

Ride to school is a long stretch

Children of racetrack workers follow the season

By Sara Olkon and Robert Channick, Chicago Tribune. Sara Olkon is a Tribune staff reporter. Robert Channick is a freelance writer

February 18, 2007

For Moses Rios and scores of other children of racetrack workers, the 60-mile roundtrip from Arlington Park to schools in Cicero is a tiring reminder of how life in the backstretch collides with academics.

Rios, 13, is a veteran of the trek, which starts in May when racing resumes at the northwest suburban track. Still, he doesn't think the three-hour commute--the only one of its kind in the state--is a big deal.

"It's not so bad," he said. "I can talk with my friends."

But even as experts worry about the impact of such a grinding trip on educational performance, the busing arrangement that made it possible is in jeopardy. The two affected school districts are concerned about the program's cost. And some parents fear that any changes in their children's schedule could have a negative impact.

For more than 150 children whose parents help groom, walk and care for the horses, following the thoroughbred racing schedule means bouncing between Arlington Park and Hawthorne Race Course in Stickney, near Cicero.

Most of the year, they live in one-room apartments in the backstretch or stable area at Hawthorne, where racing resumes Friday. But when the season switches to Arlington, they'll move there and for eight weeks--five in the spring and three in the fall--endure the daily ride south.

The six-year busing arrangement between Palatine-based District 15 and Cicero District 99 recently came into question as Palatine officials argue they shouldn't have to pay the annual \$12,000 tab for transporting kids from Arlington Park to schools in the Cicero District.

In response, Cicero officials have suggested everything from requiring reimbursement--about \$230,000 annually--for the eight weeks the students live in another district to discontinuing the busing.

Trying to minimize school disruption, District 15, which serves Arlington Park, and District 99, where Hawthorne is located, worked out a busing plan in 2000 so that elementary and junior high students could attend Cicero schools year-round.

Earlier this month, District 15 officials began weighing alternatives, including having school at the two tracks, setting up classrooms midway between the tracks or using traveling teachers.

"The situation has troubled us because we really do question whether or not what is happening here is good for the children," said Carol Kunst, assistant superintendent for District 99. "Very young children are spending large amounts of time on buses."

The buses drop off the kindergarten-through-8th grade pupils at several Cicero schools. Rush-hour traffic, construction and weather-related delays only add to what can be a tiresome trip.

But Cheryl Wolfel, director of the Second Languages Program for District 15, said the commute is a marked improvement over having the kids change schools.

"Some of them were here for three or four days," she said. "They would register here, get started, get their little name tags on their desk, get all their school supplies and then they were gone."

Of the roughly 1,500 workers who live in the backstretch, most are grooms and hot-walkers, the latter charged with cooling down horses after their runs. Grooms generally make about \$250 a week, hot-walkers earn about \$150, said Peggy Goetsch, executive director of the Racing Industry Charitable Foundation Inc. The Melrose Park social services organization is funded by the tracks.

There is no union, and vacation days are subject to individual trainers, Goetsch said. Many people rise at 4 a.m. and often work seven days a week.

While the job means a steady paycheck, free housing and access to medical and dental clinics, questions about conditions for the children long have been a sore point.

The spotlight shined on the backstretch kids in 2004, when the Illinois State Board of Education declared the children homeless, citing substandard living arrangements at Arlington Park, where families occupied 8-by-10-foot cinder block rooms in dormitories. Some of the units didn't have private bathrooms.

In 2005, the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the HOPE Fair Housing Center in Wheaton lodged complaints of discrimination and unsafe housing against the racetrack.

New accommodations have been built at Arlington Park, and the federal lawsuit is expected to be settled soon, said Bernard Kleina, executive director of the HOPE Fair Housing Center.

For many parents who live in the backstretch, rocking the boat--including a demand for

better schooling--is unthinkable.

The cost of busing the handful of high school students from the track hasn't raised similar concerns. The two districts involved--District 214 in Arlington Heights and Morton High School District 201 in Cicero--split the busing costs for 15 students who attend Morton East High School.

At Hawthorne, as at Arlington, many of the families live in one-room apartments. The track has a 350-unit dormitory on the backstretch. Entire families occupy the studio apartments, which have private bathrooms but no kitchens. An additional 60 units are offsite in five apartment buildings.

During the school year, most of the older kids must fend for themselves in the morning, given their parents' early duties.

Manuel Herrera, a 14-year-old at Unity Junior High School in Cicero, sets his alarm for 6:30 a.m. His parents call from the barn to make sure he is up, and he always is, Herrera said proudly.

Meanwhile, school officials vowed to continue discussions this month, racing to come up with a new plan ahead of the Arlington season, which opens May 4.

"This whole thing is very frustrating because there are no good answers, and we're the only two school districts that have to work like this," said Wolfel.

solkon@tribune.com

Copyright © 2007, [Chicago Tribune](#)