

For thousands of students, budget cuts mean walking to school or getting a ride from the parents



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By DIANE D'AMICO Education Writer | Posted: Sunday, September 12, 2010

Thousands of students who were bused to school last year are now either walking or being driven by parents as school districts across the state cut so-called courtesy busing from cash-strapped budgets.

Grace Reitzel, 5, sat crying in her car seat in the parking lot of the Roland Rogers School in Galloway Township on Friday. She wanted to ride the bus, but budget cuts eliminated nonmandated courtesy busing for 357 students in the district.

Her father, Todd, is trying to get enough parents to sign up so they can fund a bus on their own. He handed out fliers Friday and chatted with parents as they waited for their children to be released from school.

"I just feel like they're getting second-class treatment," he said of the children who now have to walk, many crossing busy Wrangleboro Road.

Busing used to be a service provided only to those who lived in what the state considered a remote distance from school — two miles from an elementary or middle school, or 2.5 miles from a high school. But over the years as housing developments were built without sidewalks and working parents weren't available to take students home, courtesy busing became more common.

Last year almost a third of the 833,000 students bused to school in New Jersey got their ride as a local courtesy, not as a state requirement, according to state Department of Education data. Districts get no state aid for courtesy busing, making it a prime target for cuts.

In 2009-10 the state provided \$352 million in aid to schools for the required busing. State aid typically covers about 35 percent to 40 percent of the cost, said Dot Shelmet, acting director of the

DOE Office of Student Transportation. Districts get no state aid for courtesy busing, which is funded totally through local property taxes.

This year transportation aid was one of the line items cut back in the state budget, and only \$83.8 million is targeted for student transportation. With less money to help pay for the mandated busing, districts began cutting the courtesy busing to save money. Now they are grappling with the related issues of safe walking routes, crossing guards and parent drop-off and pick-up policies.

Galloway Township and Ventnor in Atlantic County and Barnegat Township in Ocean County have among the largest busing cuts this year. Galloway Township still buses all students beyond a 1.5-mile distance from its schools. Superintendent Annette Giaquinto said they looked at where there are sidewalks, and worked with the police to have crossing guards at busy streets.

“It is very difficult for parents because we have had busing for so long,” she said.

Ventnor saved almost \$1 million by cutting about 15 buses, Superintendent Carmine Bonanni Jr. said. Only three buses remain for those who live beyond the two-mile limit.

The district used MapQuest and state guidelines to determine busing eligibility and developed maps of walking routes students are expected to follow. Bonanni said it took him 20 minutes to walk from the Red Room Restaurant on Dorset Avenue to the school, and students told him it took them 37 minutes from that area. He said it does help that the city has sidewalks on every street, and while there have been some complaints, he said people will have to get used to the change as long as budgets remain tight.

“There were a lot of cars here the first few days,” he said. “But I expect to see more walkers on nice days.”

Barnegat Township spent a year preparing for its changes, and that gave parents time to get used to the idea school district Transportation Director Bill Cox said. This year about 56 percent of the district’s 3,300 students are being bused, down from 96 percent last year. Thirteen bus driver positions were eliminated.

The district realigned its schools so that students could attend those easiest for them to walk to. The township allocated \$500,000 for miles of new sidewalks. The district’s website includes information about the sidewalks and where crossing guards are located.

“It is a fundamental change,” Cox said. “But it wasn’t as apocalyptic as it could have been because we started telling parents this was coming last year. That doesn’t mean they all like it, but they knew it was coming.”

In Galloway, the parents and school officials are still working out how children will be dismissed, and there are concerns about the youngest walking home alone.

Sally Hershman said she would be willing to pay for the bus at least for her youngest son, 8, although he was excited about walking because his older brother, who is in high school, also walks. But she worries about cars that don't slow down on Wrangleboro Road, and for now will drive him to and from school.

Rachel Melendez picked up four children, her own, a niece and the children of neighbors who work. She leaves for work later, so she says she has become the neighborhood babysitter. She said she's considering paying for the bus just to have the convenience and safety at a reasonable cost.

Reitzel said he needs about 50 parents willing to pay \$220 each for the year, and so far he has about 20. The cost is low because the route is very short.

State law allows districts themselves to offer subscription busing to parents willing to pay, and a few districts do offer it, Shelmet said. Giaquinto said they will review all of their options for next year.

On Friday, teachers of the youngest children at Roland Rogers walked the children to meet the group of parents, who are concerned about how the children will be dismissed so they won't become targets of potential predators, and how long the crossing guards will remain each day to assist.

Safety is an issue nonbusing districts have dealt with for years. Some districts have no busing at all, which leads to other problems.

Arrivals and departures at the Northfield Community School on Route 9 are managed like a military operation. A committee of school, police and city officials work annually to get the more than 1,000 students to and from the school safely every day.

Superintendent Janice Fipp said most children are driven to school. In grades K-4, the teachers walk the children out and make sure they are released according to parental instructions, either to someone in a car, walking or biking. Release times are staggered by grade to control traffic gridlock. A new video shows parents safe and quick ways to drop off their children.

"It takes a lot of planning and a lot of communication," Fipp said. "We tell parents, it's a 12-minute problem every day. Just be patient."

Northfield Police Lt. Arthur Faden, said when 24 percent of the city's population is in one spot twice a day there's just never going to be enough room. "We've been working on this since 2008," he said, when they got a grant. "The most important factor is the parents, but it is a team effort."

He said they added signs and police patrols, and if warnings didn't work they gave out some tickets to let people know they were serious about safety. A new video posted on YouTube uses

local children to demonstrate how to quickly and safely drop off children in what Faden calls the “love ’em and leave ’em lanes” at the school.

As schools also work to curb childhood obesity, walking to school is being promoted both for its benefits to students and the school budget. The National Center for Safe Routes to School promotes an annual Walk to School Day, this year on Oct. 6, to spread the word about the benefits of walking or biking for both students and the environment.

A small study at the University of Buffalo showed that walking to school could reduce stress reactivity in children, helping to reduce increases in blood pressure and heart rate.

Ventnor’s Bonanni said he believes when students walk to school they seem to arrive more alert and ready to learn. But even if they don’t like to walk, he said parents shouldn’t expect busing to return any time soon.

“This is how things are everywhere,” he said. “We just don’t have the money anymore.”

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John Vento Sep 13

Well ... I guess after the revaluations in EHT and the mostly increases in property taxes from it , we'll lose even more services . EHT is taxing people right out of Jersey , and rightly so . Maybe the people should really consider voting in a new Administration , instead of having the same ol mayor who is serving his 20th term (wow) ... lol ... you know, sometimes change is good . UNBELIEVABLE.

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Kobalanski Elliot Sep 13

Also, we would have had federal funds for building up infrastructure, businesses, and other projects and aid if we did not blow it on Defense Spending going over seas. Are we better off now then we were 10 years ago?

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Kobalanski Elliot Sep 13

You can thank both the Republican and Democrat party for this one, They held hands together for the bailout and stimulus for the too big too fail. Where is your bailout? Well, If you were not a part of the club to get your bonus's for perpetuating financial fraud on wall street already, Then your not going to get your bailout or stimulus. Instead you are going to pay for it through taxes and cuts in services. Hey, someone has to pay for these Billionaire clubs and it is us who are going to tighten up our belts - the carpenter, school teacher, public safety, bus driver, small business owner, etc.

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Hoo Knew Sep 13

seriously . . . i love how in today's American society everyone ELSE is responsible for those who receive some specific benefit. You want to goto school? here's a novel idea - GET THERE YOURSELF ! sure, if you live 44 miles out in the Iowa countryside, it probably makes more sense to have school buses. but NO-ONE is able to explain to me how (in practically every other country on the planet - and i've lived in several) why it is the public's responsibility to supply transportation when school is a few miles away. its about the most ridiculous waste of taxpayer money i've ever witnessed. every last one of you that complain are setting a wonderful example so your offspring can grow up and enjoy the "ITS ALL ABOUT ME" mentality you exude. instead of complaining, you should be eternally grateful your kids are going to school in Atlantic County instead of some 3rd world war zone like Camden, Newark etc.

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Jennifer Smith Sep 13

What is an absolute disgrace is that parents are whining that they have to take responsibility for their own children for a change. Are you seriously expecting us to believe that your kids don't walk to their friends' houses or ride bikes? The kids in Galloway who are now walking live almost LITERALLY across the street! These are kids from Society Hill, Sunrise Bay and the surrounding area. They live less than 1 mile from the school. Cities and towns started "courtesy" bussing when there was money to pay for it. Now that the money doesn't exist, they can no longer extend the courtesy so that parents don't have to be inconvenienced by making sure their child gets to and from school. If it's too inconvenient to worry about YOUR OWN CHILD, why should the rest of us have to pay for them? Yeah, we should take the money from teachers' salaries and academic programs just so you don't have to go out of your way to make sure your own kid gets to school. Stop whining like babies.

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Peter McLaughlin Sep 13

You mean the kids might have to walk to school if they are close enough? Hmmm, isn't that what

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