

Brainerd Public Schools District Sees Long-Term Success with Versatrans

Organization Profile:

Industry: Public School District

Location: Brainerd, Minnesota

Population: 13,500

Student Population: 7,000

Years as Tyler Client: 15 years

Tyler Products Used: Versatrans[®] Routing & Planning, Versatrans e-Link[®], SIF Agent

Contact: www.isd181.org

In their Own Words:

“Versatrans cares about its customers. They do a phenomenal job – and I’ve worked with other companies – of listening to their customers, and of trying to implement things that customers are asking for.”

— Fran Jansvold, Regular and Special Education Bus Router

Key Challenges

Proof of the quality of any software solution is its ability to remain up-to-date and helpful to users over many years. The demands on student transportation programs change and grow all the time, and the software that districts use to facilitate those demands must be able to keep up. Brainerd Public Schools implemented Versatrans[®] 15 years ago, in 1999, and they have continually seen success with the solution in that time.

Before implementing Versatrans, Brainerd Public Schools had used manual routing processes that were inefficient and labor-intensive. They had handwritten route plans, drawn on a big paper map in the transportation office. Naturally, it was very difficult to update or alter the routes without having to re-draw the entire map. The district ran 67 routes, many of which were lightly loaded. These routes were developed by Brainerd’s transportation contractor, with only minimal input from the Brainerd transportation staff. Budgets were tight, and these inefficient routes weren’t making the best use of their resources.

The Brainerd transportation office also dealt with challenges in their communication with bus drivers and parents. Specifically, the district consistently had issues with kindergartners getting on the wrong bus on the first day of school. Fran Jansvold, regular and special education bus router for Brainerd Public Schools, told Tyler Technologies, “I remember when we first started working in the office we had to make hand bracelets. We typed up all the kindergartners’ names [and bus information] and created bracelets for them, but even that didn’t help because we really didn’t have lists for drivers, or the information for them to know who the children were. We did try our best to give them a list of kindergartners but frequently children would get on the wrong bus. It’s very traumatic, for the children and for their parents.”

Improved communication became a major priority for the district. “Our accountability kept increasing, and still continues to increase through the years,” Jansvold explained. “Parents are asking for us to have more information for them and to allow them to know where their children are and that they are getting to school safely.”

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Action Taken

After implementing Versatrans Routing & Planning, the Brainerd Public Schools transportation office was able to take control of their own route planning. Right away they were able to dig into the system and begin to make adjustments and test how changes to their routes could result in greater efficiency. Jensvold recalled the process: “I did many studies on boundaries, student counts, and different bus route plans. I showed administrators information about students through splatter maps, charts and lists. I also pulled information on counts, start times, end times and much more to help them make informed decisions about our future. I have used idle time, individual student extra load time, specific stop load times, and accommodation times in the vehicle file to keep route times accurate to the minute.” The district gained and has maintained complete control over their routes, and simply provides their contractor with view-only access to their routing information.

Brainerd Public Schools also took steps to improve communication. They use Versatrans Routing & Planning to create and print “bus cards” for each of their students. The bus cards, which are handed out at the beginning of the school year, tell each student which bus they will ride, and when and where they will be picked up and dropped off. Drivers were provided with continually-updated lists of the same information. And the district also implemented Versatrans e-Link®, a tool with can provide outside access to Versatrans routing information. Using this tool, they gave district front office staff in each of the schools the ability to view student stop data. If a student has a question, the front office does not have to call the transportation office to find the answer. They can access the information themselves and even hand-write a new bus card if a replacement is needed.

Results

Using the improved routes which they created in Versatrans, Brainerd Public Schools was able to cut four routes, for an annual savings of \$200,000. They continue to adjust their routes to maintain their efficiency as conditions change, while minimally impacting service to their students.

They have also seen huge improvement in the communication with students, parents, drivers and front office staff. Jensvold told us that the bus cards have had a major impact: “The teacher knows, the parent knows, the bus driver knows, everyone knows exactly where that student is to be at any given time. This makes for a much safer ride for our children. And it really helps with the behaviors on the bus. Bus drivers know who their kids are — they get to know them much more quickly because they’re always checking those bus cards and looking at them — and I think they have much better communication with the parents because of it.”

She also stated that, “[providing information access through e-Link] has cut back a tremendous amount on the calls we receive in those first few days, which allows us to serve our parents better, because then we’re able to take those parent calls and not get so far behind. It just has been a wonderful thing for us in Brainerd. And the other thing that it has done is that it has saved us money because we no longer have to work the long hours that we were working [at the start of the school year], and less staff has to be called in to help manage those phone calls as they come through.”

Brainerd Public Schools continues to reap the benefits of these changes, and are secure in the knowledge that if their needs change in the future, Versatrans will adapt with them. Jensvold said, “Versatrans cares about its customers. They do a phenomenal job — and I’ve worked with other companies — of listening to their customers, and of trying to implement things that customers are asking for.”