



School Bus Consultants Helps Bakersfield City School District Develop and Implement an Efficient, Seamless School Bell Time Change

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- Steve McClain
Assistant Superintendent for Business Services, Bakersfield City School District

The decision to change school bell times is fraught with challenges that can have a major impact on any school community. Those challenges are magnified in a large and diverse school district like the one in Bakersfield, California. Located at the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley, the Bakersfield City School District is the largest elementary district in the state, transporting more than 8,000 students to more than 40 schools in 110 buses. Over time, individual school start times had become so spread out that, by 2016, Bakersfield had 20 different bell schedules. In this case study, Steve McClain, the school district's Assistant Superintendent for Business Services, explains the challenges of striking a balance between the competing, and often conflicting, demands of a sophisticated school transportation program.

The Challenge: Develop a Uniform School Bell Time Change Strategy

“We knew we had challenges because we could not get all our runs into a one or two-tier uniform bell system,” McClain said. “Our first pick-up was at 7:45 a.m., our last was at 8:55, and kindergarten is a half-day. We were looking to create three tiers, which may sound simple but it's very complex. We have a lot of bright people here, but we needed an outsider's perspective – a firm that has looked at other districts our size.”

McClain and the Bakersfield team looked at a number of firms but found the focused expertise they required in the experienced analysts and transportation industry professionals at School Bus Consultants (SBC).

SBC's operational assessment helped the Bakersfield transportation team develop a better understanding of the variables and constraints involved with routing and scheduling and created a plan to maximize the potential of their school transportation program.

The Solution: A Routing System that Works Across the Board

"We started working with SBC in the spring of 2017 and worked throughout the 2017-2018 school year to set the stage for an August 2018 launch of new bell times," McClain said. "Communication with the school board and parents was key during this period. Our goal was to overcommunicate and SBC had a lot of ideas for getting the word out to the school community. Their experience with similar size communities was extremely valuable. They are based out of town but were very hands-on with our transportation team and stayed in touch by phone, email and in person. We are very pleased with their service-oriented approach."

The Result: A 3-Tier System with a Growing Level of Efficiency and Effectiveness

"Our goal was to make this new bell time schedule successful," said McClain. "No one likes their kids on the bus longer than they have to be, and buses must be on time. SBC helped us create a routing system that works across the board."

McClain said the real test was when school started. "We took the first 10 days to iron out bugs and now we're fine-tuning. We would have loved to have everything perfect on Day 1, but that's not realistic. Every day was a grind to get up and running and SBC's quick response and on-site assistance was invaluable. After the first month, calls and complaints have quieted down. We're looking forward, not back and continue to ask families for patience as we implement this new program."

"Chief among the benefits of working with SBC is their support, which is based on real-world experience with school districts our size. They combine the right answers with great customer service and attention to our needs. They understand our values of serving kids and families, not just getting people from point A to B. Understanding that human element is as important as being on time," McClain said.

"The biggest plus was being able to go through our new bell time launch with people who had been through it before. The handholding they provided was very valuable. Our buses are on the road from 6:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and we found that the SBC team was always accessible when we needed them."
