



Dist. 15 board member seeks busing standards

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Busing 10,000 kids to and from 25 schools over the last year has been a logistical nightmare for Palatine Township Elementary District 15.

Emergency measures have mostly quieted the frequent complaints heard last fall -- like a 4-year-old special-needs child dropped off at home more than 90 minutes after school ended.

Still, school board member Sue Quinn wants to see performance benchmarks set to quantify just how efficiently the busing system operates.

"We don't have a common language to use to talk about how we're performing," she says. "There's no systematic way to check."

Quinn proposed six standards she thinks the district should aim to meet:

- Have at least 97 percent of buses arrive on time -- 15 to five minutes before school starts -- to address the biggest priority of getting students to class on time.
- Keep to less than 5 percent the number of bus routes longer than 45 minutes.
- Aim to keep the average route 30 minutes or less, a mark the district is currently meeting, Quinn said. She says the half-hour starts when the first student is picked up, meaning most others have a shorter ride.
- Strive for 90 percent parent satisfaction.
- Have realistic route schedules. If a bus consistently arrives five minutes before or after it should, routes need to be adjusted.
- Publish biannual reports to ensure efficiency and accountability.

While the school board this week agreed benchmarks are generally good ideas, implementing them could take a lot of time and money.

"We need to find out if it's practical," said board member Tim Millar. "It may be an issue of cost and whether or not we can recruit and maintain more bus drivers."

GPS devices would likely be necessary to collect data. On-site audits take time and staff, as do compiling reports. Random spot checks may be an efficient compromise.

The district staff is to report back to the board next month on just how doable the undertaking is.

District 15 fielded hundreds of complaints of long routes and late arrivals last fall stemming from its transition from a four-tier to a two-tier busing system. To alleviate the problems, the district leased 14 buses to supplement its own fleet. The board voted last month to keep the two-tier plan for the 2008-09 school year despite some ongoing concerns.

New leadership is also on the way, as the district closes in on hiring a transportation director. Retirees have led the department on an interim basis for the past two years.