

Spotlight Ontario



The Sudbury Student Services Consortium (SSSC)

- [What is The SSSC](#)
- [Governance Structure](#)
- [Benefits](#)
- [Challenges](#)
- [Critical Success Factors](#)
- [Acknowledgements](#)
- [What's Going On Out There?](#)

Editors' Note

Welcome! This is the second instalment of Spotlight Ontario, and the first with our new colleague Nathania. Since our last [Spotlight](#) piece was released in May 2005, Ministry staff have been busy with school bus safety, consortia and yes, the draft funding model.

We hope you enjoy this piece on the Sudbury Student Services Consortium and encourage you to contact us with any [thoughts or suggestions](#) you may have.

Regards,

Nick Landry, Jay Porter and Nathania Ho

It was a beautiful Sudbury Saturday Night, well almost. As the Air Canada attendant announced that flight 7816 to Toronto had been cancelled, three very weary Ministry staffers realized that their trip to Sudbury was going to last a little while longer. On a positive note, the extra time at the airport allowed them to reflect on what they had learned from their meetings with Sudbury Student Services Consortium (SSSC) representatives.

A partnership between the Rainbow District School Board, Conseil Scolaire Catholique du Nouvel-Ontario, Sudbury Catholic District School Board, and Conseil Scolaire du district du Grand Nord de l'Ontario, the SSSC is responsible for transporting approximately 24,000 students on 438 buses daily at a cost of \$19,000,000 per year. What follows is a brief history of the SSSC, its development, challenges and some of the factors which have made it so successful.

The Sudbury Student Services Consortium

In a move designed to increase efficiencies and reduce the administrative burden on local boards, the Sudbury Student Services Consortium was formed on January 17, 2001 as a partnership of the four coterminous school boards in the Sudbury area. While it was intended that the SSSC would eventually assume responsibility for a number of school board business functions, such as purchasing, its primary focus has been student

transportation.

Prior to the establishment of the SSSC, a foundation for cooperative planning was in place as the four boards had shared transportation for many years. CSC du Nouvel Ontario was providing transportation services to Sudbury Catholic DSB while Rainbow DSB and CSD du Grand Nord were buying services from a third party. Unfortunately, in the absence of a shared routing solution, it was clear that additional efficiencies would be elusive. Also, due to the confidentiality of student data, the boards realized that a centralized system would be necessary to facilitate full cooperation.

A staff presentation highlighted the opportunity for additional savings and a consultant was hired to do a feasibility study on the integration of student transportation services and to validate what staff had reported as potential savings and improved service levels.

The superintendents of business and finance from all four boards began developing a plan for the transition to a consortium after receiving the consultant's report which concluded that, "a unified department will achieve the goal of all member boards to operate a safe and on time routing service as guided by the transportation policy and approved budget."

Although the boards had common transportation policies prior to the formation of the SSSC, the administration and operating procedures were varied. As a result, a major part of the transition planning involved defining roles and responsibilities for the consortium, school boards and trustees.

Governance Structure

Since its inception, the consortium has been governed by a board of directors and managed by Chief Executive Officer Jo-Anne Harrison who is responsible for the day-to-day operations. "The political will of boards to step away from the day-to-day operations is a must... parents can appeal to the board of directors to have a decision reversed, but in most cases the policies of the consortium are upheld," she said.

This ensures that services align with policies and consistent service levels are maintained. "If, as a board, you are providing transportation to your students, there is a temptation to do a lot of door-to-door (pickups). When we started sharing, it put a stop to that," she added.

The policies of the consortium are developed and agreed upon by the trustees of the four boards and then passed on to the SSSC for planning including routing and budgeting. However, this does not mean that boards are restricted from providing service above the level agreed upon. "As a board, transportation is very integrated with program delivery; therefore, whenever the Rainbow District School Board makes a philosophical decision that will require additional transportation, such as a magnet program, we make that decision knowing that there will be additional transportation costs associated with it," said Diane Cayen-Arnold, Chief Financial Officer at the Rainbow District School Board and current chair of the SSSC. This allows boards to continue making program decisions that meet the needs of their community, while maintaining the fundamental principle of equity in transportation through the consortium.

Benefits

While monetary savings are often cited as the primary indicator of efficiency and cooperation, financial reports alone do not tell the whole story. During our interviews with consortium representatives, we were able to identify a number of other benefits that contribute to the overall success of the consortium.

Key Service Indicators

As a testament to the consortium's pursuit of efficiency and effectiveness, key service indicators have been identified and examined to determine whether or not there is equal sharing between boards, and whether the consortium has truly increased system efficiency. As part of the auditing process, the consortium looked at ride times, loading

factors, transfers, improvement of safety programs and the percentage of buses arriving or departing within a given window. Results indicated that service levels were consistent amongst students in all four boards and targets for service levels set out by the SSSC have been met. However, despite these operational achievements, Jo-Anne indicated that further initiatives aimed at enhancing efficiency and improving the safety of school bus operations will be implemented.

Development of Best Practices

Aside from their routing efficiencies, the consortium has also ventured into a partnership with SolusOne, a company who provides communications solutions using *Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP)* to help it gather accurate student information. Initial results have illustrated that the process is very adept at verifying the accuracy of student data which results in more efficient route planning and additional cost savings for the consortium.

The consortium is also responsive to the needs of its partners. When drivers alerted the SSSC to a problem they had with identifying young riders, the consortium provided school bus key chains to all kindergarten students to put on their backpacks. This made identification of younger riders easier for the drivers and ultimately improved the safety of the students.

As a four-board consortium, many community decisions affect the operation of daily routes and runs. As such, the consortium is often called upon to provide input on how certain policies may effect student transportation. Notably, the Planning Department, Traffic Department, City Official Plan Committee and individual boards have called upon the consortium to provide input on how certain policies may impact student transportation.

A Specific Example – School Bus Safety

The SSSC has developed many safety programs to fit the needs of students and drivers, as well as communicate with parents and the general public on school bus safety. For students riding a bus for the first time, the First Rider Program provides students with an opportunity to learn the rules of the bus and how to board and exit the bus in a safe manner.

The Driver Training Program contains modules on, “How to Deal with Discipline”, “Special Education Driver Session”, and “How to Deal with Autistic Children.” For principals and other designates, a discipline training program was initiated to educate them on policies and expectations regarding school bus behaviour. Other policies and procedures drafted by the consortium include “Emergency Evacuation”, “Embarkation and Discharge of Young Pupils”, “Code of Conduct”, “Car Seats and Booster Seats” and “Use of Video Cameras.” These policies and programs have been instrumental in providing the consortium and the students they serve with a consistent set of guidelines to manage their day-to-day operations.

The Bus Safety Manual developed by the consortium is an innovative way to provide a one-stop document for all safety programs related to student transportation in the Sudbury area. The manual contains information on their First Rider Program, SOAR program for Grade 4 to 8 students, Survivor Program for grade 9 to 12 students, bus patrol programs, a list of operator training courses, Epi-pen training, disciplinary procedures and a code of conduct for students. There is also a section on Procedures for the Embarkation and Discharge of Young Pupils; parents are expected to go over the material with their children and sign a tear-off form which acknowledges they have read and understand the policies. A School Bus Discipline Committee has also been established to examine procedures, as well as other topics such as video cameras, loading capacities, monitors, and driver training.

Challenges

As with any partnership, the SSSC has had to overcome a number of challenges throughout its development. From transitional issues related to human resources and policy development, to more recent challenges with data collection, the SSSC was able to share some of its experience and insight with us in the hope that it might help others who encounter similar situations.

Human Resources and Staffing

Prior to the development of the SSSC, the staffing situation at the board level was a mix of internal and external resources. For instance, Rainbow District School Board was outsourcing their transportation planning to Laidlaw Planning Services, who reported to the manager of plant and transportation. Conversely, Conseil Scolaire Catholique du Nouvel-Ontario had a transportation department comprised of a manager, transportation technician, two full-time clerks and a casual clerk.

During the transition, the Laidlaw staff members including a supervisor, two full-time clerks and a part-time clerk were offered positions within the consortium. The CSC du Nouvel-Ontario employees were also offered positions at the consortium; however as members of the local Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) certain union issues needed to be resolved first.

After the union was given voluntary recognition for a new local, the employees were given the option to transfer to the consortium or apply for open positions at CSC du Nouvel-Ontario. Those individuals who chose to move to the consortium were given a secondment for one year with the option to extend their contract for a second year. The employees also retained the right to return to the collective bargaining unit of their old board during or at the end of their secondment. Since the positions they had held no longer existed, they could then exercise the bumping rights stipulated in the collective agreement. If the employees did not return to the board during or at the end of the secondment, the employee would forfeit all rights.

As with any employee transition, pay and benefits were important issues. For the former CSC du Nouvel-Ontario employees, past seniority was recognized for pay and vacation purposes while all new employees received pay and benefit packages commensurate with the policies of the consortium. Since 2001, the consortium has taken on a number of full-time employees, bringing the total number at the consortium to eleven.

Merging of Data

A significant challenge for the SSSC was the merging of student data into a single database. Prior to the development of the consortium, both Rainbow District School Board and the CSC du Nouvel-Ontario were using Edulog software, though the manner in which they used this technology varied. For instance, while one board was using an alpha system for school identification, the other was using a numerical system. While this created some initial problems, all data has since been converted to numerical form and is incorporated into the consortium's Edulog NT system for planning purposes.

Upload

Another issue surrounding the management of student data is uploading it from the boards to the consortium. While two of the partner boards are using Trillium software, another is using Maplewood, and the fourth uses multiple systems including SAS, Maplewood, ESYS and another system which was developed in-house. While that board is currently working to move all its data into a single system, Jo-Anne Harrison points out that, "the various student systems used by the boards allows secretaries to enter data in a non-uniform manner, which results in various spellings of street names and inconsistent date-of-birth entries. This makes it very difficult to upload data into a single database with accuracy."

Bell Time Optimization

While optimizing bell times will likely save some money and improve the efficiency of the system, the experience of the SSSC shows that optimization is one of the most difficult undertakings for any new or developed consortium. "When we tried to amalgamate routes differently, we used bell times that had been confirmed by the schools as being correct. However, it turns out that the schools did not fully understand the window concept and this caused problems for breakfast programs, teacher timetables, and bus departures from schools," says Jo-Anne Harrison.

No subsequent attempts have been made to optimize bell times; however she did indicate that it is something she would recommend if forced to look for additional cost

savings.

Critical Success Factors

In our conversations with Jo-Anne Harrison and other employees at the SSSC, a number of critical success factors were identified that have contributed to the group's success. For groups looking to enhance an existing partnership or start a new one, these factors may be highly valuable to achieving success.

Shared Vision

The willingness of the four boards to enter into a consortium was critical to the success of the SSSC. All boards were enthusiastic to see the potential results of sharing routing efficiencies with the other boards, and were instrumental in the formation of the consortium. The buy-in from boards is important to ensure that everyone is working together to provide consistent policies and equitable service levels.

Autonomy in Day-To-Day Operations

The structure of the SSSC allows day-to-day operations to be separate from politics. Trustees set and approve the transportation policies and the consortium implements them. Though there is an appeal process for parental complaints, most consortium decisions are upheld and the consortium receives few phone calls about changing levels of service. The impartiality of the operations and governance structure allows changes on student transportation to be made only at the consortium level.

Administration first, operations second

One advantage for establishing the consortium in the Sudbury area was that the boards' policies were already harmonized and there were two partnerships already in place. Even so, the task of integrating this two-system structure into one was something that the consortium segregated into two phases. The administration of the consortium was set in place prior to merging its operations. The first step was integrating staff from all boards, setting up the board of directors and integrating policies. Operations were merged after finding a common platform to house board data. This ensured that the difficult task of rerouting buses was the final step.

Jo-Anne Harrison

Well-respected by her staff at the consortium and throughout the sector, Jo-Anne Harrison's straight-forward and impartial approach to managing is a key factor in the SSSC's success. Benefiting from her experience at the CSC du Nouvel-Ontario and the former Sudbury Catholic District School Board, she has been very successful in her role at the consortium and takes pride in providing boards with continuous improved service levels, new equipment, well-trained drivers and safe students.

Acknowledgements

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- Jo-Anne Harrison, Transportation Manager SSSC
- Renée Boucher, Assistant Manager SSSC
- Diane Cayen-Arnold, Chief Financial Officer for Rainbow District School Board and current Chair of SSSC
- The entire staff at Sudbury Student Services Consortium

What's Going on Out There?

With the hectic pace of start-up behind most of you, we would like to take this opportunity to thank transportation managers and their staff for the tremendous work they do at this

time of year. We would also like to highlight some important dates which are fast approaching.

November 14: Newly appointed Director of Business Services at the Ministry, Nancy Whynot, to begin her tenure.

November 18: Government response to Coroner's Recommendations is due.

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