



School Bus Consultants' Fleet Management Roadmap Guides Oklahoma School District to Operational Reset



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- Justin Milner
Chief Operating Officer
Norman Public Schools

Nestled in the heart of a world-class academic community in Central Oklahoma, the Norman Public School District, with more than 16,000 students in 24 schools, is known for academic excellence, robust fine arts programs and first-rate athletic teams. Its student transportation operation, however, failed to meet the high standards set by the rest of the organization. In 2017, newly appointed Chief Operating Officer Justin Milner decided it was time for a reset. This case study examines how the fleet management experts at School Bus Consultants (SBC) guided Norman School District leaders to create a new normal in transportation.

The Challenge: Lack of Transparency, Poor Service

When Justin Milner was appointed Chief Operating Officer of Norman Public Schools in the summer of 2017, one of his first priorities was to address the ongoing service issues that plagued the district's owned and operated student transportation operation.

"I had been in the district for more than 12 years and witnessed the transportation department's increasing dysfunction and poor customer service from a number of vantage points," Milner said. "We had some good people, but the department lacked leadership, data and a plan. My background was not in transportation, but I knew we had to do something different. I began to search for outside consultants who could give us an objective third-party view. We needed experts with the industry experience and insight to assess our operation and create a blueprint for a future with greater efficiency and a better, safer riding experience for students."

In April of 2018, Amber Bui was named Transportation Director and joined Milner in his quest to reset and reorganize the department. "Buses were late, ride times were long and service was poor," said Bui. "Justin and I set out to change the face of the department."

Milner's research led him to School Bus Consultants. "SBC clearly offered the most comprehensive approach to our problem and their experience lined up very well

with what we were seeking. We entered into an agreement and began working together in the fall of 2018," he said.

The Solution: Assess & Benchmark Performance to Create a Roadmap for the Future

Beginning with in-depth interviews with Milner and Bui, face-to-face meetings with mechanics and drivers, and a department-wide survey, the SBC team spent the next several months getting under the hood of the district's transportation operations. This included a detailed analysis of existing routing and scheduling practices and procedures.

"We wanted a blueprint on how to move forward and SBC delivered that in a very comprehensive report," Milner said. "But we didn't wait for the final report to begin making changes. We collaborated throughout the research, discovery and analysis process and took action to implement changes along the way."

SBC's work to benchmark Norman's transportation operations against other school districts was particularly valuable to both Milner and Bui.

"The SBC team was fantastic – very helpful and extremely professional in their approach," Bui said. "They compared our department to that of other districts our size and gave us very good feedback on what we are doing well and what we need to work on. SBC's recommendations were numerous and very detailed. Being new to transportation, I especially appreciated their guidance with regard to the way our department is structured – from job titles to individual responsibilities. We used that information to restructure the office to make better use of our employees' time."

Milner agrees. "We knew we had problems in our transportation department, and for years we were told that the changes we wanted could not happen," he said. "SBC came in and said, 'Yes it can happen and here's how it works in other school districts. We can turn this thing around.' The customer service we received from SBC was great. They were fully engaged throughout the process and when they were in town to meet with us, they worked tirelessly from dawn to dark."

The Result: Operational Efficiencies Move District "Light Years Ahead"

"Thanks to SBC's work and the good people we put in place in the department, we absolutely are more efficient today," said

Milner. "We're light years ahead of where we were two years ago."

Based on SBC's routing and scheduling analysis and recommendations, Norman Public Schools purchased a new software platform and spent the following year transitioning to the new system. The district also made two big purchases of new buses following the SBC audit.

"The SBC team gave us the tools we needed to ask the right questions of school bus vendors. They definitely made the process better," Bui said.

Milner called the fleet and workforce management tools SBC provided "phenomenal."

"We now have a systematic approach to bus rotation and replacement," he said. "We can look at mileage and other factors to make data-driven decisions. The impact that SBC recommendations have had on hiring and retention are equally impressive. In the past, we routinely ran 10 to 15 drivers short because we could not retain drivers. We now have minimal turnover and have earned a reputation as a great place to work. Drivers are leaving other districts to work for us, and this has resulted in higher-quality drivers. We actually closed out the past school year with five drivers in our substitute pool."

Happier drivers also mean happier riders, according to Milner. "The positive impact of the organizational and operational changes we have made is multiplied many times over. For example, because we have more drivers, we can assign more bus monitors and that has resulted in a decrease in student behavioral problems on our buses. And that makes all of our jobs much easier."

What was the greatest benefit of the SBC engagement? Milner said it was SBC's ability to help his team see the big picture.

"We get so focused on the day-to-day activities that we lose sight of the big picture," he added. "The knowledge of industry trends and data on peer practices that SBC brought to the table were invaluable."
