

Customer Q&A with LEAD Public Schools

LEAD Public Schools operates a network of six public charter schools in Nashville, Tennessee, serving more than 2,400 students in grades 5-12 across a 536-mile area.



Adrienne Useted
Chief Financial Officer
LEAD Public Schools
Nashville, TN

“

Our goals were to benchmark our transportation operation against our peers and create a bell time system that would optimize operations and save money. We are on track to achieve both of those goals. The SBC benchmarking was extremely eye-opening and valuable, and while the new bell times will not be implemented until the 2020-21 school year, we anticipate saving approximately 16 percent of our overall transportation budget. That amounts to more than half a million dollars that we can reinvest in other areas.”

What problems, issues, or needs led you to engage School Bus Consultants (SBC)?

Our charter school network, founded in 2007, has grown from 92 fifth and sixth grade students to become Nashville’s largest charter school management organization with more than 2,400 students. Over the years, we have structured our transportation operation in a few different ways – in-house, under contract with a local school system, and with an outside contractor. We had two primary concerns: fleet optimization and cost. We knew our routing was not structured in the most efficient manner and our costs had risen significantly over time to a point where they were out of line with peer organizations. We needed to optimize our system and save money, so we hit the “pause” button and began a search for transportation experts to review our overall operations and practices.

What made you choose SBC? What made their services stand out from others?

SBC has a great deal of experience in reviewing transportation operations and documenting best practices across a wide range of organizations.

What have been the greatest benefits of working with SBC?

SBC’s transparency is a great benefit. They were very clear in outlining the scope of work covered by the contract, so that enabled us to focus our time and attention on the areas that would produce the best results. We run a complex and complicated routing system that has developed over time as our network of schools has expanded. I was impressed with SBC’s ability to identify, collect and analyze our transportation data, and with the roadmap they created based on that data. I also appreciated SBC’s willingness to share the raw data they used to draw their conclusions. They were willing to share information that was best for my organization as opposed to a canned product.

What have the implementation and ongoing relationship been like?

Working with SBC was a very positive experience. We began the project in the fall of 2018 with an evaluation of routing and stops, with an eye toward implementing bell time changes in the 2020-21 school year. We sat down and reviewed our pain points, what was happening at each school, and our ultimate goals. SBC consultants then went to each location and met with our operations teams. They uncovered pain points we weren't even aware of then gave us a quick assessment of our system and how we stacked up against industry standards. We shared this benchmarking with our CEO and senior leaders and that was very valuable. An intensive data phase followed during which the SBC team stayed in close touch with us to make sure their analysis aligned with our original specifications regarding timeframes, length of runs, etc. This helped us make incremental improvements along the way that resulted in much better final recommendations for specific bell times and specific runs.

Can you share specifically how SBC helped you reach your goals?

Our goals were to benchmark our transportation operation against our peers and create a bell time system that would optimize operations and save money. We are on track to achieve both of those goals. The SBC benchmarking was extremely eye-opening and valuable, and while the new bell times will not be implemented until the 2020-21 school year, we anticipate saving approximately 16 percent of our overall transportation budget. That amounts to more than half a million dollars that we can reinvest in other areas. This is a huge deal for us. We will be able to reduce the number of routes from 43 to 25. That dramatically reduces the number of drivers needed at a time when driver shortages are an enormous issue. Reducing our driver needs by 40 percent also means we can be more selective and hire more reliable drivers, and that will mean better service quality.

How has SBC helped make your operations more efficient?

SBC completed a very good, comprehensive review of our transportation practices and policies that will lead to more efficient day-to-day operations. They also applied their expertise in contract review to our existing transportation contract allowing us to make changes that will raise performance standards and bolster our negotiating position. Our future contracts will be much better structured thanks to the SBC review.

How is the company aligned with the values that drive your operation?

Our core values are centered on safety first, student experience second, and best cost third. SBC absolutely shares our view that safety is the number one priority. On that, there is no compromise. As they went about their review of our system they were diligent in pointing out any safety issues they found along the way. They totally understand our priorities and the balance that we must strike between service levels and cost.

How has working with SBC made your job and/or work life easier?

Leading this project was a real investment in time, but it was totally worth it. The SBC consultants walked beside us every step of the way and shouldered a lot of the work. We could not have done this review and planning ourselves; we do not have this expertise internally. Without SBC we never could have gotten this project off the ground.

What surprised or pleased you the most about working with SBC?

Getting a sneak peek at the actual data behind SBC's conclusions was huge for me. That's not a standard part of their package, but they did that for us. I was also very pleased and surprised with the broader ancillary services they provided. I expected them to do a bell time study, but the contract review they performed turned out to be very valuable as well. They know everything that is happening in the industry, from the latest in parent communications to routing and scheduling software. All of this was above and beyond my expectations when the project began.

Would you recommend SBC to others? What positive benefits would you emphasize?

I would absolutely recommend SBC. No doubt about it. Our investment of both time and money in this project is paying off in spades. We're already seeing improvements in service, quality and price.