

**Chatham Central School District
Chatham, New York 12037**

One-Bell Questions and Answers

Dear Parent/Guardian:

March 27, 2009

As you may know, the Board of Education is considering a proposal to implement a one-bell transportation system for September, 2009. Last year, the Board hired a consultant to conduct a feasibility study which was presented to the public on December 16th. The Board directed the Interim Superintendent to develop a proposal for a one-bell transportation system that would meet Chatham's needs. On March 10th, the 2009-10 Proposed Budget was presented including the one-bell system.

At 6:30 p.m., Tuesday, March 31st, a Town Hall Meeting has been scheduled to seek additional input from the community regarding the one-bell transportation system. The Board of Education will meet on April 7th and April 21st at which time the Board will decide whether or not to include the one-bell transportation system in the budget to be presented to the voters.

This question and answer document is intended to address the many questions that have been raised by parents and staff members. Although the proposal will need further refinement, this document should serve as a general guide regarding the implementation of a one-bell transportation system.

Lee A. Bordick,
Interim Superintendent of Schools

1. Why is the District considering a one-bell transportation system at this time?

Due to a steady decline in enrollment from a high of 1,569 students in 1997, to a current enrollment of 1,293 students, and a projected enrollment of 1,080 in the year 2012, the District is proposing a one-bell transportation system to improve efficiencies and reduce costs. Currently, and for the past ten years, CHS and CMS students have been transported on 19 bus runs, and MED students are being transported on 15 bus runs. Because of low ridership, and projections of even lower ridership due to decreasing enrollment, 19 bus runs would be sufficient to transport all students in K-12. The cost savings is conservatively estimated to be 200 thousand dollars each year.

2. How would you address safety concerns in transporting students from kindergarten to 12th graders on the same buses?

Chatham School District has a long tradition of transporting younger students with older students on the same bus. Students in grades 5-12 are currently transported together in the morning and afternoon. There are times when students in grades K-4 also share bus routes with grades 5-12 on morning and afternoon runs. The late bus for middle and high school students who stay after school for a variety of reasons is the same bus that the MED elementary students ride in the afternoon. The students who participate in the morning intramural program and/or running club at MED also share the buses with the middle and high school students on the morning bus runs.

Under the one-bell proposal, added measures are being proposed to address safety concerns. Buses will have camera systems installed for an increased level of safety and security. The cameras will be purchased through a grant the District has received. Additionally, transportation staff members may be assigned to selected buses and those staff members will be rotated throughout the nineteen bus runs. Because these staff members are current bus attendants and/or substitute bus drivers, no additional cost is incurred. Student management training programs for bus drivers have been proposed throughout the school year. A new program will be established for middle and high school students to serve as bus mentors. These mentors will be assigned to assist elementary school students on each bus. This new mentor program will provide an opportunity for students who have career interest working with young people, and could also be used for community service credit.

For further safety and security, transportation policies and guidelines are being reviewed to strengthen discipline policies. The standard for appropriate behavior for all students will be equivalent to the appropriate behavior expected in the classroom.

3. What if my child is exposed to inappropriate conversations by older students?

During the first week of school, all students will meet with their respective school building administrator to review Code of Conduct policies, with a focus on bus discipline and the consequences of inappropriate behavior. This includes inappropriate language and conversations, regardless of the age of the student.

4. Who is responsible for inappropriate behavior or misconduct at the bus stop?

According to NYS School Law, school districts are liable for the supervision and safety of students who are within their physical custody or authority. Generally, they are not liable for the supervision and safety of students prior to boarding or after disembarking from a school bus. Custodial control and responsibility at those times rests with the parents.

5. What would be the consequence for inappropriate behavior or bullying, and who should parents report this type of behavior to (bus garage, building administrator, or superintendent)?

Depending on the seriousness of the infractions, students are subject to losing their bus privileges for an extended period of time and also subject to school discipline. Inappropriate behavior or bullying should be reported to the building principal, or in some cases to the transportation supervisor. Decisions made at the building level may always be appealed to the Superintendent.

6. Will there be consistency and follow-through on disciplinary referrals?

Yes. Administrators and transportation personnel will be engaged in regular meetings to review and ensure consistency in the application of the discipline policies.

7. Is it true that students will have longer bus rides under the one-bell system?

The bus routes are carefully being designed so that the student riding times comparable to current riding times.

8. What time will school begin and end?

The proposal calls for the school day at MED and CHS to begin between 8:00 and 8:10 a.m. and to conclude at 2:30 p.m. The CMS school day will remain the same as the current schedule. As the proposal develops, there may be slight adjustments to the beginning and end times for each of these buildings.

9. How early will my child be picked up at the bus stop? Will my child have to wait for a bus in the dark at 6:30 a.m.?

The range of times will be similar to, or in some cases later than, the current middle and high school student morning pick-up times. Because of the later starting time, the morning pick up times would range from 6:50 a.m. to 7:35 a.m.

10. Will centralized bus stops be established, which may mean a different bus stop for my child next year?

The primary goal is to keep the current system of bus stops. The District does not currently provide door-to-door transportation. As a result, it is not possible for all children to travel equal distances to and from the bus stops. A natural consequence of efficient and economical routing of buses is that some children will travel greater distances than others in traveling to and from the bus stop. During the summer, whether the District adopts the one-bell system or not, the District will employ two NYS certified School Bus Driver Instructors and School Bus Driver Examiners to review the District's bus stops and turn-arounds from a safety perspective. Based on Pupil Transportation Safety Institute guidelines, as well as current and evolving Board policy, some bus stops may be added, some may be consolidated, and some may be adjusted.

11. Will there be a "late" bus for students who participate in extracurricular activities after school, such as sports, clubs, extra help?

Yes. The proposal calls for six buses to leave the schools about one hour after the regular afternoon bus run. These second "late day" bus runs will provide students with an opportunity to stay after for extra help and/or extracurricular activities, or to participate in special programs that may be offered during this time.

12. How far in advance will my child need to sign up to ride the “late” bus on any given day?

Parents may notify the school office by written note on the same day, but no later than a specific time, such as 10:00 a.m.

13. How will parents know what time the “late” bus is going to arrive, especially if there are only a few students signed up, and if they are dropped off at a centralized location?

This subject is under study and analysis at the present time. A recommendation will be made no later than the close of the school year if the one-bell transportation system is adopted.

14. How will students who need to ride the bus to another household for early dismissal and emergency closings be handled?

Unlike the current practice where the District’s youngest students must wait at least an hour before the secondary bus runs come back to transport MED home, under the one-bell system, all students will be dismissed and transported at the same time. Parents may designate an alternate location for their child to go in case of an early dismissal or emergency closing, however, these designations must be made at the beginning of the school year, allowing us to determine ahead of time how many students will be riding on each bus. If parents wish to pick up their child, that may also be designated in advance.

15. Will the morning intramural sports programs for MED students still be held?

Yes. The intramural programs for MED students will still be held, but the programs will be scheduled after school instead of in the morning.

16. Will my child still be able to get breakfast at school? Will he/she have to arrive even earlier for the breakfast program at MED?

Yes. Children will still be able to get breakfast at school. The only difference in the breakfast program is that breakfast will be available approximately one hour earlier for MED students.

17. My child currently eats lunch at 10:50. Will an earlier start time mean my child will eat lunch one hour earlier too?

No. The current lunch times will remain the same at all buildings regardless of the bell system.

18. If MED starts around 8:00 and ends at 2:30, what will the added half-hour be used for?

MED teachers and the administrators are engaged in discussions regarding the most effective use of the additional time. A recommendation regarding the additional time will be forthcoming before the conclusion of the school year.

19. Will my child be guaranteed a seat on a bus if he/she does not ride on a consistent basis?

Yes. New York State law requires a seat for each eligible student.

20. If a bus is at capacity, will my child have to stand on the bus or wait for another bus?

A component of the plan is to have the availability of seats for students on an assigned route who may only ride the bus occasionally. It is unlawful to allow any passenger to stand on a bus that is transporting students under the age of twenty-one to and from school.

21. Will there be three students to a seat, and will students be required to wear seatbelts?

For planning purposes, the District will use the following guidelines: Three to a seat for students K-6 and two per seat for students in grades 7-12. Therefore, a full capacity 66-passenger bus may have as few as 44 students, depending on the grade levels of the students. Although seat belts are required in all full-sized school buses built after July 1, 1987 (and in all small buses since 1977), no law requires students to wear them.

22. What will the rules be regarding “no shows” for bus stops?

A “no show” is considered a student who never or rarely rides the school bus. If the one-bell is approved, the District plans to communicate with parents to confirm their intentions for their child to ride the bus. This information will be use as part of the planning process to accommodate “no show” riders.

23. Will my child be able to go home on a different bus route (i.e., separate households of divorced parents, care-giver, friend's house)?

The District is planning for 19 bus routes. To the extent we can accommodate these special circumstances, every effort will be made to do so. Current policy which permits parents to identify alternate bus departures is under review and will be finalized before the Board of Education acts on the one-bell system as part of the tentative budget adoption on April 21st. The law, however, does not require transportation to locations other than the child's home address.

24. Will my child be able to get off at a different stop on his/her assigned bus route?

Yes. If your child brings a note to the office in the morning that is signed by a parent or guardian, and presents that note to the bus driver, your child may get off his/her assigned bus route at another stop.

25. Will the bus driver be letting younger children off bus without a parent present?

At this point, the District will continue its current policy and practice whereby responsible individuals are required to take kindergarten children to and from the bus. An advantage of the one-bell system is that older siblings will be getting on and off the bus at the same time as their younger siblings, adding another layer of safety.

26. Will my child still be able to attend the morning Chatham Kids Club (CKC) program?

Yes. The Chatham Kids Club will continue to run a morning program at the MED school. The CKC officials stated that they will continue to work to meet the needs of parents if the one-bell system is adopted.

27. Will my child be able to bring his/her music instrument on the bus?

Yes, if it is not a large instrument. Items may be brought on the bus that are able to fit in the child's lap. State Department of Transportation regulations provide that the main aisle and the aisle to the door of a school bus must not be obstructed.

28. What about traffic congestion with parents and buses all arriving at the same time?

The District is working on a plan to reduce the congestion at MED and at the High School sites. The plan should be available in a few weeks.

29. Will the one-bell system cause bus drivers' and bus attendants' hours and pay to be cut?

The District is fortunate to have highly competent drivers and recognizes that the drivers play an important role in students' safety. Therefore, the District is engaged with the Transportation Association to find ways to keep the workforce intact. Despite the potential of reducing hours, the District has pledged that the benefits the drivers currently enjoy will continue. It is possible that the drivers may not lose any hours or benefits, depending on the number of people who may choose to retire.

30. What programs and/or instructional positions will be saved next year by instituting the one-bell system?

Because of the continued decline in enrollment, and given the high level of busing service that Chatham parents have come to expect, the District has been operating the transportation system very inefficiently, causing a drain on the budget. With the increased pressure to reduce taxes, non-mandated programs and/or increased class sizes are areas that Districts commonly view as ways to reduce expenditures.

31. Will the one-bell end up costing more money with the installation of cameras, safety training, extra monitors/adults riding buses?

No. The cameras will be a one-time expenditure, purchased through a grant. The adults riding buses will be substitute drivers/bus attendants whose salaries are already a part of the budget. Certainly, there are additional savings in employee benefits, but the District has chosen to grandfather those drivers who have benefits for a concern of losing highly competent drivers to another District.

32. Why can't the one-bell system be a separate proposition on the ballot instead of including it in the budget this year?

The Board of Education publicly stated that they will make the decision to incorporate the one- or two-bell system within the budget by the tentative budget adoption date of April 21st.