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Some students will no longer be eligible for transportation services

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Liberal students who live on the edge of the current bus-eligibility boundaries will have to find another way to school this year. Following a close vote at last night's school board meeting, USD 480 will trim back on its bus services for students in intermediate, middle and high school.

In a 4-3 vote, the board opted to increase the distance-from-school parameters for bus service. The changes will not affect the district's youngest students, or its most vulnerable: buses for preschool and special-education students will run as before, and so will bus routes that serve

Liberal's elementary (kindergarten to third-grade) students.

Route limits have changed for everyone else. Under the new parameters, intermediate and middle school students must live at least 1.5 miles from the flagpole of the school they attend, and high school students must live more than 2.5 miles from the flagpole of Liberal High School, in order to be eligible to ride the bus.

Burkey presented a report to the board at its June 24 meeting, outlining the district's busing problem. In a nutshell, too many students ride too few buses — currently 11 routes — which are operated by too few drivers. With the district's steady growth, adding between 80 and 100 students per year, the numbers are sure to increase. At the same time, USD 480 already struggles to hire and retain drivers, in part because the pay scale is markedly lower than other districts.

"Right now, I could be running 13 routes," Burkey said. "We've done everything we could to get more drivers, we put banners up on buses, we ran ads in the paper ... we're not gaining these extra route drivers." Burkey explained that bus driving requires a special endorsement in addition to the regular Commercial Driver's License (CDL), yet the district's low hourly wages and lack of benefits for full-time drivers does not attract qualified people.

"If the board doesn't address this, we're going to see some problems next year," he said. "You're going to see overnight football trips to Wichita, because the bus drivers won't be allowed to drive back." After running the morning route to deliver students to school, then the after-school route, then transporting a football team to an out-of-town game, "the drivers are past their limit of driving hours" allowed by law, Burkey said, "and I sure don't have an extra bus driver to send with them. Every time I take a bus driver off the regular route to send on an activity, the kids are doubling up on other bus routes to get home from school an hour-and-a-half, two hours later."

Last year, Burkey said, the bus crunch was so fierce, "we sent letters home to parents, saying 'Please, please pick your children up, because if not, I can't guarantee what time I'm going to get your children home.' We had to run seven routes with two buses. Kids weren't getting home until 6 p.m."

In discussion, the board explored various questions. Where had this problem come from, asked Tammy Sutherland-Abbott.

“I don’t remember us having this problem three years ago,” she said.

“Here’s the thing that really hurt us,” Burkey said. “We’ve got seven elementary schools, they’re all over town, and we have a radius of one mile for each. If you map that out, we’re covered pretty good. There’s not a lot of eligible riders. But four years ago, we had that first large class of 400 kids. They hit intermediate school, and we saw our numbers go boom. Those kids from all over town now attend two schools. A lot of them became eligible for bus service. That’s what’s happening again this coming year, and every year we add more kids, 65 percent of which can ride the bus. So the numbers keep coming.”

And numbers on paper are not the same as numbers in the flesh, Burkey said. While school buses are rated with a set “capacity,” that is often based on three children per bench seat, “which works OK with preschoolers but not with older kids,” he said. “So when we’re just looking at numbers of riders and buses, we don’t want to have those buses crammed to capacity. In reality, it’s overload.”

District parameters for bus service haven’t been adjusted “for at least five years,” observed board member Nick Hatcher.

“Actually, it’s been 16 years,” said finance director Jerry Clay, who also specified that the costs associated with the new pay scale and ever-increasing number of students riding the buses will be gathered from an increase to the Local Option Budget, “and even if we kept everything the same as last year, that’s still probably going to happen.”

“Legally, we don’t have to provide busing services,” said Tammy Sutherland-Abbott. “I know a lot of people who are voters, who will say ‘Why should my taxes go up for someone else to get their children to school?’”

District administrators described the bus dilemma as a delicate balance. Eliminate the

transportation, and absenteeism is likely to go up.

“There are also safety issues,” noted superintendent Paul Larkin. “Do we really want children crossing U.S. Hwy. 54, walking to school?” With the legal option of drawing a 2.5 mile boundary for all the schools, Larkin said the new, modified parameters “are a nice compromise. Safety-wise, we’re avoiding the extremes.”

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