

VICC volunteer

Highlights of the St. Louis Student Transfer Program

VICC TRANSPORTATION OFFICE

Focuses on Making Commutes Smoother and Safer

by Peggy Magee

Student behavior on the bus and how drivers respond to incidents are issues the VICC transportation department takes very seriously. They are a top concern for parents and school administrators, too, as survey results reveal.

VICC transportation manager Tami Webb and her team want to insure that all bus and taxi drivers deal with behavior problems effectively and to the satisfaction of the school and the family. That's quite an undertaking given that 400 bus drivers and 250 taxi drivers are involved in transporting 5,100 VICC students to 15 different school districts.

"There's a lot to our operation," notes Webb, adding that besides the regular runs to and from school, transportation is offered before and after school for students who participate in activities, as well as on weekends, depending on what is occurring. Webb's transportation team is comprised of four routers, one activity coordinator and one billing clerk.

Communication is a top priority for Webb. She says she is in "constant contact" with the bus companies, plus meets regularly with the drivers. She encourages the schools to maintain close communication with them as

well. "VICC transportation is not your typical school bus experience because our drivers and students travel a longer distance," she points out.

When the bus companies hold their monthly safety meetings for drivers, Webb attends to conduct student management training and to review VICC transportation policies and procedures. For buses with repeated discipline problems, she puts on workshops at the schools for students.

She also sits in on meetings that the schools conduct with those drivers whose buses have problems.

Last year, Webb felt she wanted to do more to assure that her fleets have smooth commutes, free of incidents. She is working with schools to incorporate their character development programs into the bus experience. "The idea is to bring the spirit of the school on to the bus," she explains,

Commutes Smoother and Safer (continued)



Operations manager Tami Webb and her team work to insure VICC transportation runs efficiently and free of problems. Pictured are from left, Renee Yates, Felicia Carlisle, Tami Webb, Anita Crane, Diane Sawyer (seated), Shannon Ochs and Chris Dew. Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

Commutes Smoother and Safer (continued)

adding that respect, responsibility, safety and other core values are emphasized in every aspect of school. "That should be carried over to the bus."

Since last school year, she has been meeting with administrators from Rockwood schools to communicate her interest and support in seeing the idea carried out. In a workshop she conducted for drivers last April (to be repeated again this spring), she talked about how they can "offset" bus issues by reinforcing the character traits instilled at school. "We help them understand their school's philosophy and offer way to adopt it on the bus," she explains. "The idea is for the drivers to make the buses their own in an effort to impact good behavior," she notes, adding that relationship building is emphasized, as is using a positive approach to student management.

One strategy might be posting a flyer at the front of the bus with guidelines for exhibiting good character traits and replicating the language and expectations of the school in communicating with the students. Another could be doing something fun for the kids such as charting how many riders are Blues fans versus Cardinal fans. One driver worked with the children to create a bus song, complete with rap verses and clapping. Several drivers have instituted a reward system on the bus.

Webb's office gives support to the schools in implementing their own strategies. For example, Rockwood's Crestview Middle School desired to build better connections between itself and its drivers and between the drivers and students. The drivers now regularly come into school to meet with administrators and to see what their students are doing. One day, they got a tour of the school; on another they observed a P.E. class. Notes Assistant Principal Lance Wheeler, "Tami helped make it possible for the drivers to be given this time which has proven invaluable in forming relationships. The drivers are seeing that both their employer and the VICC Office care about the kids being successful."

Now that drivers have the opportunity to regularly consult with Wheeler, issues or problems can be handled before write-ups become necessary, he says, adding that write-ups have been reduced by 50 to 60 percent since a year ago. Also impacting that reduction is a change in the write-up process, facilitated by Webb's office as well. For all buses transporting Rockwood VICC students, drivers turn in write-ups to their safety supervisor before submitting them to the school. The drivers are then counseled on whether appropriate actions were taken or how they can better handle that kind of situation in the future. "The drivers feel supported by not only our school, but the bus company and the VICC," says Wheeler, noting that his school has had no driver turn-over this year.

Webb's office also does other things to support the schools in making certain the commute is a safe and happy one. At a VICC family back-to-school night that Rockwood hosted in late July at Harris-Stowe, the transportation component was fully explorable. Both a bus and cab were on site, along with drivers, so families could sit in a seat and ask questions to get a better sense of the experience. "We think it's important that families are comfortable with all aspects of the school day so we try to be visible and approachable," notes Webb.

When Rockwood's Kellison Elementary hosted a "ride-along" on transfer student buses for faculty in December, VICC routing specialist Chris Dew handled all the planning logistics. "We work closely with Chris," notes Kellison assistant principal Suzanne DuPree, adding, "He's always ready to help in whatever it takes."

The department's pro-active strategies have lead to fewer write-ups across the board this year. "We plan to continue focusing on student management issues in order to see further improvements as we work to provide safe and efficient transportation to all students in the VICC program."

Reinforces School's Model for Positive Behavior

by Peggy Magee

Miss Annie Carter, who transports students from the city to Hancock Elementary School, was honored by the district for her emergency response practices, her rapport with students and how she emphasizes the school's positive behavior formula on her bus. Because she could not attend the board meeting where she would have been recognized, principal Jill Wright presented the certificate after school.

Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman



Hancock Elementary School had plenty of employees to choose from when it came to recognizing someone who goes above and beyond, a program the district sponsors where each school, on a quarterly basis, selects a staffer to be honored by the board of education and administration. This past fall, popular VICC bus driver Miss Annie Carter took the spotlight.

"She's an awesome bus driver," reports principal Jill Wright, noting that during a bus emergency at the start of school, Miss Annie "kept her cool and focused solely on the safety of the children." Too, she says, Miss Annie has a great rapport with the students and is reliable and professional.

For Miss Annie, who is a grandmother and great grandmother, her job performance comes naturally, "because I love children," she modestly points out.

Every day, she greets each child with a smile, certain "they'll remember that." She says she wants the children to feel comfortable and safe when they board her bus. "I like to talk to the children, see what's going on with them and encourage them." They even get a special gift from her on their birthdays. "I appreciate them and want them to know they are loved and cared for."

Annie is a good role model for the school's formula for positive behavior: be respectful, be responsible and be safe. She was informed about the 3 B's at a mini-lesson the school conducted for its bus drivers and, according to Jill Wright, "Annie strives to emphasize the 3 B's on her bus which is part of why we chose to recognize her."

MUCH GAINED

When Teachers Ride Bus with Students

by Peggy Magee

Last year, Kellison Elementary School in the Rockwood district kicked off the school year by having staff members ride the bus home with their voluntary transfer students. Knowing just how valuable that activity was, the school repeated it again in December. Using two buses, about 45 teachers, the principal and assistant principal joined 35 pupils headed for the south side of St. Louis. At each stop, staff stepped off the bus and greeted parents and siblings.

According to Assistant Principal Suzanne DuPree, it was a “rewarding” experience for all involved. “The students were really excited for us to see where they live and chat with their family members. The teachers got an appreciation for the long ride and were able to see the neighborhoods where our students live. The parents, who have made the drive to our school for conferences, musicals and other visits, appreciated the effort we made to come to them.”

Building a relationship between home and school is an important goal at Kellison, DuPree points out. “This is one way that we take the initiative to see that happen.” After last year’s ride-along, the school saw an increase in parents attending school events. “Each year we want to build on that trusting relationship.”

The parents received a letter in advance from Dupree and Principal Brian Gentz notifying them about the

“ride-along” and inviting them to come to the bus stop for a “quick hello.” The letter read: “We look forward to getting better acquainted and learning more about our students from the bus ride.”

After all the students had disembarked, the Kellison staff gathered at Hodak’s in the city to enjoy a meal together and reflect on the experience.

Before the ride-along, teachers had talked to the students about the bus ride being long and how to best utilize the time. Some gave their students coloring books and crayons. However on this day, the children simply chatted away with the adults.

Teachers David Baer and Shannon Stanze think the ride-along is a win-win activity. It’s an opportunity for the teachers to see how long the bus ride is and the sacrifices the children make, they say. “As teachers, we need to remember how much time they lose by being on the bus that long,” points out Stanze. “Realizing that by the time these students are just getting home, their peers who live much closer could

A bus rolls down Interstate 44 toward St. Louis city with teachers from Rockwood’s Kellison Elementary School who accompanied students on their ride home and chatted with their families at the stops. In front is fourth grader Haniya Davis, seated with teacher Shannon Stanze. Behind them is second grade student Kevin Emmanuel with teachers Peggy Helt, left, and Connie Cozzolina. About the students’ commute, Stanze believes it’s important for teachers “to remember how much time they lose by being on the bus that long.”

Photo provided by Kellison Elementary



already have their homework done and be spending time with their family and friends.”

Both teachers agree the ride-along is a great way to get to know their students better. “The students benefit when we have a better understanding of their lives,” notes Baer. Stanze adds, “It was a wonderful opportunity to spend more time with our students, experience a little of their daily routine and see what a different experience it is for our students who live outside the district.”

Kellison mom Keeya Johnson, who has four children at the school, was “excited and amazed” that the teachers headed to the city again this year. “The kids loved it and I think it’s great that the teachers wanted to experience the bus ride.”

ROCKWOOD EDUCATION

Helps Shape Community Leader

by Peggy Magee

Jay Washington, Sr., 38, believes his education in Rockwood helped give him a solid foundation from which he has built a career of helping others. Washington is executive assistant to Martin Mathews, the 87-year old president, CEO and co-founder of the Mathews-Dickey Boys' and Girls' Club.

The nationally-famous facility, located in north St. Louis, provides a vast selection of programs – athletic, recreational and educational – to thousands of families annually.

"Our multitude of teams and programs, as well as the mentorship of our coaches and staff, have turned out thousands of focused, disciplined and educated individuals," Washington reports. "These folks would tell you they had a better shot at success as a result of being involved in the club." As a young person living in north St. Louis, Washington himself was active at the club, learning its philosophy of respect, restraint and responsibility.

Also helping mold his character, he says, was the exposure to diversity that his Rockwood schooling provided. At Lafayette High, he played football, wrestled and played trumpet in the concert band. "It was because of the opportunity I had to get to know people of other backgrounds and cultures that I can now say I am comfortable with any type of person in any type of situation," he points out.

It's a trait that serves him well given the often high profile nature of his job. He regularly accompanies Mr. Mathews to community events where he rubs elbows with city officials, corporate executives, professional athletes and other dignitaries and celebrities.

Other times, he must tend to the tragic realities of life. Beyond the programming that the club offers at a minimal cost for those families in need, Washington and his colleagues do what they can for parents in dire situations, such as assisting with housing and employment, by partnering with



the Urban League and United Way.

It is the club's commitment to the betterment of self, community and country that pulled Washington away from higher paying jobs. About his stints at Coca Cola, Southwestern Bell and PQ Corporation, the 2007 business administration graduate of Webster University says, "I had good jobs but something was missing."

His main focus these days is the Mathews-Dickey at Bob Russell Park, a 30-acre parcel of donated land in Bellefontaine Neighbors being developed as a satellite location. It is the old Surrey Lane athletic complex. His first order of business was refurbishing athletic fields and organizing team operations.

Last summer, 12 new ball teams operated there. As money is raised, plans are to add more playing fields and other facilities so that more young people can engage in safe, healthy activities. "The people of north county can now poke their chests out with pride at seeing the revitalization of their community and knowing that their youth have access to wholesome activities," notes Washington, whose own four children have enjoyed activities at Mathews-Dickey Club.

Well aware of how the environment of a community can impact its residents, Washington is grateful that he could attend school in suburban St.

Louis and leave his neighborhood behind for part of the day. "There were drugs, gangs and families falling apart," he recalls. Rockwood provided me a better station at the time." Too, he appreciates that it was a serious learning environment with impressive resources and helpful, supportive teachers.

As Washington takes on his daily tasks at Mathews-Dickey, he does so with enthusiasm and a sense of purpose. He is pleased to be working for families of north St. Louis city and county. "I'm in their court. People have been in mine."

After working at corporate jobs, Jay Washington, Sr., left, found where he belongs working along side Martin Mathews at Mathews-Dickey Boys' and Girls' Club. The diversity he experienced in Rockwood schools serves him well as he interacts with dignitaries and disadvantaged people alike. "I am comfortable with any type of person in any situation," he says. Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

volunteer

A newsletter published by the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation to spread the word about the positive things happening in the voluntary transfer program and to offer educators a glimpse at innovative programs helping students succeed at area schools.

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Message from the CEO



The recent tragic event at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut has created a renewed focus on school safety for all of us. VICC's role in this regard is primarily related to the safe and professional transportation of our students to and from school. Strategies that we have implemented, working together with our school bus and taxi transportation partners include the following:

- Safety is discussed and is an agenda item on every transportation employee meeting
- All transportation employees are subject to stringent background checks which are periodically audited to confirm their suitability to transport students
- An incident reporting system is in place for all of our transportation systems
- All buses are equipped with GPS tracking systems as well as multiple security cameras
- All buses have an itinerary which is closely followed and monitored regarding students permitted on the bus and bus stop locations
- All buses are also equipped with two-way radios and regular ongoing communication between the driver and their dispatcher as well as the VICC office is strongly encouraged, and
- In September we brought in an expert from the TSA (Transportation Security Administration) to meet with bus safety representatives and our staff to discuss and plan training initiatives and suggestions.

More important than the above-described safety measures is the ongoing positive and cooperative relationships developed between bus and taxi drivers and their students as well as the relationships that are developed with school district employees. The current issue of the *Volunteer* highlights some of these positive practices. Our transportation office also regularly meets with school district administrators and staff to encourage regular communication and reinforce the character traits taught at the school. Tami Webb meets with administrators at some districts annually and welcomes the opportunity to meet with administrators and staff at all of our districts! To emphasize character education, our office has hosted several workshops on the importance of this topic for bus drivers and other transportation employees.

We also encourage teachers at schools to "ride along" on our buses so that staff and teachers have an improved understanding of what it is like to ride the bus to the county district and also have additional opportunities to develop stronger relationships with their students in a new setting. On average, a transfer student's ride to school is 54 minutes in length each way which is obviously much longer than the ride of a typical resident student. During that time, many of our drivers have the opportunity to reinforce the positive character education lessons that they are taught at school such as Miss Annie Carter's role in emphasizing the three B's - Be Respectful, Be Responsible and Be Safe. Certainly those are important lessons that none of us are too old to forget.

We take very seriously the responsibility of transporting our students not only in a timely manner, but more importantly, in a safe manner.

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