



District 15 parents in uproar over busing changes

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Palatine Township Elementary District 15 officials knew they had a problem when the bus ride to school began to rival the most grueling Chicago-area commutes.

Since it wasn't uncommon for a third-grader to sit on the bus up to an hour each way, the district - at the school board's direction - implemented a number of changes over the summer that reduced the average trip from 31 minutes last year to 23 minutes now.

But droves of parents throughout the 12,000-student district are in an uproar, saying the increased efficiency has come at the expense of their children's well-being.

At a recent school board meeting, Joan Kelley painted a scene in which Hunting Ridge students "stand in the street dodging cars" as they wait at a Kenilworth Avenue stop. There's a hill and the kids are blind to motorists who use the street as a cut-through, she said.

"There is literally no safe place for these children to stand," Kelley said. "We hope (the district) will take steps to rectify this situation immediately before a truly tragic situation occurs."

A consolidation in bus stops resulted in more students walking farther and waiting on busier roads. Among the angry parents is Cara Singer, who said the bus stops for the 16 students living in Palatine's Silver Lakes subdivision were moved to Smith Road, where drivers routinely clock 50 mph.

"The selection of these stops is symptomatic of an ill-conceived and poorly thought out transportation plan with limited efficiencies and numerous safety hazards," she said.

Other concerns include parents not being able to see a stop from their window; long walks; crossing streets; walking along streets without sidewalks; overcrowded buses; and students arriving to school late.

At least six new routes were created since the beginning of the school year to alleviate overcrowding on some routes and the transportation department is making changes so students are on time, officials said. However, the other issues are within acceptable standards under Illinois school code, they added.

Asst. Superintendent James Garwood said many complaints are from parents who for years have enjoyed watching their child get picked up in the driveway, which is more a convenience than a matter of safety.

In total, Transportation Director Walt Doughty said, District 15 cut regular bus stops by 43 percent and door-to-door stops by 47 percent. That means students have to walk farther. To get to their stops last year, 190 students had to walk farther than one-tenth mile, or about seven houses. Now, 1,183 students walk between one- and two-tenths mile, while 185 students walk up to three-tenths mile to a bus stop.

District 15 policy is that students within 1.5 miles are required to walk to school or pay for bus service. The 1.5 mile distance is the state-set standard.

Officials promised to investigate each and every complaint, but Garwood reiterated the changes were necessary in order to cut commute times while keeping costs down while maintaining the desirable two-tier system in which most schools start at one of two times.

Administrators and board members apologized for a lack of communication to parents, saying it's been hard to get back to everyone promptly because of the volume of complaints. Garwood said he's received hundreds of calls and e-mails.

Parents are losing their patience, though.

"My specific bus route and the issues there I think can be taken care of very easily and very quickly and done more safely if someone would actually listen," said George Smyrniotis, who has two kids at Thomas Jefferson, in a comment typical of those made at the meeting.