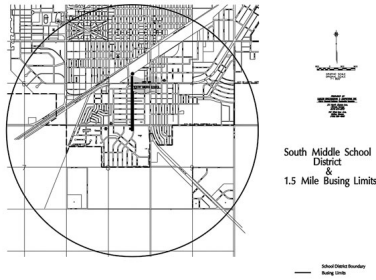


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The distance requirement for fourth- to eighth-grade students has increased to 1.5 miles, and high school students have an even greater leap: they'll only qualify for busing if they live 2.5 miles away from the school.

Grades 4 and older may need a new ride to school

By RACHEL COLEMAN

- Leader & Times

The first step toward a new school year at USD 480 schools gets underway this week, with elementary, intermediate and middle school student enrollment today and Wednesday. High school enrollment began Monday and continues through Friday. This year's routine, however, includes one major change: bus boundaries have expanded, which means fewer students qualify for free transportation.

“This was something my department and the board of education struggled with,” said director of auxiliary services Robert Burkey. “The bottom line is, we couldn’t continue operating the way we have in the past, without some changes.”

At its July 8 meeting, the USD 480 school board voted to expand the boundaries and to increase pay for the district’s drivers. The two-prong approach was intended to address a growing problem — not enough buses, not enough drivers, too many routes and destinations, and more riders every year.

The board had to address the problem, Burkey said, because during school year 2012-13, route drivers were stretched so thin, sometimes doubling up, that some students didn’t make it home until 6 p.m. That wasn’t the only dilemma. Drive-time limits prevented bus drivers from logging more than 10 straight hours or 15 total hours in a 24-hour period. What that meant, Burkey said, was that drivers who clocked in to cover morning routes transporting students to school, then returned to take the same children home in the afternoon, and then loaded up an activity bus to transport athletes to an out-of-town game, would sometimes run out of drive-time hours before the event ended and students were ready to head back to Liberal.

“If we don’t address this situation, we’re going to see overnight football trips to Wichita, because the bus drivers won’t be allowed to drive back,” Burkey said. “That’s just one example of what we’ll encounter.” Last year, he added, as out-of-town music festivals approached and buses and drivers were in short supply, he had to send letters home with bus riders “basically pleading with parents, ‘Please pick up your children from school,’ because I couldn’t guarantee how long it might take them to run the routes,” he said.

For parents and students at enrollment this year, the problem is more immediate. Some children who qualified for bus transportation to school last year are no longer eligible. Until this year, the district operated a generous busing program, offering a free ride to any student who lived more than one mile from the school where he or she attended. That won’t change for preschoolers and special-needs students, who receive doorstep service. There’s also no change for elementary students ages kindergarten to third-grade.

However, the distance requirement for fourth- to eighth-grade students has increased to 1.5 miles, and high school students have an even greater leap: they’ll only qualify for busing if they live 2.5 miles away from the school.

The increase is likely to seem extreme to the families it affects, Burkey acknowledged. However, as board members discussed when voting about the issue, the district's busing boundaries had not changed for 16 years. Legally, the district is not obligated to provide transportation services for any children who live closer than the 2.5-mile boundary, which is being applied in Liberal only at the high school level.

Even so, noted superintendent of schools Paul Larkin, transportation to school is closely linked to attendance and graduation rates. More important, he added, "there are safety issues. Do we really want children crossing [the highway] to walk to school?"

So, as families enroll their children for the upcoming school year, the youngest students will see no change in bus availability. Older students, presumably more capable of making wise choices as they walk or ride bicycles to school, will have a longer distance to cover.

To view Frequently Asked Questions about Liberal USD transportation policies, visit the district's website at www.usd480.net and navigate to the "Transportation" option listed under the "Departments" menu bar. Information is available in both English and Spanish.

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