

NEWS & RECORD

Guilford schools transportation review sees inefficiencies, offers improvements

By Jessie Pounds jessie.pounds@greensboro.com

January 10, 2018

Shorter walks to bus stops help make Guilford County Schools' transportation department less efficient than other large districts in the state, a new report shows.

In Guilford, a bus rider travels 392 feet on average to get to a school bus stop. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, it's 577 feet.

Guilford gets an 85 percent efficiency score for 2016-17 from the state, the lowest rating of the top five school districts. Charlotte-Mecklenburg is at 98 percent.

Shorter walk-to-stop distances go with longer average bus rides for students and additional fuel costs and bus driver time needed by a district, according to the report.

The comparison came up as part of a major new review of the district transportation department shared at Tuesday night's Guilford County Board of Education meeting.

Chief Operations Officer Scott McCully, who joined the district this summer from Charlotte's school system, asked the Council of the Great City Schools to bring in experts to conduct a management review of Guilford's student transportation program. The impetus, he said, came from the superintendent's transition team, which met and crafted recommendations last school year.

McCully said he's been incredibly impressed with Director of Transportation Jeff Harris, and that he feels that the district has the right leader in place. The review, McCully said, is about process and efficiency.

Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, helped present the preliminary review findings Tuesday.

Inspectors had some good things to report, for example, high ratings for miles between accidents and strong positive reviews of bus service and transportation staff from school principals.

The department had a positive culture and staff were truthful and forthcoming for the review, Casserly said.

Most of the report, however, was critique and recommendations for improvement. The council team recommended changes to everything from how transportation management is organized to hiring practices and route planning changes.

School board members had a lot of questions and concerns about investigators finding that the department was doing an inadequate job of controlling its parts inventory. Nearly \$1.75 million in parts went unaccounted for between 2006-2007 and 2015-16, the review detailed. The worst year was 2011-12, at about \$502,000 in unaccounted parts.

In 2014-15, the state began requiring districts to reimburse it for unaccounted inventory. Guilford had about \$70,000 in unaccounted inventory in 2014-15 and about \$28,000 in 2015-16.

Investigators noted an unlocked outside door to the parts room on their visit and said they were able to wander through without anybody challenging them. They also said the parts room was so crammed order was impossible.

"This is an upsetting report," board member Byron Gladden said. "Hopefully going forward we will set clear expectations with the superintendent, because I want to see the losses every year."

District staff think this issue has more to do with problems with cataloging of parts and inventory, as opposed to theft, McCully said before the meeting. In staff experience, parts that appeared to be missing turned out to be in use on buses running around the district — just never properly recorded.

Chief Financial Officer Angie Henry said no one on staff thinks the district literally lost \$500,000 worth of parts in a single year. She said because of antiquated software, keeping track of parts involves having to input inventory information twice into separate systems. One wrong keystroke, she said, can, and probably did, result in massive records discrepancies. She said people in districts across the state have been getting more careful since they started having to reimburse the state.

In their report, authors recommend the district get a bar-code linked software system for tracking parts, if it doesn't just decide to outsource parts inventory entirely.

The report found the transportation department had in the past recommended outsourcing vehicle parts inventory and management and upgrading and adding vehicle maintenance facilities to district administrators and board members, among other efficiency suggestions.