delivering the Solution

Berrien RESA chose First Student for its stable resources and proven expertise in SPED transportation management. They found, with First Student's scale, their program could leverage its local expertise with a broader set of technical capabilities to enhance its recruiting, training, maintenance, fleet planning and routing needs. The partnership allowed effectual route-level responses to specific equipment and training requirements. "Our services are customized to their [passenger] needs. These students have various behavioral issues, so when planning these routes input from the school staff is necessary to ensure the compatibility of the students on board," shares First Student Contract Manager Yolanda Suarez who has over 33 years of experience in the school bus industry.

A major concern for parents and community members was job loss and management control. "Many of the drivers live here in the community. Most of the students were riding with the same drivers and aides that they had been riding with in the past. That was very comforting for them. Parents now would agree that we provide a very safe transportation system for them," says Jim Palm, (recently retired) assistant superintendent for administrative services. As a best practice, First Student aims to retain all qualified drivers and staff. "First Student understood these concerns, and responded that generally when the company takes on a new a contract, most of the previous staff will sign on. And in fact, that was true. Ninety-two percent of our employees signed on with First Student."

Berrien RESA found First Student indeed shared its value for passenger safety, care and comfort. All First Student drivers and attendants go through extensive training in the classroom and on the road. The curriculum consists of sensitivity and inclusion, characteristics of disabilities, student behavior management, equipment operation and emergency precautions.

Child Check-Mate Systems are installed on all First Student buses, and drivers are trained to search all seats for remaining children before deactivating an alarm at the back of the bus. "We like that First Student's standard safety procedures require drivers to check for sleeping children at the end of their route. The reminder system added another element to the safety procedures of the pre- and post-check system which was already in place," commented Palm.

And to align fully on expectations, a key element of building trust and communication, First Student worked with district representatives to create a Pupil Transportation Handbook, which outlines agency, parent and student responsibilities as well as behavior management and inclement weather procedures.



Community Return

“Money was a catalyst for us. We found we would save a million dollars a year for five years when we first signed the contract,” says Palm. But the ability to maintain, if not advance, the quality of SPED transportation service offered by Berrien RESA was the decisive success factor for the district. “One of the things we have always prided ourselves on is the safety and care of our students. No matter how much money we saved, if we thought we would have to sacrifice safety, we wouldn’t have done it.” An additional benefit that Berrien RESA hadn’t anticipated was a savings of administrative staff time. Palm explained employees now have the capacity to taken on responsibilities more closely tied to educational issues and opportunities.

Vehicles are also newer and very well-maintained now that greater resources in the areas of training, technology and process efficiency are available through First Student. Palm stated, “First Student came in with 20 brand new vehicles for our Lighthouse Education Center. If additional vehicles are required, the vast resources of First Student can be tapped to meet this need.”

Palm concluded, “I think superintendents are looking for more and more ways to stretch their valuable resources, and outsourcing transportation is one of those ways. Transportation is a little more sensitive than outsourcing food service or custodial services, because students are more involved with the staff, but it can also be the biggest money-saver. Both Berrien RESA’s Board of Education and the administration were satisfied that we could outsource and save a lot of money for our local district without sacrificing safety. That has turned out to be true, and I would highly recommend First Student to anyone looking to outsource.”

First Student is a proud recipient of Berrien RESA’s 2016 Partnership Award.

