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EDITORIAL

The consultants on the bus go WTF?

Boston brought in outsiders to examine ways to improve its school bus system. They seemed surprised by what they found.

By The Editorial Board Updated January 27, 2023, 4:00 a.m.

The yellow school bus system “operates differently” in Boston, politely noted a group of veteran public school leaders in a [report](#) on the city’s chronically unreliable buses provided to the school committee earlier this month.

Translation: You people put up with this?

In the diplomatic language of consultants, the team from the Council of the Great City Schools — whose members hailed from other large districts like Omaha and San Antonio — found that Boston has among the highest costs of any district in the nation. Yet it still manages to lack basic procedures like monitoring ridership data to see how many students actually ride the buses.

Superintendent Mary Skipper — who inherited this mess from her predecessors — praised the report and said in a statement to the Globe editorial board that its findings would guide “systemic improvements” to the bus system.

And systemic improvements are what it needs. Despite spending \$143.3 million on busing — 11 percent of its budget — the district has yet to meet the 95 percent on-time rate it promised to the state (it was [91 percent after the holiday break](#)). That’s for the school day itself; the district also fails to “effectively manage its athletic transportation program resulting in canceled athletic events,” the report said.

The high cost and poor performance of the buses has even fueled calls to [end busing altogether](#), return to neighborhood schools, and re-invest those millions in the classroom. But that should be a separate, long-term discussion based on educational needs. As long as the city’s school assignment system creates a need to bus students, those buses have to be reliable.

As the report found, the task of running buses on time is even harder because there are no standard starting and opening times in Boston’s schools. There are “19 different morning bell times, 16 different mid-day bell times, and 25 different afternoon bell times.”

By rearranging school start times into tiers, the district could make it easier to arrange buses. “Changes to bell schedules, while not easy, are essential to improving on-time performance,” the report notes. “This will positively impact the cost of operating transportation services, increase fleet utilization, and improve on-time performance.”

Rearranging start times would also have educational benefits if the district used it as an opportunity to move high schools to later bell schedules. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends [starting middle and high school at 8:30 or later](#), but most Boston high schools begin at [7:30 or even earlier](#).

Changes to school schedules, of course, are controversial: The buses in Boston don’t run on time in part because former mayor Marty Walsh threw former superintendent Tommy Chang under one when Chang tried to rearrange start times in 2017.

Perhaps mindful of Chang’s fate, Skipper promised there would be “meaningful stakeholder and community engagement” before any bell time changes. In that process, Mayor Michelle Wu should be willing to take the political risk that Walsh wouldn’t, by helping her superintendent make the case for bell time changes. That will also require cooperation from charter and parochial schools whose students the city also buses, as [Wu told GBH recently](#), but the heavy lifting will be on the district’s end.

The study recommended a number of other steps, including verifying whether special education students currently receiving services need them and building bus routes “based on historical knowledge and experience, not total eligibility,” because eligibility doesn’t necessarily predict usage.

Skipper said the district’s next steps include forming a Transportation Advisory Council that would guide the district’s response to the report and “engage in collaborative problem-solving, share recommendations with the district, monitor progress, and advocate for systemic improvements to the district’s transportation.”

To some extent, the report — which the city agreed to commission as part of a deal to stave off a state takeover of the underperforming district — tells the city what residents already knew.

But there’s value in an outsider perspective, if for no other reason than to validate for parents that the district’s excuses for the system’s years of poor performance are just that — excuses. Students deserve better.