

TECH NEWS

TECHNOLOGY NEWS

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When the “school” bus isn’t yellow

Twenty-three transit agencies in Iowa are working with 45 school districts to help transport kids to school, saving Iowans more than one million dollars every year.

Public policy regarding coordination

Iowa has a history of actively promoting school/transit coordination.

In 1984, Iowa’s general assembly requested a feasibility study and pilot projects to test such coordination. The general assembly has since mandated that every school district form a school economy task force that includes a public transit agency representative. In 1999 the Iowa Code was revised to clarify that school districts can contract with both urban and regional (rural) transit systems.

As a follow-up to these activities, in 2003 the general assembly asked the Iowa DOT to investigate the extent to which Iowa’s transit agencies and school districts are coordinating transportation services, management, and maintenance systems.

Together with CTRE staff, the Iowa DOT’s Office of Public Transit recently completed a statewide study and reported the findings to the legislature.

Findings

Transit services are generally used to transport special-needs students or students who live far from regular school routes. This arrangement saves schools the expense of purchasing additional buses for their fleets, while providing additional revenues to transit services, which are operating anyway and are usually equipped with the requisite lifts.

The study determined that both school bus programs and transit agencies have similarly excellent safety records.

The nature of coordination between agencies and schools varies, often based on the urban or rural nature of the area. Some examples:

- The Des Moines Metro provides more than 4,000 rides a day, while in some other communities, students ride transit buses on only an incidental basis.
- In Iowa City, Cedar Rapids, Ottumwa, Marshalltown, and Mason City, students ride public transit if they live within a two- to three-mile eligibility limit where school bus transportation is not provided.
- In addition to providing transit service to six counties, the Mid-Iowa Development Association (MIDAS) operates all



Light-duty transit bus interior with passengers headed to school. *Photo courtesy of MIDAS.*

school bus services in the Manson-Northwest Webster school district.

Criteria for successful coordination

Transit agencies and school bus services have different customers, operations, funding sources, and vehicle requirements, so careful negotiations are critical to the success of any coordination initiative.

Coordination works best under the following circumstances:

- There is a need.
- Unused transit capacity or a special fleet is available at the right time.
- By coordinating services, the transit agency gains revenue and the school saves money.
- Managers work together to solve problems.
- No legal or regulatory barriers exist.
- Both the reality and perception of student safety can be assured.

For more information

See the project report *Coordination of Transit and School Busing in Iowa* on CTRE's website. For specific questions, contact Dennis Kroeger, transportation research specialist at CTRE, 515-296-0910, kroeger@iastate.edu.
