



Customizing Services in Berrien Springs, Mich.

Berrien Regional Education Service Agency (RESA) provides opportunities for educational institutions in Berrien County, Michigan, including multiple special education (SPED) programs. When the agency faced state budget cuts, it had to rethink its SPED transportation.

The challenge became reducing costs without sacrificing safety, students care and jobs.

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.

Additionally, as a best practice, First Student aims to retain all qualified drivers and staff. "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 parents," says Jim Palm, (recently retired) assistant superintendent for administrative services.

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.

And to align fully on expectations, First Student worked with the district to create a Pupil Transportation Handbook, which outlines agency, parent and student responsibilities as well as behavior management.

"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."

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. I would highly recommend First Student to anyone looking to outsource."

