

**CASES OF CONSOLIDATED
PUPIL / PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION
IN MICHIGAN**

Sponsored by
The Michigan Department of Transportation
Bureau of Urban and Passenger Transportation
Passenger Transportation Division

Center for Applied Research and Rural Studies
Transportation Studies Center
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Mount Pleasant, Michigan

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September 1999

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ADA	Americans with Disabilities Act
ALTRAN	Alger County Transit
BATA	Bay Area Transportation Authority
CDL	Commercial Drivers License
CMH	Community Mental Health
DAR	Dial-A-Ride
FCS	Flint Community Schools
FIA	Family Independence Agency
GRATA	Grand Rapids Area Transit Authority
GRPS	Grand Rapids Public Schools
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
ISD	Intermediate School District
ISTEA	1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act
MCTI	Manistee County Transportation, Inc.
MISD	Manistee Intermediate School District
MDOE	Michigan Department of Education
MDOT	Michigan Department of Transportation
MTA	Mass Transportation Authority (Flint, Michigan)
NPR	National Performance Review
TCAPS	Traverse City Area Public Schools
UPTRAN	Bureau of Urban and Public Transportation

CASES OF CONSOLIDATED TRANSPORTATION

The study objective was to ascertain the lessons learned by, and related experiences of, selected local transit agencies and school districts in consolidating their transportation services. The cases selected represented two urban providers and five non-urban (predominantly rural or small town) providers. These cases are:

- **City of Flint and Genesee County**
 - Mass Transportation Authority (MTA)
 - Flint Community Schools
- **City of Grand Rapids**
 - Grand Rapids Area Transit Authority (GRATA)
 - Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS)
- **City of Big Rapids**
 - City of Big Rapids Dial-A-Ride
- **Lake County**
 - Yates Dial-A-Ride
 - Baldwin Community Schools
- **Manistee County**
 - Manistee County Transportation Inc. (MCTI)
 - Manistee County Intermediate School District (MCISD)
- **Grand Traverse and Leelanau Counties**
 - Bay Area Transportation Authority (BATA)
 - Traverse City Area Public Schools (TCAPS)
- **Alger County**
 - ALTRAN Public Transit
 - Munising Public Schools
 - Superior Central Public Schools

The Flint MTA and Grand Rapids Area Transit Authority (GRATA), representing urban conditions, both had several years of experience. The MTA transports all general pupils, while GRATA transports high school pupils. The Yates Dial-A-Ride experience in Lake County represents the most extensive rural-based effort to provide consolidated service on a county-wide basis. The Big Rapids Dial-A-Ride case illustrates the informal system of consolidation whereby parents individually or collectively organize an arrangement with public transit to provide service. The Manistee County case represents the experience of a transit agency working with an intermediate school district to provide service to special education students. The Alger County case reflects a blend of services to both special and general education students in a variety of contractual relationships. Finally, the BATA and TCAPS experience in Grand Traverse and Leelanau Counties reveals information about the factors that become important in developing a consolidated transportation service.

Alger County Public Transit, Munising Public Schools, and Superior Central Schools

Alger County is home to four school districts: Burt Township School District in Grand Marais, Munising Public Schools, AuTrain-Onota Public Schools, and Superior Central Schools. ALTRAN Public Transit provides a variety of pupil transportation services to each district, although the mix of services varies with each one.

Burt Township School's single bus serves a K-12 population of about 80 students. Some years ago, the district terminated its bus service until voters adopted a millage increase specifically intended for purchasing a bus to resume service. Since ALTRAN would need at least 2 buses to serve approximately 40 to 50 transported students, neither it nor the district have made efforts to consolidate transportation. ALTRAN, however, does provide long distance transportation for some students and general passengers who travel to places like Marquette and Escanaba. The agency also leaves open the possibility of expanding its service if this is mutually agreed-upon.

ALTRAN provides pupil transportation for Munising Public Schools, although not the regular service to and from school during the traditional school year. However, ALTRAN provides daily transportation for 60 to 70 summer school students to and from classes for four weeks during the summer. These students represent about 75% of the summer school population. ALTRAN assigns 4 buses to this service to create a reasonable length of time per trip. When the transportation program started in the summer of 1994, Munising Public Schools' bus drivers, who are organized, opposed it. However, subsequent School-Union contract provisions did not make the marginal pay benefits attractive to drivers who would only work about 3 hours per day during the four-week period. ALTRAN consequently negotiated a service contract with Munising Schools without substantial opposition from the drivers union. The district sees a clear cost advantage in using ALTRAN as its service provider, and is quite satisfied with the existing level of service.

Among other ALTRAN services provided to Munising Public Schools is the transportation of books to and from the branch libraries in Chatham/Trenary and Munising. The library service is administered by the school district. Thus, ALTRAN provides a very small amount of cargo transportation.

ALTRAN provides transportation for special education students within the Munising as well as the Superior – Central school districts.

Finally, ALTRAN provides mid-day transportation service to Middle and High School students. This involves individual and group service for schools on a per-call basis. The school district is very satisfied with the service for a number of reasons:

- ALTRAN is quick to respond with service when called by the district.

- The district also has, at times, a shortage of drivers and the ALTRAN transportation option helps it avoid this potential problem. Once the district gets about 5 special activity buses on the road at any one time, the shortage begins to emerge.
- The after-school-hours service allows teachers and principals to extend the school day for disciplinary or other reasons. Without the ALTRAN option, staff persons would have to delay activities.

It is this last benefit that seems to create the most support among teachers and principals for the ALTRAN service. For example, in a program called “Homework Help,” students struggling with their studies were kept after school to work with teachers on improving academic performance. In these cases, ALTRAN service overcame the transportation hurdle of getting the student home after regular school transportation services ceased. School staff view ALTRAN as a “lifesaver” because the service it provides in these and many similar cases would otherwise not exist.

Munising Public Schools has about 420 elementary students, 320 middle school students, and 350 high school students for a combined population of about 1,090. A district of this size has many occasions when students need mid-day service to such events as after-school functions, emergency trips to doctors, and after school tutoring activities. The added transportation flexibility comes into play, for example, when the 6th grade band must travel to the High School for classes on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Moreover, there are only a few students who live outside the ALTRAN service area (contiguous to Alger County boundaries), which reinforces the flexibility of its use.

Teachers are very supportive of the service because of the options it creates. School officials believe that parents are supportive as well, in part because officials have not had complaints or negative comments about the service. The issue of student safety while riding ALTRAN buses has not been raised. ALTRAN is quick to point out that its buses are equipped with seat belts while school buses do not have them. The personalized, door-to-door service, coupled with ALTRAN driver service for younger students, is thought to pre-empt negative reactions among parents and the community.

Depending on the nature and purpose of the service, payments are made by either the student or parents, or the district. The district is billed for the service on a routine basis, which makes the system administratively convenient.

As an extension of this service, the district also uses ALTRAN for student transportation to and from some special events and/or athletic activities. Once again, the need for this occasional service depends on the availability of district drivers and buses. ALTRAN would like to provide more transportation for the Munising Public Schools, but finds that the district is somewhat reluctant to contract for this. School staff, on the other hand, find the service very beneficial, and want to be creative in using the ALTRAN option. School staff wants to use ALTRAN to great advantage. In general, there appears to be an evolving relationship between ALTRAN and Munising Public Schools, and one that is based on a growing sense of trust between the respective administrators.

The Autrain/Onota school district operates a K-6 grade school. Beginning with the 7th grade, the district transports students to neighboring Munising Schools to complete their middle and high school education. The district usually transports its own students to and from Munising. However, ALTRAN operates as a back-up service and, on occasion, is called to do so. In addition, ALTRAN transports some regular students for the Autrain/Onota district on a regular basis. In the 1998-99 school year, ALTRAN began to provide special education transportation for one wheel-chair bound student. It also transports students for special events, and provides some mid-day service between schools (e.g., between 9:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m.).

ALTRAN enjoys a long-term relationship with Superior Central Schools, located in the western portion of Alger County, and adjacent to Marquette County. For the past ten years, ALTRAN has provided, by contract, vocational education student transportation runs from Superior Central High School to Marquette City and back. These “skill center” runs leave at 11 a.m. and return at 3 p.m. daily. While in Marquette, ALTRAN will transport students to the skill center, the Marquette Senior High School, internship placements, and other locations as necessary. The district’s contract with ALTRAN calls for the service of one bus and driver, without regard for daily student counts. This affords ALTRAN an opportunity to fill the bus with other general public passengers with a need to travel to Marquette when space permits.

Both the school district superintendent and ALTRAN general manager view this as a win-win situation. The district receives a guaranteed service, and ALTRAN can extend its service to constituents who otherwise would have significant difficulty going to and from Marquette. The commingling of student and public passengers does not appear to create a discipline problem. The driver typically knows students by name, and an added adult passenger tends to be a calming influence on students. The junior and senior high school-aged passengers are also seen as more mature and well-behaved under the circumstances. Nonetheless, the district’s discipline rules are formalized and apply to student behavior on the ALTRAN bus.

ALTRAN also provides transportation for wheel-chair bound students of Superior Central Schools. Generally, the number of such students is quite small. After the Intermediate School District terminated its special education busing in the mid- 1980s, and given the substantial costs associated with the purchase of a lift-equipped bus and its ongoing operating and personnel costs, the district found it financially advantageous to contract with ALTRAN for this service. Parental response over the years has been generally supportive. Many parents want to see the same driver pick up their student(s), and ALTRAN seeks to do accomplish this when possible. In other cases, parents do not want other general passengers to ride the bus with their student(s) on board. Depending on the severity of disability, and the needs of general passengers, ALTRAN seeks to accommodate parental wishes. However, in most cases this is not possible. It is interesting to note that these same students often use ALTRAN for after-school and weekend transportation.

Some time ago, the Munising and Superior Central school districts agreed to coordinate the operation of their special education programs to gain some economies of scale. Neither district alone had the numbers of students to make a successful program operate easily. A combined program with the two populations would make better pedagogical and economic sense. The program calls for the transportation of Superior Central students to Munising for their regular school program. ALTRAN provides this transportation.

Superior Central Schools also uses ALTRAN for special event transportation, and as a backup when the district needs substitute drivers. Like Munising Public Schools, Superior Central often encounters a shortage of drivers for its 8 regular daily runs. When the list of available substitute drivers is depleted, ALTRAN offers its support.

The district's long-term relationship with ALTRAN, coupled with the quality of services it enjoys, leads the Superior Central School Board to support the Superintendent in his dealings with ALTRAN. The relationship can be characterized as mutually satisfactory, and both the Superintendent and General Manager strive to make it so. It is based on honest negotiations, trust on costs and claims, and reasonable contract costs. Each party remains open to the possibility of further cooperative ventures if they arise.

Bay Area Transportation Authority and Traverse City Area Public Schools

The Traverse City Area Public School district (TCAPS), like many other school districts across Michigan, has struggled with the adverse effects of Proposal A, the property tax/school finance reform constitutional amendment adopted by voters in March 1994. In June 1998, TCAPS joined with other school districts in the Traverse Bay Area Intermediate School District (ISD) to campaign for an increase in the school property tax rate (called “millage”) dedicated to operating costs. This regional millage passed in the TCAPS district, but failed by about 2,500 votes across the entire ISD. After this defeat, TCAPS began the search for cost reductions within its own organization. The scheduled opening of the district’s second high school in August 1998 further squeezed the existing budget.

At the time of the millage election, which also served to fill school board seats, candidates discussed the potential need for future reductions in the transportation program if school officials could not find increased revenues or offsetting cost reductions. Thus the idea of terminating busing had been broached in the local political arena and parents, citizens, and voters were sensitized to the issue. Given the millage defeat, cost reductions in non-transportation services could not provide savings in sufficient amounts to prevent cuts in the transportation budget.

In reviewing the existing pattern of operations, administrators noted that only 400 to 600 of 3,000 high school students were bused to and from school. Students came from all points within the 285 square mile district, one with a variety of population densities, terrain, and road systems. The marginal cost for this service segment was much higher than that for other segments. Moreover, high school students were more likely than elementary or middle school students to have alternative means of getting to and from school, including driving, ride sharing, or public transit. The opening of the second high school would also expand the total number of available student parking spaces. Finally, district officials sensed that community sentiment supported continued transportation of K-9th grade students.

In August 1998, the Traverse City Area Public School District terminated busing to and from the high schools. It continued to offer other transportation services, like that for vocational education. By terminating high school busing, TCAPS realized a cost reduction of \$650,000, mostly from the reduction of salary, fringe benefits, and vehicle expenditures. The district continued to operate about 120 buses at an annual cost of about \$7.9 million to serve other students.

Parental and public reaction to the termination of for 10th, 11th, and 12th graders was less than expected. With the exception of one school board meeting, parental and community outcries against the action were muted. This may have been due to a sense of resignation toward the cut in the aftermath of the millage defeat. It may also have been the result of the school board election campaign that saw the issue debated and resolved by the ballot box. The school bus drivers, represented by an association with substantial clout, were

understandably opposed to the action. However, the district was within its right to take it. Officials also noted that had the district sought to replace the Association's drivers with BATA drivers, the drivers would have reacted differently. Finally, many students simply began to drive to school, or ride share with classmates, which demonstrated that they could still get to school.

The Bay Area Transportation Authority (BATA) operates in both Grand Traverse and Leelanau Counties. Later in the fall of 1998, BATA and its supporters successfully campaigned for a five-year .18 mill property tax levy to fund BATA services. On November 3, 1998, voters adopted the dedicated millage by a 60%-40% margin. Large margins in the urbanized areas of both counties easily offset the relatively small opposition in southern Grand Traverse County, which at that time was not served by BATA.

Voter support can be attributed to BATA's "product and price advantage." It has recently expanded services in a number of ways that serve to market public transportation and keep it in the forefront of positive public attention. For example, BATA is one of several organizations in a six-county area to participate in a two-year regional demonstration grant. Called "The Regional Ride," the grant-funded service consists of flexible routes to provide patient transportation to health-care providers in the region. It is a van-based, appointment specific, 1 day advance notice, service to Munson Regional Medical Center in Traverse City as well as to doctors within the area. It provides about 150 trips per week, mostly for patient travel for treatments like dialysis and oncology. In another example, BATA received 8 new buses in September 1998, and, when combined with a new authority logo, earned much free media attention. In the view of BATA officials, marketing public transportation is necessary to keep it in the public's mind as an option when the public becomes transportation dependent. Finally, after TCAPS terminated its high school bus service, several students began to use BATA. It provides rides to about 50 students per day. This service, like the others mentioned above, highlighted BATA as a "safety net" for the transportation dependent, attracted positive public attention, and earned voter support at the polls.

The Bay Area Transportation Authority was organized under Act 196 in 1996. Prior to that time, the BATA governing body consisted of a member from Leelanau County, three members from Traverse City, and seven members from seven townships in northern and central Grand Traverse County. The township members were seated on the board by virtue of their positions as elected township officers (e.g. supervisors). The former board tended to allocate BATA service based on the relative levels of financial support contributed by each member government. In 1998, a new seven-member board was formed. Four seats were allocated to the Grand Traverse County, two to Leelanau County, and one seat filled by an at-large member selected by the other six members. The Grand Traverse members consist of one representative of the county, one representative from the City of Traverse City, one representative from the rural townships, and one representative from the urban townships (defined as those with sewer service). The two Leelanau County members consist of one citizen and one County Commissioner who sought appointment to the BATA board. The At-Large seat is currently filled by a Vice-

President of Munson Medical Center's Home Health Care program. In general, the recreated BATA board is highly supportive of public transportation.

Some BATA board members as well as some community leaders encourage the coordination or consolidation of public and pupil transportation. Some leaders have claimed that within two years, BATA will be providing pupil transportation for the district. This is conditioned on BATA's ability to acquire the necessary equipment and financial support. It is clear that the existing Dial-A-Ride service is not adequate to serve all school district transportation needs.

Nonetheless, BATA has enjoyed successful experiences in providing some segments of pupil transportation. BATA has provided student transportation for vocational education programs within Grand Traverse and Leelanau Counties for a very long time. In Leelanau County, Northport Public Schools joined in this program for the 1997-98 school year, but later resumed its own separate service. The Authority also provides Head Start transportation as it has over a number of years. A charter school located in Williamsburg has contracted with BATA for transportation service for about 50 of its pupils. In a pick-up point arrangement, parents drop off students at pre-arranged locations from which they are transported by BATA to and from the school. BATA has one 47-passenger bus it uses for this service. Finally, BATA provides some general transportation services to students. These may be students participating in the Schools of Choice program, a handful of students who use the service for after-school events, etc.

Since busing was terminated, TCAPS has worked with community leaders to promote alternative transportation service for students who need it. However, the district is not actively pursuing the option of purchasing BATA bus passes or otherwise formally contracting with BATA to transport students to and from high school. TCAPS has also responded to private operators who have asked to make an offer to provide the district's transportation. TCAPS' surveys show that there are not substantial savings beyond the sale of the bus fleet. The operating costs of the private operators remain about the same, or may be somewhat higher than the district's.

The district has engaged in other efforts to promote local transportation. For example, it has been one of several local institutions working with community leaders in a forum on educational improvement sponsored by a local Indian tribe. School transportation, as a supporting element of education, is part of the forum. In a similar way, TCAPS has worked closely with BATA's Strategic Plan process to identify transportation needs and opportunities to share resources and thereby reduce costs. This led to some sharing of facilities, dispatching, mechanics, the bus wash, etc. The district has also investigated other areas of potential cost savings in its use of the ISD's specialized services for transporting disabled students.

Any future BATA service expansion into pupil transportation is limited by the substantial costs associated with providing full service to pupils as well as the capital costs associated with acquiring and maintaining a large fleet capable of such service. BATA currently

operates 40 buses while the TCAPS district operates a fleet of about 120 buses. BATA officials are meeting with district officials to develop program alternatives to the absence of high school student busing. Neither party, however, is suggesting that BATA fully replace the service that was terminated by TCAPS.

Several issues appear to be emerging in the current negotiations between BATA and TCAPS.

- Trust between the two parties is a key element to any future success. Prior to the fall of 1998, BATA service to the district was limited in that it did not involve close working relationships and the kind of inter-organizational collaboration that builds trusting relationships among officials and organizations. Since then, TCAPS and BATA have developed a sense of mutual trust and understanding so as to allow negotiations to move forward. TCAPS transportation officials consider themselves fortunate in that they participated in BATA's planning process. The experience helped develop a good working relationship between the district and the public transportation agency. It also provided a basis upon which to discuss additional transportation options. But such moves require time.
- Second, there is a common reaction among many people that the different rider populations, school and general public, should not be mixed. BATA's emerging reputation in the community is still hampered by a perception among some people that only indigent and lower class persons use BATA, and that school children should not be exposed to them on a bus. This issue involves cultural, security, and safety perceptions of BATA and school district transportation services that must be clarified, and if not accurate, then correctly stated and publicized. BATA's safety record, for example, has to be publicized in order to reassure riders and officials that it represents a safe alternative to traditional school busing. Nonetheless, safety does not appear to be an issue that is blocking negotiations. On the other hand, the focus has been on high school aged students. If elementary school students were included in the discussion, then safety issues would likely arise.
- There are questions about the differences between standards and qualifications that apply to school bus drivers and to BATA bus drivers. Many people are unaware of these, and the lack of awareness is often a problem. However, this is also an area of potential consolidation in the form of a driver pool. Like many other districts in Michigan, there is an occasional shortage of drivers. If BATA and TCAPS adopt the same driver standards, then a common pool of drivers could be created and used by each agency, as well as perhaps by other school districts within the area.
- Another issue concerns the provision of service to some but not all students. Some people divide pupil transportation into various segments, of which not all are suitable for public transportation service. An example of such segmentation may be vocational transportation (from school to school), special education (which involves relatively fewer students and higher costs per ride), and high school students (who are more

mature and responsible than are younger students). Elementary and middle school students, many people conclude, should not ride public transportation to school.

- Costs and funding support for pupil transportation are big hurdles to consolidation. BATA receives support from the federal government (14%), the State of Michigan (50%), its riders via the fare box (20%), and from the local millage (16%). Any cost increase associated with BATA provision of pupil transportation must be supported by funding from the school district and its per capita state allocation, or some combination of school district funds and student rider payments. This would be partially offset by federal and state cost reimbursements, but the remaining costs would be substantial.
- Labor issues and agreements among the organizations and their labor unions must be ironed out. BATA's wage and benefit structure for drivers is lower than that offered by TCAPS to its drivers.
- Capital requirements, bus acquisition and fleet replacement questions are significant in the negotiation process. The typical public transportation bus and typical school bus are substantially different in their construction, safety standards, and passenger comfort level. This has implications for the number of buses necessary to serve a school district. For example, BATA's 47-passenger bus, if configured for pupil transportation, would seat 77 students.
- The State of Michigan's support for such consolidation could be perceived as unpredictable. While local governments may be able to adopt millages to support programs, an implication of Proposal A adopted in March of 1994 was that schools would get out of the millage business. A public transportation agency that sought a special millage to finance pupil transportation may appear to voters as an agency standing in stead of a school district. A perception such as this would violate the spirit of the tax limitation amendment.

The district foresees a role for BATA in providing service to students within the more urbanized, higher population density areas of the district, especially within Traverse City proper. In this role, BATA could transport students between schools, provide special runs on field trips, and otherwise fill in the gaps in district-provided transportation. The urban environment would lend itself to the creation of established stops, or pick-up points at which students would board buses. If this were to happen, BATA would be in a position to offer competitive cost pricing to TCAPS. If the district moved to "theme" schools, or magnet schools, further opportunities would arise for BATA. The source of BATA's price advantage appears to be in lower labor and fringe benefit costs.

The position of the Bay Area Transportation Authority in this process of negotiation is twofold. It asks, "Where can BATA help?" and "What will the State and the school district support?" Answers to these two questions, in combination, will dictate the options for public and pupil transportation consolidation. It now appears that a service to and

from the high school may be arranged such that 2 morning, 1 noon, and 2 afternoon runs transport students within specified BATA zones. BATA service for special and vocational education appears to be a larger opportunity in pupil transportation than does the high school service.

Big Rapids Dial-A-Ride

The City of Big Rapids operates a Dial-A-Ride (DAR) within the city limits for its residents. The agency operates as a regular city department and uses an advisory committee to help it assess service and to consider policy and procedural changes. The service receives revenues from the fare box, and is partially subsidized by the City's General Fund. It also receives funding from the Michigan Department of Transportation. These funds support a fleet of nine buses. At peak times, the DAR can put seven buses on the road. Of the remaining two buses, one is often in for service and routine maintenance and the other is used for emergencies.

The DAR operates six days a week. It runs on a twelve-hour day from 6:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. on Monday through Friday, and from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturdays. Rates are low (\$.50 and \$1.00).

The DAR began a relationship with many parents of the Big Rapids School District some years ago. While the District provides transportation service for students living outside of the city limits, it does not provide it for students living within the city. For a variety of reasons, parents living within the city came to rely on the DAR to provide service to their school-age children. In general, parents find the service to be convenient and available at reasonable cost. Every August before the start of school, parents contact the DAR to create a "standing call" for transit service on particular days and times and to and from specified places. To place a standing call, parents provide such information as names, phone numbers, emergency contact persons, orders, days, times, and locations.

The DAR has 7 buses with limited seating which are available on a first-come/first-serve basis. At this time, the standing call service arrangement creates three peak load periods when buses are filled. These periods total about four and one-half hours out of the 12 hour day. When demand conflicts occur at these times, the policy is one of asking patrons to wait until space becomes available. Otherwise people can seek other options under the circumstances. For example, a morning peak begins at 7:00 a.m. on school days. If a patron calls at 6:30 and seeks transportation to an 8 a.m. appointment, he or she may be asked to take either a 7 a.m. ride or one after 8:15 or 8:30 a.m. when the peak is over.

The system's apparent success at avoiding many complaints while operating under these constraints stems from the skill of mobility coordinators who schedule service. Other riders also come to recognize the existence of such peaks and may plan accordingly.

The DAR has no formal contract with the school district or parents. In a similar case, the agency works with parents of children attending a local Head Start program. DAR provides service to some children, and bills parents monthly for the use of transit services.

Parents appear to be very satisfied with the level and quality of service. The safety record of the DAR is very good. The DAR adds services that it views as responsibilities when

working with younger passengers. It typically operates a curb-to-curb service. When doing this for school-aged passengers, drivers make sure to check that a child dropped off at his or her destination is greeted by an adult. If no one is at home, the driver will contact the dispatcher who then seeks to call the emergency contact persons. Meanwhile, the child remains on the bus until arrangements can be made. This quality of service is higher than that provided to regular adult passengers, obviously.

The DAR provides no special training for its younger passengers. Special training is given to drivers in working with senior and disabled passengers. However, when making a standing call arrangement, parents are given a copy of the “rules of the road” defining proper behavior. When the driver finds deviations, he will note the individual, where the infraction incurred, the nature of conduct, and other relevant observations. Then penalties, if appropriate under the circumstances, are applied. In these cases, passengers may be prohibited from riding the bus for a period of time, up to and including losing the privilege of riding the bus for the remainder of the school year.

When considering future needs and demands, the DAR is unlikely to press for major changes to its existing practices and policies. It will, however, seek to balance the competing needs of its ridership populations and agencies, given funding constraints. It clearly does not seek to expand the existing service to parents of school-aged children at this time. The agency sees itself as trying to keep “its head above water” and maintain the current level of service. It will try to deal with new demands such as welfare-to-work reforms given existing constraints. Two key problems in this regard involve service hours and who ultimately pays for service expansions. Until resources for capital expansion and ongoing operating costs become available, DAR service will be in a holding pattern.

Manistee County Transportation, Inc. and Manistee Intermediate School District

The Manistee County Transportation, Inc (MCTI) is governed by a seven member board. It operates a fleet of 23 buses in a demand-response system operating within a county of 553 square miles containing 21, 265 residents. It uses a 24-hour reservation system and operates a minimum of two runs per day service to out-county areas (one morning, one afternoon/evening). The agency's revenues come from the fare box, federal and state grants, contracts with local agencies, and a dedicated millage (.33 mill) levied on a county-wide base. The millage was supported by county voters as a response to increased service demands placed on public transportation. In the last election, the vote was about 2:1 in favor of the millage. The ratio was similar in both Manistee City and in the townships. The voters' support is partially reflective of MCTI's willingness to expand services, usually via service contracts, to meet increased demand.

The MCTI governing board, in the view of some officials, would like to expand the agency so as to take over more pupil transportation within the county. This is clearly an ambitious and long-term goal, especially given the schools' record of doing a good job in transporting their students. The goal originated from a MCTI Board member's experience in another state where one bus system integrates busing needs from all riding populations: students, general public, seniors, disabled, etc. To date, MCTI has expanded its pupil transportation service in an incremental manner.

A key difference between public and pupil transportation systems is the use of flashing red lights and stops available to school (yellow and black) buses yet unavailable to public transit buses. Additionally, MCTI cannot replicate the current service arrangement provided by school districts. As service is now typically performed, children do not cross major roads, and the districts provide door-to-door service. In this regard, Manistee County Transportation is unlike the situation confronted by Yates Township Dial-A-Ride in Lake County where parents without school transportation service were willing to participate in an off-road pickup point system. Such a system would likely be perceived as a loss of service quality by Manistee County parents and hence likely be opposed. Other conditions make such moves unlikely in the short run. These include the safety issue commonly raised by parents (e.g. "School buses are safer than public transit buses.") and the relatively sound financial conditions of school districts that do not have to cut services like transportation to save teaching positions.

MCTI does provide a variety of services for pupils. First, it provides service for the Manistee Intermediate School District (MISD) in transporting disabled students to and from school. The Manistee Intermediate School District covers all of Manistee County and a small portion of Lake County. Prior to the 1997-98 school year, it operated a small fleet of three buses (one of which was a spare) and one van to provide special education transportation for approximately 45 students. The MISD ran three basic routes that together crossed all parts of the district as well as special runs for field trips, etc. One driver was retired but continued to drive one run on a part-time basis. He and two full-time drivers were supported by one substitute driver. During the 1996-97 school year, the MISD contracted with Manistee County Transportation to provide service on one route.

During the spring and summer of 1997, the MISD and MCTI negotiated a contract that had MCTI provide all special education transportation within the district. The contract cost to the district was substantially below that which it would incur if it were to continue its program. For the 1997-98 school year, MISD budgeted \$108,254 that also included the one MCTI route. MCTI proposed to operate all runs for \$59,598, or a reduction of \$48,656 (45%). The district would also make a final payment on its latest-model bus and keep it as a spare. The payment and operating costs associated with this vehicle were estimated at \$12,000 (\$10,000 payment, \$2,000 operating).

The move to contract with MCTI was also facilitated by the lack of personnel layoffs. One of the full-time drivers was transferred to an existing teacher aide position in the Preprimary Impaired classroom program and the other driver moved to an administrative position. The part-time status of the retired and spare drivers did not present itself as a labor problem.

Other contract provisions gave MISD the decision-making power to cancel school for weather reasons and have MCTI return students to their homes, for an extra charge of \$45. Transportation services would be automatically cancelled or delayed according to MISD's schedule changes. MCTI also reserved the right to cancel service if it determined that weather or road conditions prevented it from transporting passengers safely. Student transportation outside of the agreed upon routes would be billed at the regular rate of \$2.50 per ride. In an important provision, MCTI noted that all service it provides is open-door general public transportation service.

According to MISD officials, parents, teachers and staff are generally satisfied with the level of service provided by Manistee County Transportation. In particular, parents are pleased that their children spend less time overall riding the bus to and from school. MCTI is providing more, and hence shorter, routes to shorten the average ride time. The transit buses themselves offer a smoother ride and more comfort in that regard. Furthermore, parents have grown accustomed to dealing with MCTI to resolve any difficulties in scheduling service or lodging complaints.

However, these benefits are partially offset by some added inconveniences. One is associated with variable pickup and drop off times. Under the MISD transportation program, buses were often regular in the pickup and drop off times. With MCTI's program, the timing is more varied. This may be in part due to its open-door general public service whereby MCTI seeks to flex service and pickup or drop off other non-school passengers when it is convenient to do so. It may also have stemmed from the new program itself. Reports of parental dissatisfaction with timing, as reported by MISD officials, appear to be more infrequent as time goes on and MCTI's program experience grows.

Another parental concern has to do the bus drivers themselves. Under the MISD transportation program, school children had a regular driver that they came to know and trust. After MCTI took on the program, drivers were frequently changed from day to day.

This helped foster behavior problems among students, some of whom already had a tendency to disrupt service. Since MCTI's startup, it has been more consistent in its assignment of regular drivers, although when used, substitute drivers would still create the same situation. Behavior problems now appear to be less frequent. Nonetheless, the MCTI relationship with individual student passengers is not as "personal" as it may have been under the Intermediate School District.

Lastly, some parents reported to MISD that it appeared that MCTI drivers were less likely than MISD drivers to put children at ease and assist them with wheelchairs, harnesses, car seats, etc. It may also be the case that MCTI drivers are accustomed to dealing with adult passengers, most of whom may not be in need of such close attention. Again, parental comments about these matters are becoming less frequent as MCTI's experience with special education students grows.

The formal planning that went into the consolidation of transportation service in this case was limited because of the small size of the consolidation. Manistee County Transportation, Inc. essentially extended existing service so as to include MISD students. A small group that consisted of the Assistant Superintendent for Special Education and MCTI's General Manager and Transportation Coordinator negotiated the service arrangements. This team handled the operational details as the service was being implemented. Over time, the arrangements have been refined based on experience and performance feedback to MCTI. They are not reduced to writing but rather consist of informal understandings. MCTI may have them documented in its policies and procedures. There were no advisory groups of parents or others formed to offer ideas and assistance in defining service provisions.

Given their experience with the consolidated service, MISD officials have not considered returning to their earlier self-operated transportation program. The problems associated with passenger relations appear to have diminished significantly. In fact, the contractual arrangement appears to be working well overall, and it has been extended into the 1998-99 school year.

In other pupil transportation programs, Manistee County Transportation also provides service to the "Four Star" program, a Head Start-type program operated by the MISD. This is a county-wide program involving four-year olds. MCTI provides service to several out-county parents and students who attend a parochial school in the City of Manistee. This involves using pick-up points to transport from 15 to 30 students.

Finally, the MCTI provides all transport service to parents and students of a charter school located in an out-county area about ten miles from Manistee City. The Charter School serves a student population of 120 students ranging from the K to 6th or 7th grades. In this case, the charter school did not have busing in place prior to its startup. It located in an area outside of the major population center of the county to maximize its per pupil subsidy. The charter also drew students from across the county, and, therefore, crossed existing school district boundaries.

The charter school pays the total transportation bill through a contract. The service pattern is similar to that in Lake County. There are three or four pickup points located in off-road areas, well-lit, and offering ample parking for parents. The MCTI will pick up students at a designated time and transport them to and from school and to and from other functions. To initiate this service, MCTI officials sat down with parents and school officials to discuss transportation alternatives. Initially a door-to-door arrangement was identified but considered to be too expensive. The MCTI contracts are determined on an hourly rate. This feature made pick-up point systems more economical.

This is the first experience where MCTI has provided a service similar to that of general pupil transportation. It uses some cameras on buses to help maintain student discipline. Students are trained to use MCTI service. Also, drivers are trained in dealing with student passengers. Regular driver training for MCTI and other public transportation agencies usually focuses on elderly, impaired, disabled and wheelchair bound passengers. Drivers are not trained to deal with elementary and secondary aged school children in particular. In such cases, discipline is a key element to driver training.

Discipline is often maintained when adults board public transport buses. However, MCTI sees some difference between theory and practice regarding transit access. It maintains a demand-response system and runs no routes, per se. In theory, a public transit bus carrying school children may pick up adults as part of the run. This would mix adults and children, and in the mixing children would more likely behave well. The MCTI does not see such mixing occur. Similar to the consolidation experiences reported elsewhere, adults in Manistee County seem to prefer to ride without school children and therefore wait until hours and/or days when students are not likely to be riding the bus.

The MCTI offers these observations to other agencies consider service expansion in the near future: First, the removal of the Michigan Department of Transportation's reimbursement cap for local public transit agencies has encouraged these agencies to investigate service expansion. For example, when coupled with Proposal A's school funding arrangements, the cap's removal gave MCTI an incentive to investigate the expansion of general pupil transportation. While there was much discussion among officials, details eventually bogged the idea down. These details included safety concerns, union contracts, and capital requirements.

Second, the financial circumstances of school districts will determine their willingness to enter into transportation service arrangements that do not replicate their existing ones. For example, school officials, parents, and students would likely oppose going from door-to-door service to a pick-up point service, all things being equal. However, if the district were under significant financial pressure, and such an arrangement were to save significant resources and teaching positions, a pick-up point service may prove desirable. In the absence of such an event, school districts appear hesitant to move toward a public transportation option. Clearly public transportation cannot replicate existing school services.

Third, pupil safety is a primary issue for all parties. Public transit buses do not have red flashers. As such, drivers cannot stop traffic and allow passengers to cross streets. All passenger departures must be on the right side of the road. Agencies like Mansitee County Transportation consequently take much more care in transporting younger passengers. They work to be more attentive to safety threats. For example, MCTI drivers make sure that school-aged riders are safely off the bus and greeted by an adult at the stop prior to continuing their runs. It is thought that public transportation agencies “go overboard” in these kinds of situations because they are sensitive to the safety concerns of young riders.

Given existing conditions, the likely progression of change is one of small, incremental steps toward enhanced public and pupil transportation using existing financial and infrastructure resources.

Mass Transportation Authority (Flint and Genesee County)

The Mass Transportation Authority (MTA) was initially organized as a municipal authority under Act 55. It was later expanded to a county-wide authority and its articles of incorporation were amended to increase its board membership. The MTA currently has 11 seats. Five seats are allocated to cities within Genesee County. An additional five seats are allocated to Genesee County, small cities in the out-county area, and townships. The schools, broadly defined to include preschools, Head Start, Montessori, public and private colleges and post-graduate schools, are collectively allocated one seat.

The MTA presently serves 26,000 school children from the Flint Community Schools (FCS) within the City of Flint, the Genesee Catholic Board of Education, and several private schools in the county. In Flint, it has routes throughout the city that run past schools. Other public school districts within the County have approached the MTA to investigate having the authority provide them with transportation services. In general, they are seeking curb-to-curb service in off-peak hours. The MTA sees an increase in demand for school transportation service arising from the creation of charter schools, enhanced schools of choice programs, and magnet school programs. Efforts to reduce class size, to the extent that it may lead to the construction of more schools, will also increase service demand yet without increasing the number of students. The number of buses may well increase, but not the number of students under these scenarios. Costs will undoubtedly rise under these conditions.

To date, the MTA's response has been uniformly consistent. It is putting the necessary infrastructure in place prior to expanding its service responsibility. It currently operates between 330 and 350 vehicles and uses four locations to support its operations. Two major capital projects are presently underway that, when completed, will significantly expand its support facilities for its fleet plus increase its capacity for additional services. Prior to its service expansion following the 1991 Strategic Plan, the MTA operated 100 vehicles out of eight locations.

Under the revised Comprehensive Transportation Fund funding formula, the MTA perceives that the resources exist for it to consider additional school transportation after the capital projects are completed. It also finds that the State Legislature is very supportive of the concept of consolidating pupil and public transportation. It sees the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) and its Bureau of Urban and Public Transportation (UPTRAN) as chief advocates for these service configurations. However, time is needed to observe the kinds of benefits that can accrue from this type of service.

From its perspective, the MTA has established an "outstanding" relationship with Flint Community Schools since it began transporting all general pupils in the 1991-92 school year. It was open for some criticism as it sought to assemble the equipment, staff, and facilities to provide this transportation capability essentially within one summer prior to the beginning of the school year. During this start-up process, the MTA also had to continue to provide services to its other long-time constituencies as well as to other new

clients. For example, a service priority identified in the Strategic Plan called for transit support for the Strong Families/Safe Children program begun by the Michigan Department of Social Services (now Family Independence Agency). The MTA saw the Flint Community School District as one major stakeholder among many others. There were operational problems that appeared on occasion that were overcome. For example, service priorities had to be identified in cases where vehicles were down and more than one stakeholder required service. Considering the magnitude of service expansion (from 45 to 292 vehicles at peak times; from 1 to 14 support buildings), in hindsight the transition went remarkably well. However, the MTA has learned from this experience that the infrastructure and organizational capacity (facilities, staff, vehicles, policies, etc.) have to be in place before such major changes are undertaken. It is this experience that makes the MTA hesitant to acquire more school transportation contracts before its capital expansion is complete.

In 1990, the MTA initiated a Strategic Planning Process to help it deal with various issues challenging its operations as they existed at that time. The Federal Government was moving toward eliminating its operating assistance in favor of capital assistance only. The State of Michigan at that time was perceived as also reassessing its role in public transportation policy. Finally, the community itself had identified unmet mobility needs, and sought to develop service changes to gain more efficiency in the use of its resources.

The Strategic Planning Process involved 65 people from all facets of the community. Its members' guiding focus was what they saw as the best interests of the community. They drafted a seven-year strategic plan covering 1990 to 1997. The plan identified community transportation needs, examined the authority's structure, reviewed and assessed the MTA's finances, and highlighted various action items. One action item called for investigating the consolidation of pupil transportation as an MTA service. The MTA has always transported school children on its routes, although this was on an informal basis whereby students would individually pay fares and ride as general public passengers. The strategic plan sought to move further toward formal service consolidation.

In these and other transportation issues, the Strategic Planning Process worked to inform community leaders and members of the importance of public transportation. For example, the Mass Transportation Authority was not supported by a dedicated millage at that time. Given the efforts of the Strategic Planning team and its resulting campaign, the MTA garnered 79.6% approval in its first millage election. Two millage renewals have passed since. The Strategic Plan itself has provided the general public with information on transportation needs and how existing resources are applied to meet them.

A plan update in 1995 extended the strategic plan by twenty years, to 2015. On an annual basis, the current year plan is defined, with an intermediate five-year plan that is specific and detailed. Beyond that point, the plan becomes much more general in its goals. The MTA printed 5,000 copies of the plan summary plus handouts for the public. Much of the MTA's success to date is attributed to its successful strategic planning efforts.

The Flint Community School Board of Education approached consolidation immediately upon completion of the strategic plan. A Task Force was appointed to study the issue and develop a strategy for service consolidation. The Task Force included parents, educators, members of the business community, and others interested in education. While it supported the strategic plan's recommendation for consolidation in principle, the Task Force's effort was directed toward a more specific and more detailed plan of action to fulfill the strategic plan's goal. Among the issues it dealt with were the community's perception of such consolidation and, more importantly in the short run, labor relations. Labor in both organizations was organized. Therefore the school's transportation service had to be bargained away. The existing labor contract was not renewed. The school district kept its special education transportation as well as that for out-of-county travel for such things as sporting events. The same union represented labor in both organizations. In essence, the union saw the consolidation as a "no net loss of jobs" and did not vigorously oppose the consolidation. Further, the community perception was that there was a fundamental choice between teachers and drivers. If such a choice went to voters, it was clear teachers would be the choice.

A second issue raised in the Task Force deliberations was one of student safety. The MTA convincingly argued that, at that time, it transported about 4,000 students per day as general public riders. It could not point to a single incident of child abuse or similar event while riding a MTA vehicle. There were no injuries to students properly trained in the use of public transportation. This caveat, training of students properly to use public transportation, is a critical element of successful consolidation. The safety advocates were satisfied with the MTA record on this score.

After the Task Force issued its report, the MTA bought used school buses on the open market and used its own resources to rehabilitate them. It completely rebuilt the buses in an intensive program. As a consequence, the MTA now has a diverse fleet consisting of conventional transit buses, conventional school buses, smaller buses, and vans that it uses to provide service to Flint Community Schools as well as to its other constituencies. As the oldest of the rehabilitated buses have been replaced, they have been replaced with conventional school buses, painted in the MTA colors.

The FCS initially purchased a monthly bus pass for each student. It now purchases an annual pass for each student. It is a picture identification card that serves as both a school identification card and also as a bus pass. The 1997-98 cost was \$24 per month per student. Students are able to ride established routes to and from school. The district continues to provide special education transportation as well as transportation related to special and athletic events.

The Flint Community Schools entered into the transportation agreement with MTA primarily for financial reasons. By contracting with MTA, the District was able to reduce substantially its expenditures on transportation. Like others in education, FCS leaders are sensitive to the critiques and perceptions of some people who think that school districts are, at times, poor stewards of public monies that mismanage finances. In this light, the

consolidation of pupil and public busing in Flint was a decision that made good financial sense to the organization. Consolidation reflected the Flint School Board's sound financial judgment. It had immediate positive financial benefits, and saved the district millions of dollars over a relatively short period of time.

However, financial gain was not the sole reason for entering into the arrangement. The District also considers itself to be a responsible partner with other community institutions and business interests. The busing contract with MTA reflected a significant effort by the Flint Community Schools to respond to business and community support for such action. In this light, the busing consolidation is part of a broader community effort to improve public services as well as reduce costs. The District can now point to the arrangement as a demonstration of its commitment to improving public service beyond a narrowly-construed organizational self-interest. Consolidation showed that it could make difficult decisions on labor and busing issues, each of which can frequently polarize constituents.

The school district, at this time, remains open to any and all serious transportation offers and options. For example, the Genesee County Intermediate School District approached the school board with an offer to contractually provide busing for special education students. The FCS currently provides that service for itself. The District and Superintendent's stance is that it is in their best interest to listen to any reasonable offer.

These services, in fact, may be provided by MTA in the future. In accordance with the State of Michigan's strategic plan and following the intent of the federal ISTEA legislation, two years ago funding was appropriated for regional and cross-county transportation. As a consequence, the MTA can now venture into six counties adjacent to Genesee County (Lapeer, Oakland, Saginaw, Tuscola, Shiawassee and Livingston) to provide services related to programs like jobs-to-work and welfare reform. This new regional focus now permits the MTA to explore providing special and athletic-related transportation to the Flint Community School District. If provided, this would involve about 800 students with special education related disabilities added to a MTA population of about 2,000 disabled riders. In any case, it is unlikely that the Flint Community Schools will change its core service arrangement with the MTA.

As a purchaser of service, the District's Transportation Manager and his staff meet regularly with MTA to provide feedback and to address policy, quality or related matters. From time to time, an important matter or issue will require the attention of top school administrators, who will meet with top officials of MTA. For example, last year a committee of school principals was formed in order to share positive and negative experiences of consolidated transportation service with MTA officials. The intent was to inform the MTA of the FCS experience, and to offer some ideas for changes and program improvements. The District did in fact get positive responses to many, but not all, of its concerns.

The Flint Community Schools enjoy the benefits of dollar savings and a demonstration of community commitment from consolidated transportation. In exchange, the FCS finds

itself with diminished managerial control over the daily transportation operations on which it depends. Clearly, FCS as a purchaser-of-service cannot control internal MTA operations. It can, through the existing feedback mechanisms, provide information that will often create some desired changes in MTA operations and policies. Yet this is different than the kind of direct control a school district has when operating its own transportation program.

Secondly, on occasion, the District finds itself in an awkward position with parents who have transportation-related complaints. Granted, parents recognize that MTA provides the service. However, they also see the School District as partly responsible for any perceived service shortcomings because the District chose to hire MTA to transport students. This may lead to still another perception that if the situation is not changed or “corrected,” then the school district by implication must “endorse” it. While this may not be the case at all, the District feels that it must address parental concerns in a forthright and careful manner. It also means that the FCS must be capable of transmitting parental concerns to the MTA and getting MTA to understand the issue. The Flint Community School District feels that the MTA often goes out of its way to address concerns, and that an important key to success is communication between the two organizations.

From the district’s perspective, the relationship on occasion is strained by events, which are typically created by demands for exceptional service. For example, transportation needs for a field trip may not be scheduled far enough in advance. The MTA, under these circumstances, may not provide a quick enough response which, in turn, may create tensions. Another kind of strain that may occur from time to time concerns labor issues associated with drivers and the differences between regular public and student passengers. Often student behavior expectations may not materialize, and drivers may find it difficult to adapt. There is also a need for sensitivity to the needs of younger passengers. The MTA and the school district have responded to this by offering driver training and student rider training to help ensure that student behavior and bus driver expectations coincide.

The safety issue, while initially part of the debate surrounding the beginning of consolidated service, is not perceived as an ongoing problem. The MTA does share the FCS’ concerns for and sensitivity to student safety. This is partly reflected in driver training and MTA policies that guide responses to threatening situations. The MTA will also go to some length to ensure students’ safety. For example, MTA drivers will pick up and drop off children in secure locations in a particular neighborhood if that neighborhood is considered potentially threatening to youngsters.

Flint Community Schools view safety in the broader sense of liability and risk management. As one would expect, the District is concerned about bus drivers and student riders onboard an MTA bus. This is augmented by the District’s awareness of the presence of other vehicles on the road, their drivers, and their passengers surrounding the bus and in the bus’s path. The organization has a strong sense of risk management, and works to avoid accidents and incidents that compromise public safety.

In summary, leaders of the Flint Community Schools believe that consolidation of public and pupil transportation is manageable under existing laws and circumstances. They see two essential elements that support successful consolidation.

- Open and regular communication is a primary ingredient to an effective consolidation arrangement. If the school district and public transportation agency can understand each other, then mutually beneficial joint ventures of this kind are possible.
- There must be a strategy and a plan that accompany the effort. The plan must also be shared by both parties who sustain their commitment to it over time.

From the MTA's perspective, the consolidation experience has strengthened its reputation for service among its constituencies within Genesee County. It recommends that other public transportation agencies considering similar moves to be aware of:

- The need for public involvement, especially that from important stakeholders;
- A requirement for necessary infrastructure;
- The need for student ridership training;
- Student discipline code of conduct while riding public transportation.

Grand Rapids Area Transit Authority and Grand Rapids Public Schools

The Grand Rapids Public School District (GRPS) is in the third year of a three-year contract with the Grand Rapids Area Transit Authority (GRATA). Under the contract, GRATA transports high school students (grades 9 through 12) to and from school on its existing or secondary bus routes. Approximately 2,100 high school students currently use GRATA for this purpose. The school district purchases a GRATA bus pass for each of its high school students. The contractual price for the pass this school year (1998-99) is \$243. GRPS continues to operate its own fleet of 216 buses to transport its elementary and middle school students. Of its 28,000 students, GRPS continues to bus 15,000.

Additional bus services are available to high school students by virtue of their GRATA bus pass. Students can ride any GRATA bus at any time of day during the week. When first introduced, the bus pass was valid for 52 weeks of unrestricted access, including Saturdays. GRATA does not operate on Sundays. To reduce the district's costs, the pass has since been restricted such that students cannot use the pass on Saturdays or during the summer months when school is not in session. When school is not in session, GRATA does not operate its secondary routes and so provides slightly different access to its riders.

The contract between GRATA and GRPS specifies a per-pupil cost with a minimum guaranteed number of rides. The contract amounts for the 1996-97 school year specified a per pupil amount of \$225 and a minimum of 2,000 students per day (4,000 trips/day). This increased by 4 percent to \$234 per pupil with the same minimum in the 1997-98 school year. This year (1998-99), the contract increased by \$9 to \$243 per pupil, or an increase of 3.85%. According to the contract, GRATA counts students on a daily basis. If the number of students riding the bus is above the minimum amount, then the district is charged accordingly. During August, student rider counts are used to reassess the minimum. If counts are above the minimum on average, then the contract minimum is adjusted. Current ridership has been approximately 4,100 rides per day.

Students ride as general public passengers on regular line haul or secondary routes. Secondary routes are routes that only operate on certain days (school days) and that feed into line haul routes. Given the peak general passenger and student riding times, there is not much blending of students and other passengers. The secondary routes, as do most line haul routes, feed into GRATA's downtown transit center. This is a temporary facility currently used until a new facility can be completed. GRATA's passenger load peaks from 2:00 to 3:15, as judged from driver counts and passenger traffic at the transit center. At these times on days when the secondary routes are in use, GRATA provides added security at the transit center. It also requests that the school district provide some of its own security as well.

The origin of this arrangement dates back to 1990. At that time, the school district began a new program of city-wide specialty schools at the middle school level. Each middle school was organized around a theme. Under this program, a middle school student could attend a middle school not in his or her immediate area but could travel across town. To

support such a program, GRPS faced a significant expansion of its fleet. In fact, it purchased 36 buses just for this program. However, the district precluded buying even more buses by switching its high school students to GRATA. It could then reallocate this transportation service from high school to middle school students.

Initially, GRATA used its older transit buses to provide its expanded secondary route service. Fifty-two of its buses have been replaced in the last three years, creating a largely updated fleet. Much of the bus capital was provided by the Michigan Department of Transportation bus capital replacement program and by special state grants. Some of it was provided by special U.S. Congressional earmarks.

The secondary routes were integrated into the regular line haul route system, which expanded its service and hours of operation. However, the secondary routes are not dedicated solely to school transportation. Nonetheless, these routes do not operate during all days and weeks of the year. For example, the secondary routes are inoperative during the school district's spring break and summer vacation.

Mr. Don Edmonson was the GRATA Executive Director at the time the contract began. He was considered to be a "forward thinking, open minded, and environmentally sensitive" person who was willing to work closely with Mr. Mike Dykhouse, the GRPS Transportation Director, in order to develop the consolidated high school transportation program. Together, Edmonson and Dykhouse worked to persuade a skeptical public of the merits of the program. They were successful in their efforts and the consolidated service was initiated in fall of 1992.

Opposition to the proposed program came from two directions. First, high school principals opposed it on the basis of their perceived loss of control over transportation services on which they rely to accomplish their mission, the belief it would lead to discipline problems with students, and that it would contribute to juvenile delinquency, increased gang behavior, etc. Second, some parents and community leaders opposed the program because they perceived the district as throwing its high school students "to the wolves."

As part of the transition and ongoing administration of the consolidated service, a Problem Solving Committee (PSC) was created. It includes Assistant High School Principals, the School Transportation Director, the administrators of special program users of the service (occupational education, special education, etc.), GRATA representatives, and interested individuals from the community. The Committee meets monthly to address issues related to consolidated transportation service.

The Problem Solving Committee initially addressed problems associated with GRATA drivers' relative inexperience with transporting high school-age riders. Buses on school days are often filled at a much higher rate than they are during off-peak periods. Furthermore, the mix of riders is skewed toward a large majority of young riders. GRATA drivers found themselves in a much different environment than that to which they

were accustomed. At times, conflicts arose between drivers and student riders. At other times, drivers thought they were in conflict with students when in fact the person was not a student but a regular bus passenger. In some cases, drivers mistakenly believed that students were “free loaders” who rode for free, or were playing hooky when in fact they were travelling to work or occupational training, or another legitimate activity. In response to problems like these, the PSC undertook a program of driver training targeted toward diversity and sensitivity issues, as well as ways to work with younger passengers.

The training alleviated much of the problem associated with driver adjustment. Elementary students undergo training in the use of public transit vehicles prior to and during their use for intra-city field trips. GRATA offers the school district a reduced rate of \$.25 per ride on a regular line haul or secondary route for class field trips within their service area. Students receive training beginning in the second grade.

The PSC addressed a related problem associated with rider discipline that emerged shortly after the new service was introduced. It developed a Zero Tolerance Policy that insures student discipline in a program that depends on driver implementation. In effect, the school building administrator’s power extends, via the driver, onto the bus. The policy, adopted by both the school and transit agency boards, defines rules governing student behaviors, penalties for violations, and procedures for administration and appeals. Students were also trained in using public transportation and this also reduced discipline problems.

To support implementation of the policy, GRATA uses on-board camera systems and video to record passenger behavior. This is a state of the art prima facie road recorder system with digital recording to a computer hard drive. It allows drivers and transit and school officials to identify persons violating behavior rules. The camera system, operating on buses that normally run with interior lights on, records even rear portions of the bus.

In addition to assisting with behavior and discipline, the camera systems help GRATA’s risk management program, safety program, fleet service to disabled vehicles, and allow for future uses associated with digital data and “intelligent” vehicles.

As part of their High School orientation, students are presented with copies of Zero Tolerance behavior rules by the principal who explains that bus transportation use is a privilege, not a right. Families are also made aware of the discipline policy at the beginning of each school year. Parents receive a letter from the GRATA Executive Director and the School Superintendent that outlines the policy and asks parents to help their children adhere to it. Students who abuse the behavior policy may lose the privilege altogether. In most cases, however, offending students are put on “controlled” status. In these cases, their bus passes are confiscated and they are provided with green tickets that allow them to ride to and from school only.

GRATA does provide some transportation for athletic events based on school demand and need. However, these are exceptional cases and in no case does this transportation

involve travel outside of GRATA's service boundaries. There is no charter service; all field trips use regular line haul services. Students may use bus passes for some building transfers and this is based on the flexibility such a pass system offers.

At this time, GRATA would consider any request for additional service from the school district on an incremental basis. GRATA has to balance its school services with the needs of other transit-dependent populations. For example, Project Zero welfare reform involves the Michigan Family Independence Agency, the Michigan Jobs Commission, and GRATA which represents MDOT. A key element of the program's success is accessible and convenient transportation for 2,700 clients. GRATA is helping to provide this transportation.

In practice, GRPS officials believe that the consolidated service works quite well. There are distinct benefits, and officials now count the principals among the service's strongest supporters. Consolidated transportation uses both GRATA and GRPS resources more efficiently, saves money, and socializes students as regular users of public transportation. Consolidated service in effect markets public transportation as an option for students during and beyond their high school years.

There are, however, some drawbacks. The downtown transit transfer center is being used more often than it was in the early years, which involves slightly longer commutes for students. Security on the bus is an ongoing issue. Security is provided by both GRPS and GRATA, and school officials would like to see more security personnel on the job. As a new contract is being negotiated, the school district is conscious of costs and matters like security. While largely satisfied with consolidation, school officials are prepared to resume high school busing itself if the contract price become prohibitive. This, however, is not the most desirable option.

Yates Dial-A-Ride

In 1992, Yates Dial-A-Ride (DAR) provided demand-response service to an area of four townships within Lake County: Yates, Weber, Pleasant Plains, and Cherry Valley Townships. The Village of Baldwin is located in Pleasant Plains township. County-wide public transit service was begun in 1975 and operated until 1979. At that time, the county opted out of public transit due to a lack of county-wide local support. Yates Township, representing the largest number of residents using public transit service, took over operation of the service. Voters in Yates adopted a dedicated property tax to financially support the service. The other three townships supported Yates Township. Lake County adopted a resolution supporting Yates Township in this move, but did not provide any funding. From 1979 until 1995, Yates DAR provided service to the four townships. It also had contracts with various human service agencies and with some parents to bus school children within the four townships.

During Governor Engler's visit to Lake County in 1992, the following question was put to him: Why can we not use public transit for school transportation? Why could the Yates Dial-A-Ride be used to meet the medical, cultural, and social needs of the area's senior citizens, but not those of its school children?

Governor Engler's response was that such service should be forthcoming and that he would help in such efforts.

In the years before the Governor's visit, residents within the Baldwin Community School District had failed to pass seven millage elections. At some point during this process, the district terminated its transportation program. In 1993, a four-mill school funding proposal was again defeated by district residents.

Yates Dial-A-Ride, however, was not in a position to offer a viable transportation alternative. It operated four buses in four of the most populated townships within Lake County. It had a history of support for both school and public transportation. For example, the other three townships contributed funds to Yates to support transportation services. However, only Yates Township continued to tax itself. While citizens in these townships had the desire to provide school transportation, they had neither the capacity nor local funding for such service on a county-wide basis.

Yates DAR did, however, gain important experience in busing school-age passengers for one year prior to the advent of district-wide service. On an experimental basis, parents of school children in Bitely Township's Woodland Park contracted with Yates for one bus to bring in about 24 school children to school. Such an arrangement fell through for parents in another area. A key element for success in such ventures is the need for parent volunteers as service coordinators. These coordinators act as liaisons between the parents and Yates to facilitate organizing the children, collecting money, and scheduling pick up and drop off time.

The Baldwin Community School Board formally requested that Yates Township consider providing school transportation. Yates Dial-A-Ride's response was that it operated a demand response system that provided service on a first come, first serve basis. It did, however, ask the school district to join it in a campaign to acquire more buses and more local funding to offer school transportation.

Officials from the Michigan Department of Transportation offered assistance to the School District and Yates DAR to help develop a proposal to coordinate service with human services agencies and consolidate pupil and public transportation. Several other agencies with transportation interests joined the effort, including the Family Independence Agency (FIA), Community Mental Health (CMH), and Jobs Commission. John Llewellyn, then a candidate for the State House of Representatives, took on a leadership role in the local effort. Officials from the school district, transit agency, and other agencies began to meet every third Monday to hammer out an arrangement that would expand the public transit service to include pupil transportation. On occasion, other interested parties contacted the group to offer help; these included State Senator John Prindia and also staff from the Governor's Office. Yates DAR's General Manager made several trips to Lansing for the purpose of organizing assistance and support from state departments. Meetings continued from 1992 into 1995. John Llewellyn was elected to the House and he took this project as one of his own. He worked to get the state to help support the local effort.

MDOT's response was ultimately to offer conditional assistance. The department would provide Yates DAR with seven buses if Yates DAR could raise \$300,000 annually to cover the vehicles' operation and maintenance costs. The school district offered \$200,000 in support of the effort. Given a provision in a law proposed by Rep. Llewellyn, the district was able to use Department of Education At-risk funds to supplement the initial \$200,000. This increased the \$200,000 to \$300,000 and thereby met MDOT's condition.

The MDOT Commission approved the purchase of six 55-passenger buses for the new program. Further, it would provide funds for the rehabilitation of one district school bus. MDOT assisted Yates DAR in writing specifications for a bidding process to build and furnish the buses. AMTRAN from Arkansas was awarded the contract. Sierra Equipment furnished the vehicles.

At that time, Baldwin Community Schools had 2 unionized drivers and six buses, four of which were "red tagged" or out-of-service. One of the drivers found employment elsewhere and the other driver, with three years left before retirement, was bought out. In essence, the Baldwin Community School District had no equipment and no drivers at the time that Yates Township DAR began its school transportation program.

The buses were delivered in July 1995. Yates Township DAR began its school transportation program the following September.

The program's success is attributed to its

- supportive human service agency network;

- contractors;
- consistent pattern of monthly roundtable meetings;
- parental input;
- legislative changes (for example, change in using at-risk school funding);
- MDOT Commission's support of coordination and consolidation.

Several changes in Lake County will influence operations, including

- the enterprise zone designation expected to increase business, industry, commerce;
- transportation linkages to neighboring colleges;
- charter schools and schools of choice.

The current three year contract with Baldwin schools calls for a payment of \$100,000 annually, for a total of \$300,000, to finance the operational costs of the school transportation program. The vehicle purchase and replacement costs are and will be borne by MDOT. Federal ISTEA funding was used to build Yates DAR storage garage facilities. A matter for concern is the District's student count: it was 902 students when the program first started and has since dropped to 814 students this year.

Yates DAR's governing body is the Yates Township. It has an advisory body of 12 members including 1 parent, 1 handicapped person, and representatives of human service agencies, and the school district.

The discipline policy is well defined. If a student is written up more than twice, then a meeting is scheduled with the Yates DAR manager, parent and student. These meetings are the biggest plus in dealing with discipline problems. Video taped student behavior is shown to the parent and child as evidence of undesirable behavior. This supports the agency's position and typically gets the parent's support for correcting errant students. Other persons wanted escorts on the buses, but such escorts are less likely to view the entire bus and may be subjective in the assessment of behavior. Escorts are used on some problematic runs in addition to video taping. In most cases, the video camera also picks up driver activity, and thus it helps with staff as well as student behavior.

Drivers undergo a variety of training. They are trained as new drivers and advanced drivers of school buses by the Mason County ISD. This includes such things as student discipline, railroad evacuation, etc. Training is also provided in-house, including CPR and first aid. MDOT's "Train the Trainer" program also provides assistance in this regard. For example, the Director of the Cadillac Transit System recently offered a violence prevention training program for Yates personnel. All Yates employees have their CDL, with the exception of the bookkeeper and one dispatcher. Drivers are not specialized, and must be capable of driving all buses and routes within the Yates service area.

Contracts serve to keep the entire school transportation program operating during the summer months. These include the summer school enrichment programs, canoe contracts with canoe rental operators, work-related transportation with seasonal growers (bean

factory and soon, cherry farmers), RCI summer training programs, regular routes, and driver vacation schedule fill-ins. On one occasion, a driver requested and was granted a 30 day unpaid leave with benefits. Otherwise, summer staffing remains at full levels.

Yates DAR can now go county-wide with its new client base. Coordinated rides keep costs low for agencies. For example, volunteer drivers used to drive persons to in-county medical appointments and were reimbursed \$.43 per mile. Now persons in need of such service can pay a \$2 bus fee. Mental Health clients in need of services in Big Rapids can now be linked to Big Rapids Dial-A-Ride at the county line whereas under the old, more limited service area this was unfeasible. The FIA had owned and operated two vans to service clients. Since the advent of county wide service, FIA eliminated its own transportation service. In yet another benefit, general public riders can often use the service to ride to work. When these people, some of whom are parents, ride with school children on the bus, one consequence is improved behavior by youthful passengers.

School starting times will often dictate peak service loads and influence service levels for non-school passengers. The high school starts classes before the elementary school. Yates DAR has one run that drops off High School Students about 7:15 am and a second run that drops off elementary school children at 8:25 am. Door-to-door service for preschool children (about 11 or 12 children) will run between these times.

Other agency clients are encouraged to use transit service between the hours of 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. A significant advantage of using the service at these times is the improved timing of making appointments. Some seniors will make use of these times as well.

The bus seating arrangements differ somewhat from conventional school bus seating. Seat backs are lower and have more leg room. Adults can more comfortably ride such vehicles. All seats are lap-belt equipped and all buses are handicapped equipped. Important differences between Yates buses and conventional yellow and black buses include the lack of red flashers and stop arms. Even so, on occasion when using flashing yellow lights, drivers will notice that some vehicles will stop when the bus is unloading or loading passengers. The Yates buses also have transit-style windows and transit style lifts. The bus interiors, built by Sierra Equipment, are more conducive to public transit buses. The bus bodies, however, are of school quality and are all steel. The IH chassis are the same as conventional school buses. Each bus cost \$62,000.

The Baldwin Community School District has one high school, one elementary school, and one combined pre-school/first grade. The High School is located in Baldwin, about six miles from the elementary school situated in Idlewild. The preschool/first grade building is located about two miles north of Baldwin. The district encompasses parts of Newaygo county. Northern parts of Lake County are within other district boundaries.

Yates DAR works with parents to identify carefully pick-up points for school-age passengers. Initially, Yates used the school district's old schedule and stops. These have been updated in response to changing conditions which has meant eliminating one or two

points and adding others. There are currently 18 such pick-up points. To be selected for a pickup point, the site must be located off of the main roads, lit, plowed in the winter months, and be of sufficient size so as to allow parents to park while waiting for the bus. These are typically church or store parking lots. Yates Township will acquire permission of the owner prior to locating such a stop. While Yates will not provide door to door service for school-age passengers, and will not pick up or drop off school children on main roads, a bus will pick up and drop off non-school-age passengers on the main roads.

Yates DAR does not provide special education transportation. This service is provided by Mason ISD from Baldwin County to Scottville. This service requires intensive driver training.

The Yates DAR produces a public relations campaign that includes periodic news releases, maps, and schedules to help in organizing parents and transit passengers prior to the beginning of each school year. Also at this time of the year, flyers are sent to parents with rules when they register their children for bus service. Parents fill out a bus registration form to allow a child to ride the bus to and from school.

Yates DAR fully covers all passengers from the time they are picked up until the time they are dropped off.

The Manager of Yates DAR sees the following elements necessary for success:

- The right people at the right time.
- A small town with close knit community.
- Strong linkages to local agencies.
- Parental support.
- Absence of busing for seven years prior to Yates DAR service expansion.
- Recognizing an opportunity and acting on it.