

Talk

about Today's Public Schools

Editor's Note:

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Fuel driving up costs for Texas school districts

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Everyone across the nation is struggling with skyrocketing fuel costs, and school districts certainly are no exception. The cost of fuel has a heavy impact on school districts in Texas in particular because the state Legislature has not increased the transportation allotment to schools since 1984, and the current school funding system does not accommodate inflation and the rising cost of operations.

Recently, one of Northside's elected representatives expressed interest in helping school districts offset the high cost of fuel and posed several questions to me.

How much additional funding does the district spend outside the formulas and regular allocations for fuel?

Northside's transportation budget for the 2007-08 school year is \$27.8 million, compared to \$20.7 million in 2003-04. This budget includes all costs necessary to transport 42,000 children (total enrollment is 85,500) each day, maintain a bus fleet of 756, and cover a span of more than 355 square miles. In 2003-04, the transportation allotment from the state was \$5.2 million. In 2007-08, it will be \$5.7 million, a 9.6 percent increase, even though in that time period the District has grown by more than 14,000 students, or about 19.6 percent.

Since 2003-04, fuel costs have increased an average of 25 percent annually, and we expect the costs for 2008-09 to be double that of the previous school year. NISD spent more than \$1.8 million for fuel in 2003-04, and the District expects to spend about \$4.8 million in 2007-08. To cover the rising cost of fuel, NISD has added more than \$1.9 million to the budget over the last four years and expects to add another \$1.1 million this coming year.

How has the district addressed the increases in fuel cost over the past five years?

Northside has a longstanding commitment to alternative fuels as a means to curb costs. Five years ago, 95 percent of our bus fleet was powered by propane, a cheaper and more environ-

mentally-friendly fuel. At that time, we estimated the District saved \$700 per bus annually in fuel costs. In addition, using propane reduces the wear and tear on the engine, and as a result the buses need less maintenance and have a longer life expectancy. Unfortunately, in 2001, because of market factors, bus manufacturers stopped making the gas-burning engine that could be converted to propane. However, bus manufacturers once again are producing propane buses, and the District recently purchased 16 propane powered buses. Currently, about half of our bus fleet is powered by propane fuel. In fact, because of Northside's efficient use of resources and propane gas, the District was nominated for the 2008 Propane Exceptional Energy Fleet Award.

Northside ISD has four strategically located transportation stations so that neighborhood children can be transported to neighborhood schools to reduce both mileage and fuel costs. The routing department also reviews bus routes year round to consolidate and improve efficiency, resulting in less miles and cost. Station managers ensure fueling is done in the early mornings and/or late afternoons, and idling is limited to one to three minutes on diesel buses, especially at bus loop and station parking lots. Northside has been purchasing new buses since 2003 and as a result, the average age of the fleet is less than eight years. This means better burning and more efficient buses. In addition, the District is acquiring a new fuel system through Texas Fleet Fuels to better regulate usage and cost. This system will create better accountability and will have the ability to send real-time reporting data to department directors starting in August 2008.

School buses average 6 to 8 miles per gallon of fuel. The current cost of fuel as of June 1, 2008 is: propane \$1.73, unleaded \$3.37 and diesel \$3.85. This compares to \$0.99, \$1.19, and \$1.31 in 2004, respectively.

How much fuel is spent on travel miles (including field trips, out of town trips, employee reimbursement, etc.)?

During the 2006-07 school year, buses consumed almost 1.5 million gallons of fuel taking students to and from school, and to tutoring, afternoon extensions, field trips, and out of town trips, etc. Currently, NISD does not receive any transportation allotment funding for its four campus magnet school programs. The total mileage for the four magnet schools for the 2007-2008 school year was 656,460 miles. Transportation used 53 buses at four stations for 180 days to accommodate NISD magnet students in all sectors of the district.

Operating under the current school finance system, school districts across the state are either already struggling to make ends meet or are preparing for tough financial times ahead. The rising cost of fuel only is making matters more difficult. Short of ending bus transportation for students, Northside is doing everything possible to reduce its fuel costs. It is imperative that the state Legislature overhaul the school finance system, and at the very least increase the transportation allotment to realistic levels.

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