

Case Study

Berrien County, MI



First Student

Overview

Berrien Regional Education Service Agency (Berrien RESA) needed to lower student transportation costs without compromising safety. The southwest Michigan agency with a county population of 161,700 operates a number of alternative education programs and facilities for children with special needs and behavioral issues.

Challenge

Berrien RESA operated its own Special Education transportation service, and was faced with decreases in state funding. Many school districts save money when they outsource student transportation, but Berrien RESA was primarily concerned about the special needs of their passengers and the customization of fleet and equipment. Their Blossomland Learning Center provides education programs for moderately to severely cognitively impaired students, ages 3 to 26. Their Lighthouse Education Center is an alternative education facility designed to provide programs and services for autistic and severely emotionally impaired students. As they began to investigate outsourcing, questions about critical issues such as safety, loss of jobs, and loss of control were raised by parents and community.

Solution

Berrien RESA contracted with First Student, a transportation company that regards safety and customer service as core values, and thus began a unique partnership that combines care and compassion with cost savings and technology.

First Student realized they would encounter challenges. Yolanda Suarez, First Student Contract Manager at Berrien RESA stated, "It takes compassion as well as special training and equipment to safely transport students with special needs. All of our conventional buses at Berrien RESA are equipped with wheelchair lifts to transport children with special needs." She continued, "On each of our bus routes attendants or nurses are on board to monitor students' medical needs," added Suarez.

First Student uses a fleet of Ford Aerostar vans at the Lighthouse Education Center and transports up to five students per van." She



continued, “Our services are very customized to their needs. These students have various behavioral issues, so when planning these routes input from the school staff is necessary to ensure the compatibility of the students on board.”

First Student management works closely with the Lighthouse Education Center principal and provides additional after-school and special runs as needed throughout the day. First Student also provides nine weeks of summer school transportation.

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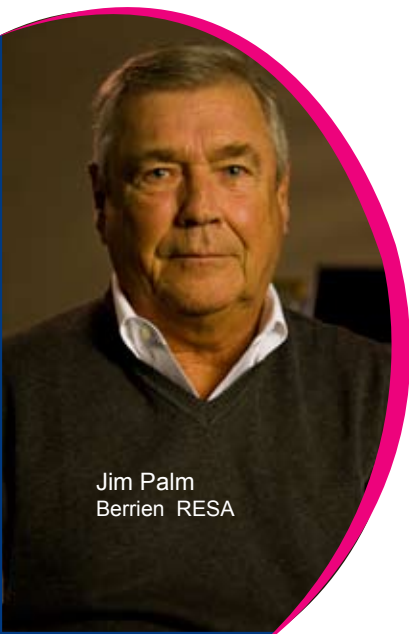
***Yolanda Suarez,
First Student Contract Manager, Berrien RESA***

Assessing the Situation

Jim Palm, Assistant Superintendent for Administrative Services at Berrien RESA, said, “Money was a catalyst for us. We found we would save a million dollars a year for five years when we first signed the contract. It was a big decision and we wanted to be very cautious and look at all the options before we went ahead with it. We wanted to be sure we could do this without sacrificing any safety issues.”

Passenger safety and special care is of utmost importance, and not everyone can provide for special needs passengers. Palm noted, “One of the things we have always prided ourselves on is the safety and care of our students. No matter how much money we saved, if we thought we would have to sacrifice safety, we wouldn’t have done it.”

As to the questions among parents and the community about loss of jobs and loss of control, Berrien RESA found their answers. “First Student understood these concerns, and responded that generally when the company takes on a new a contract, most of the previous staff would sign on. And in fact that was true. Ninety-two percent of our employees signed on with First Student.” Palm continued, “Many of the drivers live here in the community. Most of the students were riding with the same drivers and aides that they had been riding with in the past. That was very comforting for them. Parents now would agree that we provide a very safe transportation system for them.”



Jim Palm
Berrien RESA



Delivering the Solution

“Without exception, the safety of our students is our primary concern,” said Palm. “We learned about their driver safety training and professional development programs and were very impressed,” he added.

What Berrien RESA found was that all First Student drivers and attendants go through extensive training both in the classroom and on the road. Employees receive special training in student management and emergency procedures and participate in monthly safety meetings and training throughout the school year.

“We like that First Student’s standard safety procedures require drivers to check for sleeping children at the end of their route. The reminder system at First Student added another element to the safety procedures of a pre- and post-check system which was already in place,” commented Palm. The Child Check-Mate electronic reminder system is installed on all First Student buses. Drivers are trained to check all seats for remaining children before deactivating an alarm at the back of the bus.

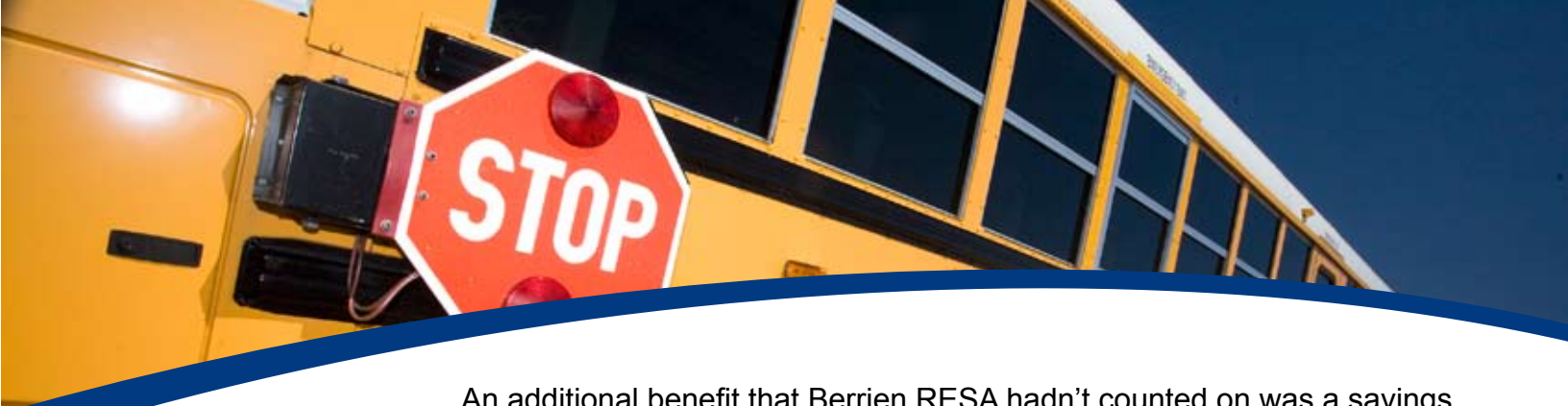
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***Jim Palm,
Assistant Superintendent for Administrative Services, Berrien RESA***

Palm also noted that a private contractor like First Student, because of their size, can provide more extensive and ongoing training than most schools.

The Berrien RESA team was also impressed with First Student’s safety crossing gates. These gates are standard equipment on all buses, and prevent students from walking directly in front of the bus. They maintain a safe distance between the student and the bus, so that the students are always visible to the driver.

“First Student was also very cooperative in working with other needs. Because of the types of programs that we operate, digital video cameras are located in every classroom and in every hallway. Consequently, we asked First Student to install cameras in every vehicle. We found that this is a significant safety enhancement for our program – it’s about protecting the students, the drivers and the staff. They have been very useful to us,” adds Palm.



An additional benefit that Berrien RESA hadn't counted on was a savings of administrative staff time. Palm explained that previously they had 50-60 employees. Now that First Student operates and manages the student transportation services, staff have been freed up to attend to other responsibilities and allowed them to focus on their education mission and school-related issues.

Vehicles are also newer and very well-maintained as a result of greater resources available through a large organization. Palm stated, "First Student came in with 20 brand new vehicles for our Lighthouse Education Center. If additional vehicles are required, the vast resources of First Student can be tapped to meet this need."

Return on Investment

The dollars Berrien RESA is able to save on transportation are passed on to its constituent local school districts to help meet their needs. As a result, district officials were very supportive of the decision to outsource.

He observed, "I think superintendents are looking for more and more ways to stretch their valuable resources, and outsourcing transportation is one of those ways. Transportation is a little more sensitive than outsourcing food service or custodial services, because students are more involved with the staff, but it can also be the biggest money-saver. Both Berrien RESA's Board of Education and the administration were satisfied that we could outsource and save a lot of money for our local district without sacrificing safety. That has turned out to be true, and I would highly recommend First Student to anyone looking to outsource."

"First Student has met all of our needs."

***Jim Palm,
Assistant Superintendent for Administrative Services, Berrien RESA***