

KEYS TO SUCCESS: COMMUNICATION & CONSISTENCY

Wichita Public Schools - Wichita, Kan.

Overview

As the largest school district in the state of Kansas, Wichita Public Schools (WPS) has the remarkable task of educating 11% of the state's public school students. More than 50,000 students attend the district's 97 schools, with nearly 35% using yellow buses to get to school each day. With a long history of contracted bus services, WPS knew exactly what they wanted in a new transportation provider when they began seeking proposals in 2009 for the district's 600-bus transportation system.

Wichita Public Schools issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) outlining the district's priorities: service scalability, technology, large district transportation experience, communication, transparency, strong customer service and solid safety records. WPS wished to partner with a company whose focus was the school district's future and long-term success.

Challenge

Back-to-school season is an exciting yet stressful time of the year for school administrators and staff. While most of the administration focuses on what goes on inside the school, WPS Operations Division Director Darren Muci and Director of Transportation Fabian Armendariz concentrate on the complex process of getting more than 17,000 students to and from schools and extracurricular activities.

WPS had just made the decision to transition their 600-bus operation to First Student after 13 years with their previous provider. Each new school year brings change - whether it's routes, boundaries, technology or tiers. WPS faced the added challenge of ensuring a smooth transition during school year startup.

First Student Area General Manager John Billigmeier says of the startup, "The logistics of running 600 buses every day is no small feat, but starting up the location for the first time was a huge undertaking. The logistics going into that were very complicated, and very challenging."

Delivering the Solution

First Student's primary focus was to ensure WPS received safe, problem-free transportation from the beginning. They started with a solid plan to transform the district's current systems, buses, training materials, staff and location to make it a true First Student operation. Without delay, they went to



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work. Darren Muci says of the early days, “We saw very clearly that they (First Student) had done their homework. They understood Wichita Schools, but also the community and what went into being able to provide those services for Wichita Public Schools. They were ready to go to work. We could see that during the RFP interview process, unlike many of the other companies who really hadn’t spent a lot of time investigating what it would mean to provide services to the Wichita Public Schools.”

First Student staff arrived in Wichita in December of 2009 to begin preparing for 2010 school year start-up. We brought in an experienced management and support team that would aid the district in all the aspects of the transition, including onboarding existing drivers from the current provider, hiring additional drivers, training, bus and maintenance management, routing, dispatching and more. First Student had the resources to launch the Wichita operation, and they included the district’s own people in the transition to keep a consistent operation in the community. “We had the size and ability to reach out to our other areas and bring people here. They knew our systems, and were able to bring that to Wichita... to help us start everything here locally and build that up. The resources were helpful towards setting the stage for a successful partnership,” said First Student Area General Manager Phil O’Donnell.

“And it really is that key communication going back and forth in order for us to have a smooth operation because a mistake could be made on our end or their end... In the end of it all, it’s going to come to the both of us.” - Fabian Armendariz

First Student has been partnering with WPS since August 2010, successfully and safely transporting Wichita’s students. “What we got with First Student was the management team that was ready to work with us on a daily basis. And I mean several times throughout the course of any business day, to ensure that they were going to be able to provide services for us,” Muci said. “We could count on them to take notes and to make sure that they heard what our concerns were and then to go back and either make adjustments or fix things. First Student was also always looking at what was going well, and then asking what they could do to make this better. That showcased that they were really in this to win this with us so that we could provide improved services all the time. The important part of this was that every day got better,” he added.

Within the First Student organization, staff communicated with each other — if any staff member noticed a problem during startup or in the normal course of the school year, they brainstormed on how to fix it. Because of the extensive First Student training, staff knew what to look for and how to cut off potential problems and staff also spoke up on ways that might enhance services.

Fabian Armendariz is impressed with the level of communication between district administration and First Student, “We can have frank discussions. If they’re not making money then it’s not worth them being here. By the same token, we’re looking for reductions. But we’re able to have honest discussions, as far as being able to reduce the number of routes, in order for us to run a more efficient operation. And



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I appreciate the honesty that John and his team have brought to this relationship between our district and First Student. It's key . . . being able to communicate and to talk and have those honest discussions. For this type of a contract, as massive operation as what we run with over 500 daily buses, you need to have that communication and that working relationship in order for you to be successful.”

Community Return

With First Student as a partner, the district achieved its transportation goals and built the strong partnership they desired; and the students and parents of Wichita have the safe, reliable service they deserve. In addition to meeting the district's high service expectations, First Student delivered an entirely new fleet of buses with advanced technology, as well as hired and trained over 750 bus drivers and monitors.

The biggest return on investment for the district was to have a successfully-operated, smoothly-run student transportation system built together through a solid partnership. First Student's Billigmeier says, “Communication, honesty and transparency all along the way were the keys to our success until we developed the relationship that we have now. And now, it's developed into a true partnership.”

