

Transportation Operations Provide Smooth Start to New School Year

While the recent news about Superintendent Dr. Karen Mantia's medical leave was sudden and unexpected, I wanted to take a moment to acknowledge something remarkable I witnessed during this transition. For someone who has been in education for more than 20 years, this certainly served as a good reminder of the high level of expertise and commitment we have all around Lakota as I was assuming my new role as acting superintendent.

Despite this major shift in leadership, there was very little impact on our daily operations. Buses ran on schedule, classrooms maintained their normal energy levels, lunches were served, and after-school activities went on as planned. All of this suggests one thing. Our principals, teachers, counselors, aides, front office staff, custodians and so many others are the ones moving us forward – and their work over the last few weeks, especially, have proven that we are all in exceptional hands.

This smooth transition was nothing more than an extension of a smooth start to the school year here at Lakota. While a lot contributes to that in a district our size, I thought I'd dissect for you just one part of our operations that makes all the difference every day, but especially at our start: transportation.

When you're talking 12,000 students on 143 bus routes over a combined 10,000 miles each day, there's a lot of room for error. Add in other uncontrollable variables like road construction, weather, and traffic, and getting students where they need to be, and when they need to be there, is a tall order.

But Lakota's transportation team – managed by our Chief Operating Officer Chris Passarge and contracted by Petermann, including Manager Susan Prewitt – certainly rise to the challenge. What exactly does preparation look like for them each school year?

Hundreds of address changes trickle in over the summer. This demands around-the-clock modifications to our routes before that first day and during the weeks thereafter. Daycare forms alter the drop-off location and route of hundreds more and accommodations must be well-planned for students with special needs who require specialty equipment or aides on board. The team fields hundreds of parent calls, too, and works diligently to maximize student accommodations without having to add substantial more routes and costs.

Then there's bus maintenance, cleaning and inspections and every year, large demands on hiring. New bus drivers must go through an intense, two-month training process, through which Lakota drivers receive about double the on-the-road training time required by the state.

This is just one piece to the puzzle, too. Our enrollment center, as another example, enrolled nearly 750 new students during the five weeks leading up to the start of school, and processed about 350 address or custody changes. Their efficiency helps keep many of our other operations moving smoothly, too.

However long I fill the role of superintendent, I fully intend to keep us moving in a positive direction. I care deeply about this school district, both as a parent and a staff member, and I want nothing more than to see our children succeed.

Robb Vogelmann is the superintendent of the Lakota Local School District.

