

**THE HOWARD COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM  
TRANSPORTATION SERVICE DELIVERY PLAN/  
SCHOOL START TIME INITIATIVE  
INTERNAL ACTION REPORT**



**COMPILED FOR:**

Superintendent of the Howard County Public School System  
Dr. Michael Martirano  
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## Overview

The first day of school, whether a first-time experience or an experience in a new educational environment, holds profound significance. It marks a pivotal moment for students stepping into unfamiliar territory without the familiar support system they may be accustomed to. It marks a pivotal moment for school staff initiating a journey of learning, growth, and mentorship for both them and their students, as they lay the foundation for a successful and enriching academic year. It marks a pivotal moment for parents as a significant milestone in their child's life; a day when parents begin to establish trust in the educational institution and its staff.

On August 28, 2023 (Day One), amidst the palpable excitement of students, staff, and families, the first day of school would mark the realization of extensive planning and preparations for the students in the Howard County Public School System.

This first day's activation of the School Start Time Initiative as part of the Transportation Service Delivery Plan was not realized (referred to as the School Start Time Initiative). A tangled mass of misevents began to unfold shortly after the start of the day, resulting in a system failure to adequately, efficiently, and assuredly transport Howard County Public School students to school in a timely manner.

## HCPSS Transportation Service Delivery Plan/School Start Time Initiative Internal Action Report (IAR)

In the spirit of fostering a culture of continuous improvement and ensuring that valuable lessons are not lost, Superintendent Dr. Michael Martirano requested an IAR following a challenging series of events that signaled the implementation of the Howard County Public School System's Transportation Service Delivery Plan/School Start Time Initiative. The purpose of the IAR was manifold, to:

- Provide an internal assessment of the Plan's components, including background information on the development of the Plan
- Identify strengths growth areas, assumptions, and system breakdowns that impacted implementation of the Plan
- Identify key findings and provide recommendations for future actions, and
- Identify modifications or adjustments to policies, procedures, and/or protocols that the superintendent needs to make organizationally

The internal IAR was conducted by Educational Consultant, and former HCPSS school administrator, Dr. Genée A. Varlack, over a period of 8 weeks. Dr. Varlack reviewed a plethora of HCPSS documents related to the Transportation Service Delivery Plan / School Start Time

Initiative, HCPSS Board of Education documents and reports, consultant reports and work streams, websites, media reports, and press conferences. She also conducted interviews with HCPSS stakeholders.

### Summary - HCPSS Transportation Service Delivery Plan/School Start Time Initiative

Based on a growing body of research which recognizes the biological changes occurring during adolescence and their impact on sleep patterns, proponents argue that adjusting school start time to align with teenagers' natural sleep-wake cycles can enhance academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being. The School Start Times project represented a continuation and expansion of prior work rather than an entirely new initiative. The assessment of the feasibility of altering school start times to support student achievement within HCPSS had been ongoing since 1997 and extended through 2017. The primary goal consistently centered on investigating the feasibility of initiating secondary school education later than the prevailing 7:25 AM start time. The project was intentionally crafted with a singular focus: to systematically develop a tangible recommendation aimed at reducing or eliminating transportation costs as a determinant in the decision-making process for implementing changes to school start times.

On April 15, 2021, the Board of Education instructed the Superintendent to assess the existing student school start times and formulate a recommendation for new start times for the 2022-2023 school year.

Subsequently, on February 10, 2022, the Board voted to endorse the proposed timeline for establishing revised school start times, with the expectation of implementing these changes during the 2023-2024 school year.

This signaled the start of structured planning and weekly strategic meetings among HCPSS Chiefs, led by Superintendent Dr. Michael Martirano, aimed at embracing the recommendation for new school start times in the 2023-2024 academic year. During these meetings, specific school start times were established, blind spots were identified, contractors were selected, specialized services were discussed, and the interconnectedness of each department impacted by this initiative was recognized and accounted for in the planning process.

The Transportation Service Delivery Plan / School Start Time Initiative, facilitated by the Decision Support Group (DSG), required in-depth study, methodical planning and logistical execution that resulted in eight complementary and related workstreams:

- Policy 5200 revisions – The transportation planning parameters contained within Policy 5200 were modified to expand the non-transportation areas

- School-by-School Bell Time Determination – Bell time changes for each school within the entire system needed to be determined. On July 14, 2022, DSG provided an iteration of preliminary school-by-school bell times in which HCPSS staff believed the results were within a 70% to 80% range of accuracy. The three-tier bell time was structured to:
  - Keep high schools at the same, and first in the sequence of start times.
  - Start all high schools no earlier than 8:00 AM, and with a desired target time of 8:30 AM.
  - Minimize the impact on schools later in the sequence by compressing the time spread between the earliest to the latest school start times.
- The school-by-school bell times structure was presented on December 15, 2022 with improved confidence to near certainty that the School Start Time changes could be implemented without adding any additional buses to the transportation system. Following the recommendations of a feasibility study, each school was placed on one of three primary time tiers:
  - 8:00 AM – All high schools and six middle schools
  - 8:40 AM – Remaining middle schools and fourteen elementary schools
  - 9:15 AM – Remaining elementary schools
- This information presented to the Board formed the foundation for bus routing. It was necessary for each of the design elements mentioned in Workstreams 1, 2, 6, 7, and 8 to be completed before the detailed design of bus routes could be designed.
- Revised Bus Routes –Bus route determination was dependent on the approval of policy revisions and the determination of school bell times. The finalization of routing did not occur until boundaries had been adjusted to accommodate Guilford Park High School.
- Community Outreach – Outreach to the community was necessary to obtain feedback and allow sufficient time to adapt to the upcoming changes prior to implementation.
- School Board Progress Updates were a critical component to the plan.
- Transportation Service Model changes – Transportation contracts to bus companies required changes that would support the bell time initiative.
- Technology and associated process changes – New technologies and associated processes were implemented within the Office of Transportation.
- Organization changes – Reorganization of the Office of Transportation was an instrumental component of the plan to ensure successful operations.

In the effort to make the changes feasible, the Board endorsed the amendments to Policy 5200 – Student Transportation on May 26, 2022. Additionally, on February 23, 2023, the Board approved modifications to school start times for the 2023-2024 school year.

## Opening Day Events

The opening day of school is never an ordinary event. In the best-planned scenarios, the day is a momentous occasion for all involved, filled with excitement, apprehension, anticipation, fears, and tears. August 28, 2023, marked a momentous day in the history of the Howard County Public School System (HCPSS), one with no other metric for comparison. The following events occurred, some prior to Day One, others simultaneously occurring on Day One, and others unfolding in the timeline of the subsequent days. The events are documented as reported. Interpretation of these events can be accessed later either in SY23-24 Concurrent Initiatives or in the Key Findings sections.

- Zūm Services, Inc. (Zūm), a West coast Transportation company participated in a competitive and in-depth bid process to transport students in the Howard County Public School System. Zūm was awarded a HCPSS Student Transportation Services Contract on February 15, 2023 for Regions 3, 5 and 6. The 230 contracts that they were awarded constitutes 45% of HCPSS bus routes.
- The only incumbent contractor that participated in this open bid process was Tip Top Transportation, which was awarded 58 contracts alongside Zūm constituting 11% of HCPSS bus routes.
- On August 10th, following the amicable resolution of the mediation process, the Office of Student Transportation confirmed the number of buses they would have available to run routes for the 2023-2024 school year. This number was inclusive of the routes that contractors involved in the mediation, were allowed to turn in to Howard County due to a lack of drivers which made it an impossibility to run the routes.
- In the same period as the mediation agreement, one of the existing bus contractors terminated its business relationship with HCPSS. This termination took immediate effect, leading the Office of Student Transportation to assess, absorb, and plan for the 30 routes, including 16 requiring specialized transportation, previously serviced by Blue Horizon. The termination of this business relationship resulted in additional temporary routes that were needed at the beginning of the school year due to routes being surrendered in the mediation process.

- The HCPSS Office of Student Transportation designed and laid out all bus routes for the SY 23-24 transporting of Howard County students in alignment with agency best practices. Due to ongoing decisions, requests, and changes, and after many iterations of routes, finalized redesigned routes were delivered to Zūm on Saturday, August 26th, two days before the start of school.
- Zūm received paper routes from HCPSS on Saturday, August 26th, which included edits from the routes previously received. The late receipt of the routes prevented Zūm from conducting dry runs on these new routes. Dry runs are necessary to stress test routes and routing times prior to the first day of school.
- On Monday, August 28th, the first day of SY23-24, Zūm drivers encountered delays in starting their routes. The planned method to log in for duty, distribute keys, and obtain tablets for over 200 drivers proved to be problematic. Retrieving keys from a board where all 200+ bus keys were hung and the assigning of tablets contributed to the delays in the process.
- Upon receiving their keys and tablets, it was observed that twenty (20) Zūm bus drivers did not report for work as scheduled. Additionally, 10 more drivers hired by other local bus contractors who were brought in to help with any other additional duties, failed to report as scheduled. The driver vacancies also contributed to the delays on Day One.
- While addressing the absenteeism void, on the first day of school, 200+ buses representing Zūm Transportation, Inc. began to exit the Zūm Transportation bus lot in Jessup, heading to various destinations in Howard County to start their Tier 1 bus route. A major bottleneck ensued due to the 200+ buses exiting the same bus lot at the same time onto a two-lane road while having to contend with the normal morning traffic on Dorsey Run.
- Bus route information provided to some contractors was inconsistent with what was provided to families and schools. This was largely due to the routing changes that occurred 48 hours before Day One. Despite reminder messages sent to the community on Saturday, August 27<sup>th</sup>, to review and verify student transportation information in readiness for the first day of school, families that relied on information they received prior to the Saturday messaging would not have been aware of the last-minute changes that occurred.

- GPS delayed directions and driver unfamiliarity with the routes resulted in drivers missing turns and getting lost during student pick-ups and drop-offs.
- Real-time routing discrepancies were apparent. One such discrepancy revealed that a route initially scheduled for 25 minutes required 45 minutes for completion.
- The routing was planned with minimal or no idle time between each tier, guaranteeing delays - a phenomenon known as route "stacking." This resulted in one scenario wherein a route was started at 7:42 AM, was required to make 7 student pick-ups, and was scheduled to arrive at the school at 7:48 AM.
- Numerous families received bus numbers that did not correspond to the numbers displayed on the sides of the buses. Zūm buses were labeled with 6-digit numbers and School Locator is only able to accommodate 4 digits.
- Numerous busses displayed incorrect school affiliations alongside their respective bus numbers.
- Traffic engineering for the car loop could not be planned adequately due to the high volume of families choosing to transport students to school. This resulted in significant traffic and bottle necking at schools, further delaying bus arrival and dismissal.
- Buses arrived late to neighborhood stops or never showed up at all.
- Drivers faced challenges with the routing assistance technology, encountering issues operating it, and observing discrepancies between the information displayed on the technology and the paper copies. Furthermore, the new routes received by Zūm on Saturday, August 26th were not readily accessible in the software, indicating a delay between the upload of information and its accessibility.
- Effective communication with schools and families regarding individual bus route delays was lacking. The Office of Student Transportation, tasked with maintaining communication with families about delays, could not adequately keep pace with the constantly changing delays and challenges. Information to families was delayed, inaccurate, or not received at all. The Zūm application that would allow parents to view their child's bus had not yet been implemented by HCPSS.



- Due to redistricting for Guilford Park High School, bus overlaps occurred in neighborhoods, creating situations where buses serving multiple school levels or even different schools were picking up students from a common bus stop at similar times.
- At or about 11:00 PM on August 28, 2023, the night before the second day of school, HCPSS families received notifications that bus routes for thousands of students would be canceled for at least the entire first week of school.
- 340 of the system’s 503 bus routes arrived late on the first day of school.
- Students with specialized transportation arrived home as late as 6:30 PM.

## Destabilizing Effects

**Destabilizing Effects** in this case, refers to the consequences or events that led to the weakening of HCPSS structures or processes on Day One. These effects were manifested in various ways and across different areas. They encompass multiple interconnected initiatives that were implemented at the start of the 2023–2024 academic year, and were compounded by the convergence of other events where specific actions or details had not been firmly established. Altogether they constitute the perfect storm of high-level events, low level events, and details that destabilized HCPSS structures or processes.

The concurrent and competing initiatives are classified into the following eleven (11) categories labeled as SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 1: New Technology; SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 2: Re-districting Exemptions; SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 3: Waivers, Appeals, and Exemptions; SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 4: Expanded Non-Transportation Areas; SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 5: Demarcation Line; SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 6: Mandatory Registration; SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 7: New Bell Schedules; SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 8: New Bus Contractor, Zūm Services, Inc; SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 9: Driver Training; SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 10: Administrators; and SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 11: Family File completion

In addition to the concurrent and competing initiatives, other destabilizing effects that led to the weakening of HCPSS structures or processes on Day One, fall under the titles of: Decision Support Group; Office of Student Transportation; Specialized Transportation; Driver Shortage; Bus Numbers; Pre-Kindergarten; Pupil Personnel Office; Routing; Global Positioning Software; and Synergy Education Platform.

## **SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 1**

**NEW TECHNOLOGY:** On April 7, 2020, the Board of Education granted a contract to Tyler Technologies, Inc. for Versatrans, a robust, cloud-based school bus routing solution aimed at streamlining school bus routing, implementing school bus telematics, managing contractor payments, conducting bell time modeling, and conducting boundary reviews. This award was made during the Covid-19 pandemic. HCPSS began using the software in the late spring of 2021. To date, two years after receiving the software, it is not fully maximized to the extent HCPSS will utilize it, given delays in its implementation due to limitations with staffing and consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and how students were educated in a virtual and hybrid manner during that period. While the software provides the means for determining bus routes for HCPSS students, it still presents as relatively new software. Plans are being made to maximize this tool for the functionality HCPSS requires.

The Versatrans software was designed to improve the automation of student bus assignments, incorporate the capabilities of on-board GPS, and streamline coordination with the Office of School Planning for boundary reviews using data sets such as in-house enrollment projections, GIS layers, and bus route impact analysis.

### **Recommendation:**

- Investigate the functionality of Versatrans within the current HCPSS structure. This assessment will allow for well informed decisions about Versatrans implementation, potentially refining coordination between the Office of Student Transportation and the Office of School Planning to improve the effectiveness of the boundary review processes

## **SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 2**

**RE-DISTRICTING EXEMPTIONS:** The Board of Education finalized the Attendance Area Adjustment Plan, along with its corresponding attendance projections for the redistricting process for the opening of Guilford Park High School on November 17, 2022. Additionally, the board granted approval for various exemptions to the redistricting decisions for the 2023-2024 school year. It is crucial to note that the projections and exemptions are distinct processes and do not align seamlessly.

As a result of these exemptions, approximately 30+ additional buses were required, beyond the anticipated total allotment of 478. The routing adjustments for these exemptions led to situations where two sets of buses heading to different locations arrived in neighborhoods - one for exempted students and another for students attending their home school. Bus

information specific to exempted students could not be captured in the School Locator. Staff members tasked with providing bus information for an exempted student, had to access a separate platform and invest additional time to procure the information to respond to the concerned families.

The routing process for SY24-25 and possibly some subsequent years through SY26-27 will also be impacted by the following exemptions, which will require additional buses.

- Rising 11th grade students (current 10th graders) who are assigned to another existing high school are offered an exemption and will have the choice to continue attending their current school or attend their newly assigned school. These students will have an opportunity to opt-in for transportation.
- Rising 10th grade students (current 9th graders) who are assigned to another existing high school are offered an exemption and will have the choice to remain at their current school or attend their newly assigned school. These students will have an opportunity to opt-in for transportation.
- Students with an Individualized Education Programs (IEP) or 504 plans in place as of November 17, 2022, are exempt and have the choice to remain at their current school or attend their newly assigned school. These students will have an opportunity to opt-in for transportation.
- Students with at least one custodial parent on active-duty military as of November 17, 2022, are exempt and have the choice to remain at their current school or attend their newly assigned school. These students will have an opportunity to opt-in for transportation.
- Students currently in middle school (during the 2022-2023 school year) who will share at least one year at the same high school as an older sibling who uses a grade level exemption for the 2023-2024 school year will have an opportunity to request an exemption to attend the same high school as the older sibling. If capacity is available, and until the older sibling graduates, transportation may be requested for the younger sibling using the exemption registration form. Families of students who qualify for this exemption will be contacted during the student's 8th grade year to finalize a decision.

### **Recommendation:**

- Revisit Policy 6010 School Attendance Areas to refine the exemption process. The unintended consequences and costs associated with exemptions are not captured in the policy nor in department budgets. Exemption decisions and repercussions currently linger for at least 3 years

### **SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 3**

**WAIVERS, APPEALS, AND EXEMPTIONS:** As outlined in Policy 6010, Redistricting, Parents of students who were being reassigned based on attendance area adjustments could request a waiver to receive transportation through the student reassignment process. The HCPSS received approximately 100 appeals of the walk zone decision from non-transported families of which at least 21 were overturned. When an appeal is overturned, an exemption is granted, which leads to an increase in bus ridership.

Additionally, the Pupil Transportation Office was required to thoroughly investigate and address each "appeal" received. This process commonly involves physically walking the neighborhood boundary using tools such as measuring wheels and other instruments. Given that boundary lines are physically delineated for routing purposes, any successfully overturned "appeal" necessitates the alteration and redrawing of boundary lines. Additionally, it requires edits to the routing process to accommodate the change.

### **Recommendation:**

- Consider reassigning the appeal decisions of walk zones to the Office of School Planning. This office, responsible for projecting student enrollment, planning for infrastructure needs, developing school boundary studies and studying attendance area adjustments, has innate knowledge about boundary lines and can readily respond to appeal requests and decisions. By reassigning this task, it allows the Office of Student Transportation to focus on the significant task of routing students

### **SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 4**

**EXPANDED NON-TRANSPORTATION AREAS:** The Board of Education made changes to Policy 5200 – Student Transportation, specifically expanding the scope of non-transportation areas. The modifications aimed to optimize the school bus system by reducing the number of stops, thus enhancing overall efficiency.

As a result of these system-wide adjustments, approximately 3,500 students were moved to non-transportation areas. This change added to the existing 14,000 students who were

already residing in such areas. Previously, adjustments have been made to walk-zones, but the extent of the modification to Policy 5200, expanding the walk zones was unprecedented.

**Recommendation:**

- Establish metrics that will monitor and evaluate the challenges and successes of the modifications to Policy 5200, specifically the changes to the walk zone. This will assist in identifying any additional adjustments that may be needed

**SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 5**

**DEMARCATIION LINE:** Remanding the demarcation line decision had significant operational implications for the Office of Transportation (OST). To implement the decision, OST had to use various tools, including the Howard County 911 map, Interactive Maryland map, and Google Maps, to identify streets and addresses within the non-transportation areas. This process required considerable time, and added to the workload. The decision led to the need for 5 additional buses and 2 vans to transport the 259 students impacted. In the instance of Stevens Forest, previously a walk school, a bus route was now required for only six students. Similarly, in Laurel Woods, a bus had to be routed for just ten students.

**Recommendation:**

- Review the current demarcation line decision with input from the Office of School Planning and the Office of Student Transportation. Assess the long-term costs associated with this decision

**SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 6**

**MANDATORY REGISTRATION:** The Group recommended the adoption of an "opt-in" transportation policy for the school system, aiming to gather enhanced data for planning routing efficiencies. Consequently, the mandatory registration was instituted, requiring all eligible students seeking bus transportation for SY23-24 to opt in through the Family File system, except for those covered by an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Despite this effort, tens of thousands of students completed the mandatory transportation Registration process, yielding minimal deviation from the projections used in previous years. The opt-in transportation policy proved ineffective, as all students opted in. This continues to be a subject for further investigation, as an illustrative case saw River Hill being routed for 212 students, whereas the actual ridership amounted to only 10 students.

**Recommendations:**

- Revise the opt-in transportation to include a mid-year date for transportation adjustments. This would allow eligible students, such as those qualifying for parking

passes or those no longer participating in Fall sports, to either opt out or opt into the transportation service based on their changing needs

- Implement RFID cards to allow HCPSS to track bus transportation ridership. Set guidelines to ensure ridership participation stays at or above 90 percent with re-evaluation occurring mid-year, and if necessary re-instated during the next scheduled opt-in period

### **SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 7**

**BELL SCHEDULES:** Bell time changes for each school within the entire system were adjusted by the Board on February 23, 2023. While the exact start time for each school would be determined later that spring, the start times would be occurring in three tiers. The compressed tiers and the bus schedule were planned for and implemented using simulated data without real-time testing or feedback, requiring bus routes to fit into the tiered schedule.

#### **Recommendation:**

- Drive the recommended route generated by the simulation. Note any inconsistency encountered during the actual drive to refine and improve the accuracy of the simulation results

### **SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 8**

**NEW BUS CONTRACTOR:** Zūm Services, Inc. transported students on 210 routes on August 28, 2023. This was 20 routes shy of what they were contracted for due to lack of drivers. Zūm experienced a plethora of challenges, and mishaps that demonstrated a lack of preparedness to assume the position of primary carrier. This lack of preparedness included:

- A shortage of drivers available to cover the required routes
- A lack of adequate understanding regarding the requirements for bus attendants
- Specialized transportation with no bus attendants
- An insufficient number of substitute drivers
- An inadequate plan to enhance traffic flow on the bus lot, staggering departure times to prevent congestion, and to establish points of egress from the bus lot onto Dorsey Run Road
- A lack of adequate training for drivers new to the county to familiarize themselves with the nuances of driving in a new county, state, or neighborhood; to understand the requirements for transporting students with special needs, to have and implement a comprehensive understanding of Maryland traffic laws, to familiarize themselves with the use of onboard technology and GPS systems installed on the buses

- Fundamentally flawed logistical planning and management reserve for drivers to log-in for duty, obtain bus keys, obtain tablets, and exit the bus lot
- A lack of adequate training for drivers new to the county to understand the assigned routes, stops, and schedules for picking up and dropping off students, resulting in some students with special needs being dropped off as late as 6:30 PM
- Poor management in launching the bus fleet and overseeing contracted services which was exacerbated by the dismissal of the manager during the first week of the school
- An insufficient number of staff with school bus experiences- such experience prepares drivers for the unique driving challenges, regulations, and responsibilities compared to other types of bus experiences, largely due to the focus on student safety and well-being
- Inconsistent Driver teams during the first two weeks of school due to Zūm Services, Inc flying in driver teams from out of town to cover bus routes. This resulted in continued lack of familiarity with routes and passengers needs
- Insufficient awareness of the specific supports students with special needs had on individual routes which led to limited space for wheelchairs or inadequate equipment such as safety vests on certain buses
- Limited awareness of the required loading time for students with special needs which led to delays in the boarding process

**Recommendations:**

- Identify parameters around the level of access Zūm will be provided on various platforms, and how such access will be used to prevent redundancies and additional workload for HCPSS staff. (Currently, Zūm has API access to route information in Versatrans but relies on HCPSS staff to submit a nightly route report to them. The manually generated report assists in ensuring data accuracy, and requires a nightly commitment from HCPSS staff
- Ensure that all contracts that involve transporting students are registered, approved, and administered through procurement. This includes athletic bus contracts, music and art bus contracts, school field trip contracts, and clubs.
- Encourage in-depth conversations regarding the Zūm vendor and what it means in 3 years to have a monopoly on student bussing. They in essence can put smaller vendors out of business who are unable to obtain the necessary technology
- Analyze the financial relationship HCPSS has with Zūm especially considering instances where other school systems with comparable large contracts have encountered

significant failures. With Zūm holding half of the school system's bus contracts, this relationship has the potential to create a long-term commitment for HCPSS. Understanding the experiences of other school systems with similar large contracts is important in assessing and managing the relationship effectively

- Investigate rearranging schools across different tiers within Zone 1 and Zone 2 to increase routing efficiencies for SY24-25. This investigation may potentially decrease the number of regular education buses needed, but HCPSS could face limitations when reducing the number of contracts. The final mediation agreement compensates contractors for additional "deadhead" time, a compensation they did not previously receive

### **SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 9**

**DRIVER TRAINING:** Due to the large number of new drivers in the Howard County Public School System (HCPSS), the pre-service driver training was conducted by the vendor rather than HCPSS itself, which was the practice in the past. The shift in the training approach removes HCPSS from hands-on implementation and could potentially present safety concerns as it pertains to the drivers' familiarity with specific intricacies and personalized elements within HCPSS

#### **Recommendation:**

- Collaborate closely with the bus contractors to ensure that the training program includes essential information and considerations specific to HCPSS. This collaboration might bridge any potential gaps in understanding or applying policies and procedures unique to HCPSS

### **SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 10**

**ADMINISTRATORS:** There was significant turnover of administrators in the Howard County Public School System (HCPSS), with 42% of schools (57 out of 77) having new administrators for the 2023-2024 school year. Given that 30 of these administrators were Assistant Principals, who typically play a role in managing buses and addressing transportation concerns, adds a layer of significance to a new school year. Without recognizing and communicating the impact of such turnover between and across departments, departments promote silo operations which ultimately can impact delivery of service to the students. In this case, 57 administrators did not know their staff or school community intimately and were tasked to lead during tense times.



## **Recommendation:**

- Add staffing discussions to senior leadership agendas in June when changes occur. Examining the extent of staff changes as it relates to organizational impact allows all departments to identify coaching, gap, and professional development opportunities that can be strategically planned for

## **SY23-24 Concurrent Initiative # 11**

**FAMILY FILE COMPLETION:** There were changes in the timeline for Family File completion, potentially accelerated due to a mandatory transportation registration initiative. The earlier completion date aimed to facilitate the planning and organization of transportation services for the upcoming school year. Data from new students enrolling in HCPSS schools or those who enrolled after the transportation registration process closed had to be added to the plan.

**DECISION SUPPORT GROUP (DSG)** Decision Support Group, LLC (DSG), from the initiation of the project, deliberately concentrated on building upon previously completed work to evaluate the feasibility of changes in school start times. This initiative aimed to support the enhancement of student achievement within HCPSS by exploring the viability of commencing secondary school education later than the typical 7:25 AM start time.

**Key Finding 1:** The service delivery plan presented by DSG assumed the availability of a sufficient number of bus drivers and appropriate staffing levels, aligning with the recommended organizational chart within the Office of Student Transportation. Nevertheless, on August 28, 2023, the first day of school, neither of these elements was in place. A shortage of drivers (30) and incomplete staffing within the Office of Student Transportation were evident, with five positions vacant and two filled on August 10<sup>th</sup> (See Appendices A-1 through A-5).

**Key Finding 2:** The plan also proposed minimizing the gaps between tiered schools. However, it is essential to note that this recommendation underwent simulation using their software, Easy Trip, without subsequent testing or validation using training buses.

**Key Finding 3:** The bell time structure presented to the Board on December 15, 2022 outlined the necessary completion of workstreams 1- *Transportation Policy Revisions*; 2 - *School-by-School Bell Times*; 6 - *Transportation Service Model Changes*; 7 - *Transportation Technology Enhancements*; and 8 - *Transportation Organization Changes* to be completed before the detailed design of bus routes began. To date, workstreams 7, and 8 are incomplete.

**Recommendation:**

- Customize and validate all recommendations for high-level initiatives to align with the school system's needs. Challenges may arise without the flexibility to tailor recommendations accordingly

**MEDIATION:** In a report dated June 23, 2022, DSG consultant shared key recommendations for the successful implementation of the Transportation Service Delivery Model. One such recommendation encouraged the School Board to direct that all existing transportation contracts be extended, as required, and then terminated as of June 30, 2023. The Board's motion and subsequent approval of this recommendation was the impetus for legal proceedings between bus contractors and HCPSS, ultimately resulting in mediation

**Key Finding 1:** As a result of mediation, contractors were allowed to turn-in routes that they did not have drivers for. This resulted in 58 routes being returned that HCPSS had to absorb.

**Key Finding 2:** On Aug 10th mediation was resolved, resulting in known number of buses for routing. Within this same period, Blue Horizon one of HCPSS's bus contractors, severed its relationship with HCPSS and turned in 28 routes, 16 of which were specialized transportation. These routes, 58 initially from the mediated agreement, and an additional 28 from Blue Horizons, would need to be absorbed and perhaps consolidated for SY23-24.

**Recommendation:**

- Find common ground after mediation to mend the strained, distrustful relationships that resulted between HCPSS and bus contractors. HCPSS must take the steps to:
  - Acknowledge the impact the mediation had on all involved
  - Offer apologies for HCPSS actions that contributed to mediation circumstances
  - Clarify any ongoing misunderstandings
  - Plan a follow-up session to ensure agreements are progressing positively

**OFFICE OF STUDENT TRANSPORTATION (OST):** The Office of Student Transportation played a pivotal role in planning, directing and implementing the Transportation Service Delivery Plan / School Start Time Initiative.

**Key Finding 1:** Despite historical understaffing, which led to an unclear chain of command below the Director level, the 16 individuals in the Office of Student Transportation were tasked with monumental responsibilities. Inadequate support structures were in place to facilitate the completion of the numerous tasks assigned to them. The tasks included:

- Defining roles and responsibilities for vacant staff positions for advertising purposes: This involved creating job descriptions, outlining duties, and establishing qualifications for open positions to attract suitable candidates
- Establishing interview panels and conducting interviews for vacant positions: This involved coordinating interview schedules, assembling interview panels, conducting interviews, and identifying candidates who presented as best fit for the positions
- Participating in the mediation process: This involved assisting in resolving the disputes between HCPSS bus contractors and HCPSS
- Responding to the modifications of Policy 5200, Implementation Plan: Reviewing, and addressing concerns about the walk zone and ensuring alignment with other organizational needs
- Investigating all appeals of the walk zone: This involved OST handling all appeals regarding the walk zone, reviewing and assessing each appeal to ensure safety and compliance with established guidelines
- Responding to the remanding of the demarcation line decision: This involved implementing routing changes based on the demarcation line decision, and utilizing additional buses to transport students
- Collaborating with the consulting firm DSG: This involved working with the external consulting firm to address the tenets of the School Start Time Initiative
- Working with various Howard County departments (Public Works Traffic Engineering, Office of Transportation, Police Department): This involved collaborating with and coordinating for student transportation, traffic safety, and compliance with local regulations
- Managing the opt-in responses: This involved managing responses from families representing the 57,000 students who chose to opt-in for transportation
- Defining the Bell Schedules: This involved designing the start and end times for HCPSS schools
- Evaluating proposals from potential vendors: This involved reviewing and assessing proposals submitted by vendors interested in becoming contractors for the school system, considering both their capabilities in alignment to the RFP and their pricing
- Training and certifying drivers: This involved conducting training sessions for drivers and ensuring they met required certifications and standards

- Training new staff: This involved providing orientation and training to newly hired employees to familiarize them with their roles and responsibilities
- Responding to requests for specialized transportation: This involved managing requests for transportation that requires accommodations or supplementary aids
- Routing buses to transport students to school: This involved organizing and optimizing bus routes for an anticipated 57,000 students in 77 schools and 32 non-public schools to ensure efficient transportation to and from school
- Planning for and implementing summer school transportation
- Planning for and responding to the Maryland State Department of Education audit
- Collaborating and coordinating with other county agencies on sidewalk decisions and walking routes
- Responding to and planning for Board of Education and community suggestions about collector buses in walk zones, and walking bus toolkits
- Collaborating with the General Counsel regarding mediation
- Organizing, planning, and responding to the vendor and routing needs which occurred because of routes surrendered by a contractor
- Planning for and responding to specialized routing for students receiving compensatory services as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Repeating the task of defining roles and responsibilities for a vacant staff position to establish position title and salary grade parameters.

**Key Finding 2:** The oversight of the School Start Times project, particularly concerning the provider Zūm, lacked clarity. Information from Zūm was received and shared without sufficient validation. Zūm's services were not thoroughly vetted with school districts that utilize them, and the preparedness measures such as busses, driver, attendants, etc. were not validated by HCPSS.

**Key Finding 3:** The HCPSS has one (1) Behavior Specialist in the transportation department to address the needs of all 77 schools and 32 non-public institutions. This position is typically staffed with an accompanying paraeducator.

**Key Finding 4:** Vacant positions have created vulnerabilities within the Office of Student Transportation. The position responsible for certifying drivers has remained vacant for over a year, placing additional responsibilities on other staff members. The shortage in various

positions has also affected the staff responsible for ensuring the accuracy and currency of Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS) records.

Furthermore, new staff members, although hired, arrived after a significant portion of the planning had been completed. Their delayed arrival has left limited time for specialized training, posing challenges to their integration into critical roles.

### **Recommendations:**

- Organize and implement workshops or table-top exercises that are focused on enhancing project management and problem-solving skills. An identified focus for this proposed exercise is the Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) rollout
- Arrange and conduct training sessions to familiarize both existing and new staff members with their roles and responsibilities within the newly established organizational structure
  - Customize training to address the specific duties within the updated organizational structure with specific focus on reimagining the role of Trainers to focus on safety and compliance
  - Develop manuals and resource materials for continuous reference
  - Identify performance measures that align with OST goals
- Organize and schedule refresher training sessions on the use of the Versatrans software
- Collaborate with neighboring school districts utilizing the Versatrans software for insights and best practices
- Arrange and coordinate vendor-hosted training sessions for the purpose of maximizing the use of Versatrans software to include maximizing the Flex Scheduler, which can provide immediate forward-facing routing updates and assist the OST in utilizing mileage data from the original source
- Organize and schedule refresher training sessions on the use of the Zonar software
- Arrange and coordinate vendor-hosted training sessions for the purpose of maximizing the use of Zonar software
- Arrange and execute a Driver Symposium in collaboration with Zūm Services, Inc. to discuss ongoing pain points, constraints, and challenges the new vendor and drivers are experiencing. Use this symposium as an opportunity to provide both the vendor and its drivers additional information about the uniqueness of the county and residents they serve

- Provide tangible assistance or resources to the Office of Student Transportation that will enable them to address the vulnerabilities identified in its staffing structure, routing process; responsibilities with and for pre-kindergarten students, displaced students, and students with disabilities
- Identify, define, and implement performance milestones around the work and structure needed in the Office of Student Transportation as they embrace a new organizational structure, new initiatives, and new staff
- Develop a strategic approach for routing students with special needs across the district's special schools and 32 non-public institutions
  - Analyze current routing procedures, identifying constraints and challenges specific to students with special needs
  - Study the data to understand trends and patterns
  - Identify routing hurdles including scheduling challenges and r resources
  - Utilize the Versatrans and Zonar software systems to optimize routing efficiency
  - Test new routing strategies for effectiveness and efficiency
- Send emails to program heads to inquire about any surge in enrollment
- Consider reassigning all Day One communications to the Howard County Public School System's communication office. This office plays a crucial role in maintaining transparent, consistent, and effective communication both within the school district and with its external stakeholders. It has the means and ability to support and respond to the various communication needs on that day while maintaining a positive public image for the district. By controlling the message and the messaging HCPSS community can be assured of clear, clear and timely communication with stakeholders during this most important moment of the school year. By reassigning this task, it allows the Office of Student Transportation to focus on the significant task of transporting students
- Add a paraeducator position to support the Behavior Specialist in the transportation department who addresses the needs of all 77 schools and 32 non-public institutions. In working alongside the Behavior Specialist, the paraeducator will:
  - Serve as liaison between school and the special education supervisor

- Interpret IEP supplemental aids to make safety decisions for transporting students
- Select and adapt materials to assist students with disabilities
- Communicate effectively with the Behavior Specialist to share updates and progress
- Assist in training, retraining, and Implementing behavior best practices, de-escalation strategies, and crisis intervention for all bus staff (3) - eight-hour training sessions
- Assist in revamping documentation and disciplinary procedures
- Conduct disability awareness workshops
- Support with behavior intervention for 32 non-public schools
- Provide targeted and specific support the Office of Student Transportation in addressing lapsed or lagging actions due to staffing concerns. Provide assistance in:
  - Prioritizing tasks that impact current and future initiatives
  - Obtaining temporary assistance to address staffing or redistributed workload to help complete urgent or delayed tasks
  - Reassessing and adjusting timelines to align with the available resources
  - Arranging professional development to enhance roles and responsibilities
  - Developing a long-term plan to ensure continued planning and monitoring for both current and future initiatives

**ROUTING:** Routing was impacted by various changes to the school district’s plans.

**Key Finding 1:** The date for eligible students to opt in for transportation changed several times resulting in multiple iterations of bus routing.

**Key Finding 2:** During the week of August 15<sup>th</sup>, school-based staff returned from summer vacation. The requests submitted to the Office of Student Transportation for specialized transportation grew by 100 during this week.

**Key Finding 3:** The Office of Student Transportation revised bus routes for Zūm. After sending the initial routes on 8/15/23, it was clarified that Zūm should transport all students within their

awarded zones, even those requiring specialized transportation. The edited routes exceeded Zūm's capacity, prompting the Office of Student Transportation to make further adjustments to reduce the number of routes. Zūm requested the revised routes by Friday, August 26th, and they were sent on Saturday. The updated routes were implemented within the Versatrans platform, directly reflecting changes in the School Bus Locator. Additionally, email notification was sent to families on August 27<sup>th</sup> to review and verify their child's information in Family File.

**Key Finding 4:** The standard for dismissal times from each school location is 7 minutes.

- Ensuring the safety of elementary school students during transportation is a top priority for schools and parents alike. Loading and unloading students from buses at the elementary school level requires careful attention and time to ensure students are placed on the right bus.
- Late arrivals of school buses for pick-ups or drop-offs can indeed have a snowball effect, particularly for the last schools in a route or tier.
- The delayed implementation of the Zūm app for front office staff had a significant impact on the school's ability to effectively manage communications and engage with the community.

**Key Finding 5:** Transporting pre-kindergarten students requires individual pickups. This significantly impacts routing times. Sites such as Town and County Apartments where multiple students reside may take up to 10 minutes to load due to the individual stops. A community stop (collector stop) for non-disabled students could significantly improve the load time especially given the impact on the morning, midday, and afternoon bus runs.

**Key Finding 6:** Designing transportation routes for students to and from Cedar Lane involves careful consideration and planning. Many students have specific safety requirements, and addressing diverse disabilities demands attention, knowledge, foresight, and time. Attempting to consolidate routes posed challenges. The buses should have a maximum of 5 students. If all require wheelchairs, additional scenarios for routing would need to be considered. Student enrollment rose from 123 students last year to 137 students this year. This remains an ongoing area of investigation and study.

**Key Finding 7:** Transporting students to non-public agencies increased this year by 5 schools. Transported students could not be serviced at any other location and could not be combined with other routes.

**Key Finding 8:** At the onset of the School Start Time Initiative, it was anticipated OST would need to provide routing for 478 routes. By August 31, 2023, the projected number of routes was 508. While the number of buses needed were impacted by exemptions to the walk zone,



the demarcation line decision, an influx in displaced students and an increase in requests for specialized transportation

**Recommendations:**

- Identify start times specific to the Western side of the County that incorporates the distance and geographic locations of the schools served. This change may develop additional efficiencies in the routing process
- Reassess the legacy decisions that were made in routing to avoid repeated moments from the past that did not work. This is especially important when routing for shared school campuses. Precedence has been set for staggering the arrival and dismissal times for schools that share a campus. This simple change in routing prevents student conflicts, and avoids arrival and dismissal congestion.

**GLOBAL POSITIONING SOFTWARE (GPS):** HCPSS is actively exploring ways to enhance their school bus operation through the comprehensive use of Zonar technologies. The potential integration of routing optimization software and additional features could contribute to better efficiency, safety, and overall management of the school bus fleet. The consideration of budget adjustments will reflect a commitment to leveraging technology for the benefit of the school transportation system.

**Key Finding 1:** Non-Zūm buses are equipped with Zonar, a robust fleet management technology that offers more than GPS tracking. It is used in partnership with the Howard County Police Department.

- The system is not currently being used to the capacity HCPSS wishes, particularly for verifying mileage, route tracking, driver performance, and punctuality.
- HCPSS currently utilizes approximately 10% of Zonar capabilities, likely due to new school system initiatives and limited staffing in the Office of Student Transportation. It is critical to note that OST would most likely use only a percentage of the technology that Zonar offers, that which is applicable to system needs.

**Key Finding 2:** HCPSS had plans to integrate Zonar's GPS and tablet solution, along with BusPatrol, into the Tyler Technologies, Versatrans system to support a GPS initiative.

- HCPSS is currently considering whether to expand the use of Zonar Fleet Management routing optimization software.
- The goal is to determine if the software being explored includes features such as GPS tracking, safe and fuel-efficient driving monitoring, digital Pre- and Post-Trip vehicle inspections, virtual technician support, and driver productivity analysis

**Key Finding 3:** Zūm’s buses are equipped with a GPS system which is not integrated with Zonar.

- HCPSS can access data from Zūm’s dashboard and online portal which will verify mileage and routes and pull driver performance/punctuality data. Without access to this dashboard, HCPSS would have has limited means of reporting on time data.
- Zūm has the necessary technology to initiate the use of the Radio Frequency Identification cards.

**Recommendation:**

- Strategically decide on whether to rely on Zūm’s GPS system or maximize the use of Zonar across all busses. While other scenarios exist with the implementation of Zonar, maximizing its use across all contractors allows HCPSS maintain control of the data Zonar generates and lessens potential dependency on the new contractor (See Appendix B).

**SPECIALIZED TRANSPORTATION:** Specialized transportation is provided for students with special needs, students in temporary housing; displaced students, and students attending non-public schools. The needs of each individual student requiring specialized transportation must be considered and attended to closely. Considerations include, but are not limited to: safety equipment; attendants; and length of trip. Routing for specialized transportation buses is extremely challenging.

**Key Finding 1:** As a result of the extended walk zone, families with students having special needs registered safety concerns due to the increased walk distance. Students within these families who previously walked to school, requested specialized transportation given safety concerns about safely navigating the longer distance to school. These requests were not conveyed to OST by schools

**Key Finding 2:** Every mid-August, coinciding with the return of school-based staff from summer break, there is a consistent surge in special education transportation requests. This year the OST experienced more than 900 requests, an unanticipated and substantial increase over past years which average about 100 students. The root cause of this increase is being explored. While they along with the Office of Special Education have established protocols to encourage the submission of transportation requests before the school year concludes, this year’s enrollments exceeded the projections. A critical examination of whether transportation request guidelines are being strictly followed may be necessary along with an investigation into the accuracy of HCPSS projection methods. Additionally, the alignment between student registration data and transportation requests should be examined to ensure adherence to the submission guidelines. The influx of requests poses a challenge for the

Office of Student Transportation (OST) as it significantly impacts the efficient routing of student transportation and need for buses.

**Key Finding 3:** The Office of Student Transportation and its contractors are grappling with students whose disabilities they are ill-prepared to manage or address. There has been a lack of training and minimal forecasting to equip them for a successful partnership. While the inclusion of a behavior specialist in the Office of Student Transportation has been beneficial, it is deemed insufficient, considering the expected level of service for each student and the diverse interpretations of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). This poses a significant vulnerability.

**Key Finding 4:** Critical misunderstanding for the planning of and transporting students with special needs was evident. Despite sharing a document that specified the safety need for students on each bus, the document was left in the bus lot resulting in straps not installed for vests, students arbitrarily moved from a bus to a van without understanding of why they were placed on a bus or behaviors that would result if certain elements were not planned for. Additionally, the lack of attendants on all vehicles transporting students with special needs emphasized the lack of understanding student needs. The necessary prompts, tips, or tricks that Attendants use to ensure students are comfortable were not provided until the Office of Special Education along with the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessments supported the contractor.

**Key Finding 5:** The updated organizational chart for the Office of Student Transportation now features three Area Managers, each responsible for overseeing their designated special education load. This marks a change from previous years. Faced with challenges on the first day, staff across various departments sought out the previous individual in charge to help address the issues that emerged on the Zūm lot regarding special education transportation.

**Key Finding 6:** The OSE has had an ongoing need for transportation due to compensatory hours caused by missed instructional hours. This includes hours of instruction students missed at the onset of SY23-24. High school students are provided 2 hours of instruction after school and elementary students are provided 1.5 hours of instruction. Students are then transported to their homes.

**Recommendations:**

- Arrange and execute sensitivity and disability awareness training sessions with OST staff for the purpose of understanding the needs of the clients that the department serves and using that understanding to drive the routing process for specialized transportation

- Organize and implement ongoing training workshops for contractors and drivers focused on sensitivity and disability awareness training for the purpose of understanding the needs of the clients that the vendors serve

**ARRIVAL AND DISMISSAL:** Widespread transportation and communication challenges led to both arrival delays to school and dismissal delays from school

**Key Finding 1:** Dismissal delays were experienced in the elementary schools due to the allocated 7-minute time for dismissal, a period deemed inadequate, and particularly challenging for younger students at the start of the school year. With an overwhelming concern for student safety along with the monitoring required for younger students to follow directions, placing them in bus lines to increase the likelihood they will be on the correct bus going home, in addition to their shorter legs in traversing bus steps and book bags, 7 minutes load time is inadequate.

**Key Finding 2:** Due to significant delays in bus arrivals at elementary schools, students were required to remain inside the building under monitoring until the buses arrived. This measure was implemented to ensure the students' safety and well-being. Upon each buses' arrival, students were called for dismissal resulting in further delays in the process.

**Recommendation:**

- Customize arrival and dismissal time for each level, allowing increased load time for elementary schools and special schools.

**DRIVER SHORTAGE:** Howard County has also been affected by the nationwide school bus driver shortage. Since the Covid-19 Pandemic, HCPSS has experienced a shortage of 125 drivers in SY21-22, and a shortage range of 85-105 drivers in SY 22-23. Bus contractors in HCPSS are currently able to staff their reduced routes per the mediation agreement. Zūm, the school system's largest bus contractor, has offered an aggressive hiring campaign along with competitive salaries. They secure temporary out-of-state drivers on a rotating schedule to fill any driver gaps.

**Key Finding 1:** The grounds staff are required to hold a CDL license – restricted A. Zūm approached the staff, inquiring about their interest in serving as drivers for sporting events. Zūm offered to cover the expenses for their certification. While this was creative thinking to fill a necessary void, HCPSS staff declined this invitation due to safety concerns.

**Key Finding 2:** While contractors may document having sufficient drivers to cover their routes, a significant challenge is highlighted due to the Maryland employment regulations allowing drivers to qualify for unemployment benefits after three days without work. These regulations permit drivers to indicate their intent to return following a school break to maintain their

unemployment benefits. Many drivers opt not to return and choose to collect unemployment benefits until their eligibility period expires. Although HCPSS has no authority over this circumstance, it continues to significantly impact the efficient transportation of Howard County students.

**Key Finding 3:** On November 18, 2022, an amendment was made to Zūm’s RFP under Services to be Provided, removing their discretion to decline the request for supplemental student transportation services for co-curricular activity, athletics, or extended day vocational or special programs. This amendment is inclusive of field trips occurring within Maryland. Due to driver shortage, Zūm has not been able to consistently fulfill this contractual requirement. This results in schools contracting with other vendors for field trip transportation, thus passing a cost on to HCPSS families, one that has already been included in the contract with Zūm.

Tip Top, another HCPSS bus contractor, also has this request for supplemental student transportation services requirement included in its contract. To date, Tip Top has a higher rate of success in meeting this requirement (68.5%) in contrast to Zūm’s success rate of 28.1%. This is an area for further study.

**Recommendation:**

- Initiate innovative discussions centered on union agreements, risk management concerns, and insurance issues that prevent HCPSS Grounds staff from obtaining additional certification to serve as back-up drivers in a school system emergency. These conversations may result in solutions to mitigate driver vacancies in an emergency basis (See Appendix B).

**BUS NUMBERS:** Bus numbers are the critical identifier for students connecting to their designated route. Zūm’s buses arrived with 6-digit numbers.

**Key Finding 1:** During a numbering convention, it was agreed that any regular bus would be 1000 number; buses for special education would be a 4,000 number. And then any van would be a 9000 number. HCPSS agreed to get placards for the busses and obtain approval from the Motor Vehicle Administration. In addition to running the earlier routes (not the revised routes sent on August 26<sup>th</sup>, Zūm did not receive the placards. The routes and bus information did not match resulting in families receiving bus numbers that did not correspond to the numbers displayed on the sides of the buses.

**Recommendation:**

- Order and affix bus placards once routing is finalized. This step increases the likelihood of ensuring accurate bus numbering.

**PRE-KINDERGARTEN:** By law, Local Education Agencies (LEA) are required to provide pre-kindergarten services to students who are income eligible or have an individualized education program (IEP). The Blueprint for Maryland’s Future requires that by SY26, LEAs provide service to all 4-year-old children from low-income families who wish to enroll in a full-day pre-kindergarten program. This essentially adds a seventh (7<sup>th</sup>) elementary grade to the school system. Currently, HCPSS has 21 full-day programs and 11 half-day programs. Classroom space for this new grade is finite and each pre-kindergarten program is housed in schools across the county where space is available. Transportation is provided to students if they live in a transported zone, or if they have an IEP. Transportation is also provided to students who are attending a pre-kindergarten site away from their home school due to maximized enrollment at their home school.

The Office of Student Transportation is tasked with determining the routing for this program, taking into consideration the amount of time students spend on the bus when they must be transported to distant sites where space is available.

**Key Finding 1:** Notifications and communications regarding the SY23-24 pre-kindergarten programs were communicated to families in a later manner than is typical of HCPSS standards due to the challenges of Day One.

**Key Finding 2:** According to the schedule outlined in the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future, HCPSS pre-kindergarten program's implementation is delayed. Although HCPSS conversion for the remaining half-day programs is proposed in the SY24-25 budget, the budget must first be approved. Additionally, there exists a potential for daily and ongoing effects on bus routing and transporting pre-kindergarten age students who enroll in the county.

**Recommendation:**

- Develop efficiencies for student registration by identifying centralized registration stations which provides improved access for families and increases efficiencies in the registration process. This initiative will allow for the earlier registering of both kindergarten and pre-kindergarten students.
- Enhance, align, and communicate a 40-hour schedule for school-based secretarial staff to receive and process centralized paper and online summer registrations

**PUPIL PERSONNEL OFFICE:** The Pupil Personnel Office assists with managing the schooling of displaced students, students in temporary housing, and students who attend an alternative educational program at the Homewood Center.

**Key Finding 1:** The McKinney-Vento Act safeguards the rights of homeless students, allowing them to attend their original school even if they are residing in a different city or county.

Adhering to this, the Office of Student Transportation was significantly challenged this past August when the office encountered an unexpected increase of displaced students who required transportation. The number rose by 200 students from last school year.

**Key Finding 2:** The Pupil Personnel Office assists with the management of schooling for students attending Homewood This is a fluid process wherein students may arrive and register daily. This affects the routing process for transportation. This year enrollment increased at Homewood from 55 to 135 students who required transportation.

**Recommendation:**

- Set clear guidelines and deadlines for registration communication to ensure that all divisions can adequately prepare to receive students.

**SYNERGY EDUCATION PLATFORM :** Synergy Education Platform serves as Howard County Public School System's student data management platform, facilitating administrative processes and enhancing learning outcomes. This platform seamlessly integrates systemwide data, offering comprehensive functionality to effectively utilize, manage, and communicate student information.

**Key Finding 1:** Synergy has a specific date for its rollover, transitioning from one school year to the next, which typically takes place after the conclusion of the summer school term. Summer school engages approximately 18% of the student body, totaling around 10,000 students. Although the rollover could technically occur right after the previous school year ends, there's limited time to conclude the academic year, prepare for summer school, and execute the rollover seamlessly. Despite the scheduled Synergy rollover date, other services or departments can continue planning and operating without hindrance due to the platform's nightly updates.

**Key Finding 2:** From August 15 to August 28, 2023, the week that staff returns from summer break, the Howard County Public School System enrolled 2,300 students, accounting for approximately 5% of its total enrollment. On average, this translates to roughly 30 students per school. These enrollments primarily consist of late kindergarten registrations and students who did not enroll during the summer. This surge in enrollments affects various aspects, including the distribution of student schedules, the allocation of Food and Nutrition PIN numbers, and the assignment of locker numbers.

**Key Finding 3:** The Synergy Education Platform is updated nightly, allowing interacting systems and services such as Tienet: Food Services; Transportation; Canvas; Naviance; Clever; Library Services; and Hoonuit to access current student information. Interacting systems depend on this platform to determine student identification numbers, grade levels, contact

information and other specific student information. As they prepare for the upcoming school year, many of these systems and services along with school personnel await the Synergy rollover, which transfers all data into the most current school year, before planning for their programs. This has historically led to delays in scheduling and planning across various departments.

**Recommendation:**

- Organize and implement training sessions to acquaint both new and existing staff members with the Synergy Platform to enable proactive planning without the need to redo tasks after the rollover. The information gap about Synergy use creates unnecessary delays and frustration with users who are ill-informed about accessing student data.

### Established And Effective Systems

**HCPSS STABILIZING FACTORS:** After a tumultuous and challenging morning on the first day of the school year, HCPSS divisions came together to help alleviate difficulties and make essential adjustments to support and transport students. The presence of well-defined processes within HCPSS divisions provided a structured framework for the first day and first month of school, allowing for a smoother execution of various tasks and activities. Additionally, the ability to collaborate with existing educational partners and governmental agencies allowed for the sharing of expertise and planning with various perspectives in mind.

**Key Finding 1:** The Division of School Management and Instructional Leadership demonstrated intentional efforts by reporting as expected and planned to the various schools for opening day. Their structure included a means to communicate about any concerns and respond to any challenges.

**Key Finding 2:** When the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment (CIA) became aware of the difficulties associated with the beginning of the school year, it moved quickly to mobilize. They quickly turned their attention to getting ready for the pre-kindergarteners, who were going to start school on Day 4 of the first week of classes. CIA and the Office of Special Education (OSE) collaborated to establish several protocols in response to the transportation challenges that pre-kindergarten students faced. These protocols were designed to provide parents and students with clarity and stability. These protocols included multiple measures:

- Establishment of a dedicated phone line and email exclusively for pre-kindergarten parents to access information



- Communication with school administrators and other academic division staff members to coordinate efforts
- Preparation of talking points to address concerns raised by parents
- Development of communication materials to be disseminated to families affected by the situation
- Creation of a spreadsheet to document parent/student concerns and track responses
- Identification of dedicated phones and cell phones for addressing parent concerns
- Training of staff to facilitate communication with parents and transportation personnel, as well as providing coverage on vans and buses to support students
- Development of a roster for 60 staff members needed daily over the span of one month to ensure coverage on vehicles transporting students
- Nightly communication with volunteers for the following day and assignment of staff to both exits of the bus lot to ensure an attendant on specialized buses
- Establishment of a focal point at the bus lot, denoted by a pink tablecloth, to facilitate communication and support for drivers seeking assistance or information

**Key Finding 3:** The Department of Special Education engaged in extensive collaboration with the Office of Student Transportation in preparation for the first day of school, focusing on addressing the unique needs associated with transporting students with special needs. Just three days before the start of school, late Friday afternoon, they worked alongside Office of Student Transportation staff to install safety equipment on the buses to ensure secure student transport. Furthermore, during the initial month of school, they assumed responsibility for managing the phones in the Office of Student Transportation (OST), enabling OST staff to address other challenges. Additionally, they collaborated with other divisions to cover vacancies for bus attendants.

**Key Finding 4:** The Division of Operations altered its regular schedule by adjusting the frequency of weekly division meetings to bi-monthly sessions in the months leading up to Opening Day. The Chief Operating Officer took on the role of Project Manager, serving as the liaison between the Director of Transportation and the new vendor, Zūm. Simultaneously, the Executive Director was responsible for managing all other day-to-day details of the project.

**Key Finding 5:** The Office of Student Transportation is currently being structured, organized, and staffed to meet the needs of a growing school system. Its limited staff planned, designed and laid out all bus routes for the SY 23-24 transporting of Howard County students. Despite the numerous changes in decisions, additional iterations of routing schedules, and requests for information that diverted their attention from the primary focus on Day One readiness, the

OST staff responded earnestly to situations largely beyond their control. A critical look at the timing of the approval of the bell schedule, the mediation proceedings, the redistricting exemptions, the walk zone appeals, the demarcation line decision, and the onboarding of a new contractor occurred without much pushback from any stakeholder group or pushback to the entities making these requests. The OST staff has demonstrated resilience in a most difficult school year and perseverance in their efforts to remedy what was broken.

**Key Finding 6:** The Division of Operations, Food and Nutrition Services made adjustments to staff hours to accommodate the late start times of school during the first few weeks of SY23-24. Breakfast hours were adjusted allowing students to access breakfast up to 1 hour before lunch. Lunch hours and lunch schedules all had to be adjusted for all schools while adhering to state and federal guidelines.

**Key Finding 7:** The Office of School Facilities promptly addressed the necessity for changes in bell schedules across all 77 schools. While a few schedules were able to adjusted virtually, the vast majority (~90%) required manual alterations due to outdated Tell centers responsible for managing mainframes, intercoms, and phone connections. Staff dedicated overtime hours to create new schedules offsite and upload them into the data centers. On the eve of the scheduled changes, site visits were conducted to physically implement and activate the new schedules.

**Key Finding 8:** The Office of Communications demonstrated effectiveness in providing continuous and updated communication regarding the School Start Time Initiative. In response to the challenges faced on the first day, the office took the lead in transmitting and managing communications to parents and the community regarding bus delays, changes, and other transportation notifications. Their pivotal role in the ongoing implementation of this plan continues to be significant.

**Recommendation:**

- Develop a structured approach to transition training to maintain department and system achievements. Transition training prepares individuals for a significant change or transition within an organization. Changes in leadership, organizational structure, technology, and processes, are included.
  - Identify the scope of the transitions or changes within the division
  - Identify key areas or personnel that require training or support
  - Develop a transition training plan timeline
  - Customize training content to key areas, roles, or transition changes

**COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS:** Leveraging existing relationships and partnerships with stakeholders provided valuable support and resources, enabling effective implementation of components on Day One.

- HCPSS, cognizant of the need for bus driver certification, reached out to former Director of Transportation, David Ramsay, to assist in the process
- The Maryland State Director of Transportation was called who was able to certify Monica Pringle so that HCPSS could certify its drivers in alignment to state guidelines
- HCPSS collaborated with bus contractors arming them with the necessary tools to facilitate their own driver training course
- HCPSS facilitated monthly mtgs between the Office of Student Transportation and the non-public entities it serves
- Internal problem-solving and update meetings were scheduled with area managers to problem solve monthly transportation challenges
- The OST has a behavior specialist on staff who serves as a liaison between the Office of Special Education and OST
- HCPSS worked in partnership with the Howard County Government, Howard County Recreation and Parks, Howard County Police Department, Howard County Department of Public Works Traffic Engineering and neighboring counties to plan for and orchestrate safety measures for Day One.

**Recommendations:**

- Maintain and expand community partnerships to provide additional opportunities for students, staff, and the community. The HCPSS has had an active educational partnership program for more than 20 years, achieving more than 1000 relationships established during the school year 2022-2023. The partnerships help to supplement educational and business opportunities for stakeholders.

**OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT**

The HCPSS Transportation Service Delivery Plan/School Start Time Initiative was not implemented successfully. In his book *Failing Forward*, Edmondson (2022) emphasizes the need to understand the root causes of any missteps by looking beyond surface-level explanations. Often, plans and simulations are designed under ideal conditions, failing to capture realistic scenarios that may not function as intended. Hence, as in the School Start Time Initiative, these plans or simulations fall short in providing insights into what might not work in the real situation.

The Internal Action Report allows HCPSS to probe into, analyze, and experiment within known parameters, the actions that will determine future success. While the stabilizing factors mentioned played a crucial role in mitigating potential challenges, there are opportunities for improvement aimed at enhancing cross-division and departmental collaboration and communication, as well as fortifying district systems, processes, and policies. The cross-division and department recommendations along with the system recommendations are provided in the following areas:

**Recommendations:**

- Enhance Risk Assessment and Mitigation Strategies. Improve risk management procedures for upcoming high-level projects, especially those involving specialized transportation, by carrying out thorough table-top risk analyses and developing effective mitigation and contingency plans
  - Organize interdepartmental meetings to create a standard procedure for performing risk analyses prior to the start of any new project
  - Create a checklist that includes potential blind spots and contingencies to be used during risk assessments
  - Develop comprehensive contingency plans with key stakeholders to address potential risks
  - Make plans and findings available to the appropriate departments by documenting them
- Mitigate high-level projects by identifying, defining, and implementing performance milestones.
- Determine and specify important performance benchmarks that are in line with the project
- Create a list of measurable benchmarks that serve as progress indicators
- Monitor progress against established benchmarks
- Streamline Communication Protocols. HCPSS leaders have established efficient protocols for communicating among themselves. The School Start Time Initiative served as a reminder that there is potential for improvement in such protocols. Improving these structures includes identifying ways and means to:
- Develop additional communication protocols aimed at ensuring timely, accurate, and purposeful information exchange among stakeholders across school system departments. This includes crafting standardized operating procedure (SOP) documents for the annual start of the school year as well as inclement weather protocols to streamline processes

- Communicate the purpose of senior leadership planning meetings to all participants, emphasizing the importance for proactive problem-solving, and discussions about potential unforeseen events.
- Promote the interconnectivity of departments by providing agendas that allow for deliberate, unhurried, purposeful interactions wherein participants understand the role their voice has in the process, the importance of interacting with other departments, and the necessary steps they must take to ensure the agenda items have been personalized to each participant's department.
- Expand on questions asked during leadership meetings to include think time and identification of vulnerabilities on agenda topics
- Test, confirm, and validate all assurances
- Develop and test contingency plans with various scenarios to ensure preparedness for unforeseen challenges.
  - Conduct a Post-Event Analysis with members of the Superintendent's Cabinet to review the command structure during the events of the opening day.
  - Develop a checklist of Identified roles and responsibilities during a system-wide critical incident and practice such roles in a table-top critical incident exercise.

## QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER INQUIRY

- In prior years, walking distances were adjusted in small insular areas. Policy 5200 modification made adjustments system-wide. What key departments/areas should have been involved in trouble shooting the wholesale nature of this change to prevent the underestimation of impact that occurred?
- Portions of the School Start Time Initiative have yet to be implemented. Is there a new timeline? Who will be included in both the planning, communication, and rollout of the Radio Frequency Identification? How might the contractor voice be included?
- How will the mandatory registration policy be enacted for SY24-25?
- Redistricting exemptions impacted the need for buses. What guardrails can be placed around the criteria used to determine exemptions?
- What onboarding was completed with the new vendor? Similarly, to onboarding new staff, introductions of many sorts need to occur. What introductions should be intentionally offered to a new vendor?

- The Transportation office not only grew with new members but also members assumed new roles. What percentage of staff were new to the department or new to a role (new - within 1 year) What training did staff have? What adjustments were intentionally made for staff given the major change that was proposed with school start times? Was there adequate staff? What would change in the office if the first day of school was approaching now? What other transportation system changes were under consideration or projected that coincided with school start time changes?
- As of 8/31 the BOE was updated and told that, "Staff continues to be hired to complete the updated organizational model for the expanded Office of Student Transportation." One would infer that the office was not fully staffed. What plan exists to fill the positions yet unfilled? Is this a priority?
- Has a plan been defined and explored by Zūm and HCPSS for the use of vans?
- What input and understanding was provided to the companies conducting the pre-service training? How was the training monitored? Were training records and materials provided? Collected?
- The Versatrans software has not been maximized. To date, some recurring costs have not been noted as was anticipated. What has been un-utilized in this software? What was completed according to promise?
- The former Director of Transportation was available to consult on the rollout of the School Start Time Initiative. What prevented OST from reaching out to him sooner?
- The school start times were changed to remove idle time. This resulted in lack of turn-around time for buses to adequately and efficiently complete routes. The start times were then readjusted. What went wrong to cause two adjustments given the new technology used, the use of a consultant, the increase in the transportation budget, the new vendor, and all the planning that occurred - What was missed or assumed?
- How are transportation issues reported, tracked, and communicated within the transportation department?
- How are transportation issues reported and tracked by schools to the transportation department?
- How are transportation issues reported, tracked, addressed and communicated within the transportation department to the superintendent?
- What training was involved for HCPSS staff in readiness for the rollout of all systems?
- Zūm provided data of conflict times and provided an analysis for minimal changes. What data does HCPSS have access to? What data does HCPSS use?

## CONCLUSION

The Howard County Public School System is a well-known, respected school district recognized for its dedication to high-quality education, creative teaching methods, and creating a diverse and welcoming atmosphere. HCPSS believes in continuous improvement, as indicative of the School Start Time Initiative. This initiative aimed to respond to the transportation needs of the district's diverse and growing student population, within strict financial parameters.

During the planning of the School Start Time Initiative, several events and initiatives encountered setbacks and planning difficulties. These challenges stemmed from the service delivery plan, which formed the basis of the School Start Time Initiative that relied on having enough bus drivers and proper staffing levels, as suggested in the Office of Student Transportation's organizational chart. However, on August 28, 2023, the initial school day, neither of these crucial elements was fulfilled.

Furthermore, a primary cause of these planning difficulties was the continuous and simultaneous demands placed on the Office of Student Transportation (OST) staff. These demands included various tasks, such as approving the bell schedule, mediating proceedings, granting redistricting exemptions, handling walk zone appeals, responding to demarcation line decisions, and onboarding a new contractor. These requests were presented without sufficient supervision or opposition from any stakeholder group, leading to a lack of pushback against the entities making these demands.

As HCPSS prepares for the upcoming school year (SY24-25), it is essential to consider current and persistent factors in the planning process for effective preparation and execution. These factors include:

- **Routing.** To optimize the routing process, it is necessary to assess both the capabilities of available technology and the proficiency of HCPSS staff in effectively utilizing it.
- **Redistricting Exemptions.** To accommodate the redistricting exemptions, additional buses will be required to facilitate this change.
- **Appeals.** To respond to the expanded non-transportation areas, sustained allocation of both physical and financial resources will be required. This stems from the necessity of providing specialized transportation for students in these areas who now require bus services
- **Demarcation Line.** To implement the current boundary decision, five buses and two vans will be necessary to accommodate this change.

- **Mandatory Transportation Registration.** To utilize this initiative and understand what is working well and what needs improvement requires some form of evaluation to identify its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis)
- **Zūm Services, Inc.** To fully utilize the services of this vendor, seamless planning for transporting HCPSS students requires collaborative engagement and mutual involvement in the planning process
- **Pre-Service Driver Training Program** To continue with this initiative and assess its effectiveness requires on-going monitoring and evaluation of its results.
- **New Bell Schedule.** To implement the Board’s October 23,2023 directive to the Superintendent of Schools to revert to an 8:00 AM start time for high schools in SY24-25, requires an analysis of the events that unfolded on August 28, 2023, Day One of school. Unpacking the events and understanding the implications of the start time change on August 28, 2023, can assist in making informed decisions about reverting to the previous schedule for the subsequent school year. To implement a change in bell schedules for the SY 24-25, several considerations are required:
  - A definitive and timely decision regarding the parameters surrounding the changes in bell times. This requires outlining the specifics of the schedule adjustments, including the start and end times for each tier of schools.
  - A determination of whether the bell schedule changes apply to all three tiers of schools (elementary, middle, and high schools) or if it is targeted specifically for a particular tier, such as tier 1 schools only.
  - An examination of the impact of shifting school start times for all three tiers of schools. This means the shifted mid-tier times would have to be pushed 10 minutes later as well as the latest tier would have to be pushed 10 minutes later. By pushing the last tier of schools 10 minutes later there is the potential of students walking home from school in the dark.
  - An examination of the impact of shifting school start times has on contracts. The shift may add costs as bus contracts pay for a 5-hour minimum.
  - Re-evaluation all routes and tiers
  - An assessment of the costs for additional bus contracts if the bell schedule change is inclusive of Tier 1 schools only
  - A period of at least 6 months to issue an RFP and get contracts awarded if the bell schedule change is inclusive of Tier 1 schools only
  - An understanding of the impact on bus contractors for the need of additional vehicles



- An understanding of the impact on bus contractors to attract, hire, and train additional drivers for the additional vehicles that would be needed if the bell schedule change is inclusive of Tier 1 schools only
  - Planning to address the impact on various school system departments and affiliated such as Special Ed, Transportation, Food Services, Athletics, Howard County Education Association, Howard County Association of Supervisors and Administrators, custodial, and Instructional Technology, if the bell schedule change is inclusive of Tier 1 schools only
- The system will be well served if the Board understands and examines the instructional, procedural, and structural insights learned to enhance the likelihood of successfully implementing this change.

## APPENDICES

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APPENDIX A-1

Office of Student Transportation Position Budgeted FY21

<b>Budgeted FY21</b>	
DIRECTOR STUDENT TRANSPORTATION	1.0
BUSINESS MANAGER	1.0
AREA MANAGER TRANSPORTATION	6.0
SCHOOL BUS ROUTER	2.0
DRIVER TRAINER STUDENT TRANSPORTATION	2.0
TRANSPORTATION ANALYST/PLANNER	1.0
SECRETARY	3.0
Total	16.0
All positions remained filled.	

APPENDIX A-2

Office of Student Transportation Positions Budgeted FY22

Budgeted FY22		Adjustments made during budget year		Notes	Date Position Available to be filled	Date Position Filled
DIRECTOR STUDENT TRANSPORTATION	1.0	DIRECTOR STUDENT TRANSPORTATION	1.0		9/1/2021 (Retirement)	8/26/21
BUSINESS MANAGER	1.0	BUSINESS MANAGER	0.0	Business Manager vacated 1/1/2021 (retirement); position		
AREA MANAGER TRANSPORTATION	6.0	AREA MANAGER TRANSPORTATION	6.0		(1.0) 8/26/2021 (promotion)	2/28/2022
SCHOOL BUS ROUTER	2.0	SCHOOL BUS ROUTER	2.0			
DRIVER TRAINER STUDENT TRANSPORTATION	2.0	DRIVER TRAINER STUDENT TRANSPORTATION	2.0			
TRANSPORTATION ANALYST/PLANNER	1.0	TRANSPORTATION ANALYST/PLANNER	1.0			
SECRETARY	3.0	SECRETARY	2.0	1.0 filled secretary position reclassified to		
Total	16.0	TECHNICAL ASSISTANT	1.0			
		ACCOUNTING ANALYST	1.0		1/1/21	3/11/21
		Total	16.0			

APPENDIX A-3: Office of Student Transportation Positions Budgeted FY23

Budgeted FY23			Adjustments made during budget year		Notes	Date Available to be filled	Date Position Filled
DIRECTOR STUDENT TRANS	1.0		DIRECTOR STUDENT TRANS	1.0			
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR STUDENT TRANS	1.0	New 7/1/2022	ASSISTANT DIRECTOR STUDENT TRANS	0.0	position was never filled; reclassified 11/17/2022 to coordinator of contracts	7/1/22	Position never filled
TECHNOLOGY MANAGER	1.0	New 7/1/2022	TECHNOLOGY MANAGER	1.0		7/1/22	5/4/23
AREA MANAGER TRANS	6.0		AREA MANAGER TRANS	3.0	2.0 area manager positions reclassified to area field specialists; 1.0 area manager position reclassified to planning manager	4/20/2023 (lateral transfer)	8/10/2023
FIELD SUPERVISOR	2.0	New Positions 7/1/2022	FIELD SUPERVISOR	0.0	positions were never filled; reclassified 11/17/2022 to coordinator of specialized service and training and coordinator of planning and technology	7/1/22	Positions never filled
SCHOOL BUS ROUTER	2.0		SCHOOL BUS ROUTER	3.0	1.0 Pool Position	(1.0) 2/23/2023; (1.0)	8/14/2023 ; 1.0
ACCOUNTING ANALYST	1.0		ACCOUNTING ANALYST	1.0			
DRIVER TRAINER STUDENT TRANS	2.0		DRIVER TRAINER STUDENT TRANS	2.0			
TRANS ANALYST/PLANNER	1.0		TRANS ANALYST/PLANNER	1.0		5/4/2023 (promotion)	remains vacant
BEHAVIOR SPECIALIST	1.0	New Position 7/1/2022	BEHAVIOR SPECIALIST	1.0		7/1/22	Position never filled
TECHNICAL ASSISTANT	1.0		TECHNICAL ASSISTANT	2.0	1.0 filled secretary reclassified to technical assistant		
SECRETARY	2.0		SECRETARY	0.0			
Total	21.0	5.0	COORDINATOR	3.0		(3.0)	(3.0)
			FIELD SPECIALIST	3.0	2.0 from position reclassifications; 1.0 Pool position	2/22/2023; 1.0 filled 6/15/2023;	1.0 filled 9/5/2023 ;resigned eff 9/14/2023 remains vacant
			EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT	1.0	1.0 vacant secretary position reclassified to exec. asst.	8/1/22	8/10/23
			PLANNING MANAGER	1.0		1/26/23	4/20/23
			TECHNOLOGY ANALYST	1.0	Pool position	2/22/23	10/9/23
			Total	24.0			

APPENDIX A-4

Office of Student Transportation Positions Budgeted FY24

Budgeted FY24		Adjustments made during budget year		Notes	Date Position Filled
DIRECTOR STUDENT TRANSPORTATION	1.0	DIRECTOR STUDENT TRANSPORTATION	1.0		
TECHNOLOGY MANAGER	1.0	TECHNOLOGY MANAGER	1.0		
AREA MANAGER TRANSPORTATION	3.0	AREA MANAGER TRANSPORTATION	3.0		
SCHOOL BUS ROUTER	3.0	SCHOOL BUS ROUTER	3.0		1.0 remains vacant
ACCOUNTING ANALYST	1.0	ACCOUNTING ANALYST	1.0		
DRIVER TRAINER STUDENT TRANSPORTATION	2.0	DRIVER TRAINER STUDENT TRANSPORTATION	2.0		
TRANSPORTATION ANALYST/PLANNER	1.0	TRANSPORTATION ANALYST/PLANNER	1.0		1.0 remains vacant
BEHAVIOR SPECIALIST	1.0	BEHAVIOR SPECIALIST	0.0	behavior analyst position reclassified to	
TECHNICAL ASSISTANT	2.0	TECHNICAL ASSISTANT	2.0		11/2/23
COORDINATOR	3.0	COORDINATOR	3.0		
FIELD SPECIALIST	3.0	FIELD SPECIALIST	3.0		1.0 remains vacant
EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT	1.0	EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT	1.0		
PLANNING MANAGER	1.0	PLANNING MANAGER	1.0		
TECHNOLOGY ANALYST	1.0	TECHNOLOGY ANALYST	1.0		
Total	24.0	TRANSPORTATION SPECIALIST	1.0		7/27/23
		Total	24.0		

APPENDIX A-5

Office of Student Transportation Positions Budgeted Summary

	Approved # of Positions in Budget	# of New Positions	# of Positions after Adjustments	# of Positions Reclassified
<b>FY24</b>	24.0	N/A	N/A	1.0
<b>FY23</b>	21.0	5.0	24.0	8.0
<b>FY22</b>	16.0	N/A	N/A	2.0
<b>FY21</b>	16.0	N/A	N/A	N/A

## APPENDIX B: Transportation 60 Day Review



November 3, 2023

### MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education

From: Michael J. Martirano, Ed.D. Superintendent

Subject: Transportation 60 Day Review

This memorandum is in response to the Board of Education's motion passed on July 13, 2023.

*Move that the Board of Education direct the Superintendent to have staff conduct a review of the first 60 days of transportation and non-transportation areas to assess what's working and not working. The assessment will include, but not be limited to, attendance tracking for students no longer receiving transportation for the 2023-2024 school year compared to historic attendance in these areas. It will also review safety incidents compared with historic trends. The assessment should include recommendations for remediation of identified areas of concern.*

### WHAT IS WORKING WELL

#### Improved On-Time Arrival

Following the adjustment to school start times on Wednesday, September 20, 2023, to support the on-time arrival of student transportation vehicles, the on-time arrival of school buses and alternative vehicles to each of their stops and destinations is much more closely aligned to past years. As noted on the following chart displaying the five school days before the Sept. 20 start time adjustments and five days following the adjustments, September 20<sup>th</sup> tier 2 arrival times improved by 16% and tier 3 by 12% compared to the day before the adjustments were made. In the afternoon, significant on-time improvements were made at tier 2 and 3 schools by 19% and 63%, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> GPS data provided by Zūm Services.



Morning	Tier 1		Tier 2		Tier 3	
	First Stop	School	First Stop	School	First Stop	School
09/12	98%	83%	88%	79%	82%	75%
09/13	97%	81%	87%	79%	81%	75%
09/14	97%	83%	88%	80%	83%	76%
09/18	97%	81%	88%	80%	82%	74%
09/19	96%	83%	87%	80%	83%	76%
09/20	97%	93%	95%	96%	94%	98%
09/21	97%	91%	95%	97%	94%	96%
09/22	98%	96%	97%	98%	98%	97%
09/26	94%	90%	95%	97%	99%	99%
09/27	97%	96%	98%	99%	98%	98%

Afternoon	Tier 1		Tier 2		Tier 3	
	School	Drop off	School	Drop off	School	Drop off
09/12	96%	87%	79%	69%	39%	26%
09/13	97%	87%	78%	69%	39%	25%
09/14	96%	87%	79%	70%	38%	26%
09/18	97%	86%	78%	69%	37%	25%
09/19	97%	87%	79%	69%	38%	25%
09/20	99%	95%	98%	82%	91%	65%
09/21	97%	93%	90%	78%	82%	70%
09/22	99%	94%	94%	79%	90%	68%
09/26	99%	97%	96%	80%	89%	65%
09/27	99%	96%	96%	80%	91%	71%

### Driver Availability

For several years, the school system was forced to overcome a bus driver shortage, resulting in an average of 85-95 driver vacancies on any given day. Currently, no driver shortage exists, resulting in all planned routes having a bus/alternative vehicle and driver.

### Increased CDL-Certified Drivers

The lack of sufficient drivers with a Commercial Driver's License (CDL) to begin the school year required several routes to be transitioned onto multiple vans. The continuous increase of CDL-certified drivers is now allowing adjustments to be made back to buses, increasing efficiencies and the ability of current van drivers to serve as bus attendants.

## **Timely Notifications**

Timely notifications to families of bus delays are occurring for HCPSS families whose child receives transportation services.

## **Special Education Services**

HCPSS and transportation contractors have made many improvements, specifically on routes that serve students with disabilities. Staff in HCPSS Department of Special Education have been instrumental in coordinating between HCPSS Office of Student Transportation, the families, and advocacy groups that best understand the needs of our students with disabilities.

## **Athletics Transportation**

Each week, improvements have been made regarding transportation for our athletics teams. Games no longer have to be rescheduled due to a lack of transportation. As transportation contractors secure additional certified drivers, HCPSS will be in a better position to ensure full on-time coverage of athletics events. Issues continue to be mitigated as they arise to ensure athletic transportation is in place for all teams.

## **Safety Concerns**

The Office of Student Transportation has been actively working with families who have raised concerns about both safe walking routes as well as bus stop locations. Since March of 2023, 100 official Walking Route Committee appeals have been submitted and reviewed in addition to several hundred other informal inquiries. Currently, three appeals are being processed by the committee, and there is one appeal to the Board. Since the end of August, staff have been in contact with many families regarding bus stop location questions and concerns and continue to work closely with partners in the Howard County Police Department, Howard County Division of Traffic Engineering, and the Howard County Office of Transportation to ensure the safety of all students.

## **Field Trips**

To alleviate potential issues for schools scheduling transportation for field trips, beginning September 3, 2023, the Office of School Management and Instructional Leadership advised schools to wait only two business days for confirmation of a bus request, after which they were free to utilize any of our bus contractors. Anecdotal evidence from school and central office staff indicates this has been a successful process, and field trips are running as scheduled.

## ATTENDANCE

### **Comparison of the first 60 days of attendance**

The data presented below provides a comparison of the attendance rates for all students enrolled in the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 school years, categorized by school type.

School Type	# Students	Tardy Rate	Absence Rate	Attendance Rate
Elementary Schools FY23	26,318	1.9%	5.3%	94.7%
Elementary Schools FY24	26,291	2.2%	4.2%	95.8%
Middle Schools FY23	13,264	3.2%	4.8%	95.2%
Middle Schools FY24	13,230	4%	3.9%	96.1%
High Schools FY23	18,411	5.4%	6.5%	93.5%
High Schools FY24	18,389	5.7%	5.2%	94.8%
Alternate School FY23	225	7.1%	18.9%	81.1%
Alternate School FY24	273	9.4%	19.8%	80.2%
Attendance Rate for all FY23	58,203	3.3%	5.6%	94.4%
Attendance Rate for all FY24	58,175	3.8%	4.5%	95.5%

### Attendance Tracking for Students in New Non-Transportation Areas

The data presented below compares the attendance rates of students who are enrolled in the 2023-2024 school year, returning to the same school, remaining at the same address, and were eligible for bus transportation last year but are not eligible this year.

School Years	# Students	Tardy Rate	Absence Rate	Attendance Rate
2022-2023	1,478	3.5%	5.2%	94.8%
2023-2024	1,478	6.2%	4.5%	95.5%

The data presented below compares the attendance rates of students who are enrolled in the 2023-2024 school year but are not eligible for transportation this year.

School Years	# Students	Tardy Rate	Absence Rate	Attendance Rate
2022-2023	2,377	3.2%	5.0%	95.0%
2023-2024	2,377	5.9%	4.1%	95.9%

### Revised Start Time Adjustment Attendance

On Wednesday, September 20, 2023, staff implemented revised start times to better support the on-time arrival of student transportation vehicles. The data presented below, as requested by the Board, focuses on the mean attendance figures from two weeks prior to the revised start time and two weeks after the implementation of the revised start time. The data is categorized by school type.

School Type	Date	Average Attendance
Elementary Schools	September 6	96%
Elementary Schools	October 4	96%
Middle Schools	September 6	96%
Middle Schools	October 4	97%
High Schools	September 6	96%
High Schools	October 4	95%

The data was obtained using the Hoonuit Dashboard; information from the individual school can be found [here](#).

## SAFETY INCIDENTS

The data below compares safety incidents reported in the first 60 calendar days of the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 school years. Incidents are categorized by type.

Type of Incidents	2022-2023	2023-2024
Bus accidents-no student injuries	11	6
Bus accident with student injuries	1	0
Motor vehicle incident in the parking lot	1	1
Other bus incidents, e.g., disabled bus, flat tire, or hitting a mailbox	0	5
An unidentified person approaching a walker	1	3
<b>Total Type of Incidents</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>

Additional information regarding the table can be found [here](#).

## WHERE IMPROVEMENTS CAN BE REALIZED

### **Accurate Data**

Accurate real-time and historical data related to the on-time arrival of student transportation vehicles to their scheduled stops and destinations remains difficult to acquire consistently across all of our transportation contractors. In the spring and summer of 2020, all existing school buses were outfitted with GPS trackers and new buses were outfitted as they were brought into the fleet in subsequent years. School system staff intend to install the same model GPS trackers on the Zūm Services fleet in order to track all buses serving HCPSS routes through one system.

Additionally, existing software has been providing routing assistance, school bus telematics, and bell time and boundary modeling and will be further leveraged to receive and decipher bus data to take that burden off current transportation contractors and school administrators related to the on-time arrival and departure of buses.

### **Driver Availability**

It is important for transportation contractors to continue to increase the number of available drivers for the rare instances when more drivers call out than there is coverage for, or an additional bus is required to account for an unexpected circumstance.

### **Special Needs Support**

At the start of the school year, HCPSS staff served as adult support on specialized bus routes. On October 2, 2023, Zūm Services solicited an HCPSS approved staffing agency to provide these supports as they continue their hiring efforts. All temporary employees were trained and certified by HCPSS. This certification follows COMAR guidelines, ensuring that all necessary training and paperwork are met and in compliance with COMAR standards. It is important for long-term assistants to continue to be hired by transportation contractors, so the staffing agency will no longer be necessary.

## **CONCLUSION**

Though I was extremely disappointed in the challenges we experienced on a widespread basis with student transportation to begin the school year, I am very pleased with where we are currently. While many districts in the State continue to be challenged by significant driver shortages, daily route cancellations, and late bus arrivals, we have no driver shortage, extremely rare cases of route cancellations, and an extremely high number of buses arriving at their destinations on time each day.

Meeting the transportation needs of the student population is an ongoing process that requires continuous improvement. To achieve this, we will regularly evaluate our processes and identify opportunities for improvement. Additionally, we will address and overcome daily challenges on an individual basis as they arise.

If you have any questions, please contact Jahantab Siddiqui, Chief Administrative Officer.

Copy to: Executive Staff  
Board of Education Office

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This Internal Action Report has been reviewed for accuracy and completeness.

Prepared by:

Genée A. Varlack, Ed.D.

Date: December 29, 2023

**THE HOWARD COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM**  
**TRANSPORTATION SERVICE DELIVERY PLAN/  
SCHOOL START TIME INITIATIVE**  
**INTERNAL ACTION REPORT**



**COMPILED FOR:**

Superintendent of the Howard County Public School System

Dr. Michael Martirano

December 29, 2023

## Overview

This first day's activation of the School Start Time Initiative, as part of the Transportation Service Delivery Plan, was not realized (referred to as the School Start Time Initiative). It did not work as expected. A tangled mass of misevents began to unfold shortly after the start of the day, resulting in a system failure to adequately, efficiently, and assuredly transport Howard County Public School students to school in a timely manner.

## HCPSS Transportation Service Delivery Plan/School Start Time Initiative Internal Action Report (IAR)

In the spirit of fostering a culture of continuous improvement and ensuring that valuable lessons are not lost, Superintendent Dr. Michael Martirano requested an IAR following a challenging series of events that signaled the implementation of the Howard County Public School System's Transportation Service Delivery Plan/School Start Time Initiative. The purpose of the IAR was manifold, to:

- Identify strengths growth areas, assumptions, and system breakdowns that impacted implementation of the Plan,
- Identify key findings and provide recommendations for future actions, and
- Identify modifications or adjustments to policies, procedures, and/or protocols that the superintendent needs to make organizationally

The internal IAR was conducted by Educational Consultant, and former HCPSS school administrator, Dr. Genée A. Varlack, over a period of 8 weeks. Dr. Varlack reviewed a plethora of HCPSS documents related to the Transportation Service Delivery Plan / School Start Time Initiative, HCPSS Board of Education documents and reports, consultant reports and work streams, websites, media reports, and press conferences. She also conducted interviews with HCPSS stakeholders.

## Summary - School Start Time Initiative

### Rationale and Background

The primary goal of the School Start Time Initiative was to initiate secondary school education later than the prevailing 7:25 AM start time, a goal in alignment with a growing body of research which recognizes and focuses on adjusting school start time to align with teenagers' natural sleep-wake cycles to enhance academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being. With the assistance of the Decision Support Group (DSG) consultants, HCPSS assessed the existing school start times and the Board subsequently voted to endorse a proposed timeline for establishing revised school start times for SY2324. DSG proposed 8 complementary workstreams for the plan's success to include an expanded walk zone, a three-tier bell system, revised bus routes, a technology driven transportation model, and reorganization of the Office of Student Transportation.

## Opening Day Events - What Happened

The following events occurred on Day One.

- Buses arrived late to neighborhood stops or never showed at all.



- 340 of the system's 503 bus routes arrived late to school due to: insufficient logistical planning for drivers receiving keys and exiting the bus lot; driver vacancies; incorrect routing data; traffic bottlenecks; and late changes in bus routing data.
- Students with specialized transportation arrived home as late as 6:30 PM.

### Destabilizing Effects – What Were The Causes

The following events led to the weakening of HCPSS structures or processes on Day One. The events encompass multiple interconnected initiatives that were implemented at the start of the 2023–2024 academic year, and were compounded by the convergence of other events where specific actions or details had not been firmly established. Altogether they constituted the perfect storm of high-level events, low level events, and details that destabilized HCPSS structures or processes.

- Concurrent initiatives were started for SY23-24: New Technology; Re-districting and Redistricting Exemptions; Waivers, Appeals and Exemptions; Expanded Non-Transportation Areas; Demarcation Line; Mandatory Transportation Registration; New Bell Schedules; New Bus Contractor; Driver Training; Administrators; and Family File completion
- More students than anticipated enrolled at unique schools/programs that necessitated more planning and additional routing: Cedar Lane (14); Non-public agencies (5 sites); Homewood (200); Specialized Transportation (900+); Pre-kindergarten
- An unanticipated number of student exemptions resulted from the redistricting for Guilford Park High School. As a result of these exemptions, approximately 30+ additional buses were required, beyond the anticipated total allotment of 47
- Numerous families appealed the walk-zone decision. Each appeal required time to investigate each appeal and required edits to the routing process to accommodate any change
- As a result of mediation, 58 bus routes were returned for HCPSS to absorb, plan for, and route
- One bus contractor terminated his relationship with HCPSS and surrendered 28 routes, 16 of which were specialized transportation. In addition to the 58 routes surrendered from mediation, HCPSS would need to absorb a total of 86 routes
- There were changes to the demarcation line. Each change required time to investigate and required edits to the routing process to accommodate any change. The decision led to the need for 5 additional buses and 2 vans to transport the 259 students impacted
- Bell schedule changes occurred. The School Start Time Initiative compressed the bell schedule tiers without real-time testing or feedback, relying on simulated data for planning and implementation. This necessitated the adjustment of bus routes to align with the new tiered schedule

- There was incomplete planning and validating of the Zum organization's plans. Zum experienced a plethora of challenges, and mishaps that demonstrated a lack of preparedness to assume the position of primary carrier: Drivers faced technology challenges; Drivers were unfamiliar with routes; There were an insufficient number of drivers; There was an overall lack of logistical planning
- There was undue dependence on the Decision Support Group. Depending on a consultant without customizing the recommendations resulted in challenges
- Industry Standard bus load times of 7 minutes were inadequate. Without customizing the industry load times to the particulars of HCPSS and elementary schools resulted in additional delays
- The routes and bus information did not match resulting in families receiving bus numbers that did not correspond to the numbers displayed on the sides of the buses or buses not affiliated with the correct schools
- The Office of Student Transportation were tasked with monumental responsibilities along with the School Start Time Initiative. Inadequate support structures were in place:
  - Defining roles and responsibilities for vacant staff positions and creating job descriptions
  - Establishing interview panels and conducting interviews as best fit for the positions
  - Participating in the mediation process
  - Responding to the modifications of Policy 5200, Implementation Plan:
  - Investigating all appeals of the walk zone
  - Responding to the remanding of the demarcation line decision
  - Collaborating with the consulting firm DSG
  - Managing the opt-in responses
  - Defining the Bell Schedules
  - Evaluating proposals from potential vendors
  - Training and certifying drivers
  - Training new staff
  - Responding to requests for specialized transportation
  - Routing buses to transport students to school
  - Planning for and implementing summer school transportation
  - Planning for and responding to the Maryland State Department of Education audit
  - Collaborating and coordinating with other county agencies on sidewalk decisions and walking routes
  - Responding to and planning for Board of Education and community suggestions about collector buses in walk zones, and walking bus toolkits
  - Collaborating with the General Counsel regarding mediation

- Organizing, planning, and responding to the vendor and routing needs which occurred because of routes surrendered by a contractor
  - Planning for and responding to specialized routing for students receiving compensatory services as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.
  - Repeating the task of defining roles and responsibilities for a vacant staff position for to establishing position title and salary grade parameters.
- Numerous changes in decisions, additional iterations of routing schedules, and requests for information occurred that diverted attention from the primary focus of Day One readiness. The OST staff responded earnestly to situations largely beyond their control. A critical look at the timing of the approval of the bell schedule, the mediation proceedings, the redistricting exemptions, the walk zone appeals, the demarcation line decision, and the onboarding of a new contractor occurred without much pushback from any stakeholder group or pushback to the entities making these requests.

### Established And Effective Systems

After a tumultuous and challenging morning on the first day of the school year, HCPSS divisions came together to help alleviate difficulties and make essential adjustments to support and transport students. The presence of defined processes within all HCPSS divisions provided a structured framework for the first day and first month of school, allowing for a smoother execution of various tasks and activities. Additionally, the ability to collaborate with existing educational partners and governmental agencies allowed for the sharing of expertise and planning with various perspectives in mind.

### Opportunities For Improvement

The HCPSS Transportation Service Delivery Plan/School Start Time Initiative was not implemented successfully. In his book *Failing Forward*, Edmondson (2022) emphasizes the need to understand the root causes of any missteps by looking beyond surface-level explanations. Often, plans and simulations are designed under ideal conditions, failing to capture realistic scenarios that may not function as intended. Hence, as in the School Start Time Initiative, these plans or simulations fall short in providing insights into what might not work in the real situation.

The Internal Action Report allows HCPSS to probe into, analyze, and experiment within known parameters, the actions that will determine future success. While the stabilizing factors mentioned played a crucial role in mitigating potential challenges, there are opportunities for improvement aimed at enhancing cross-division and departmental collaboration and communication, as well as fortifying district systems, processes, and policies. The cross-division and department recommendations along with the system recommendations are provided in the following areas:

## Recommendations:

- Enhance Risk Assessment and Mitigation Strategies. Improve risk management procedures for upcoming high-level projects, especially those involving specialized transportation, by carrying out thorough table-top risk analyses and developing effective mitigation and contingency plans
  - Organize interdepartmental meetings to create a standard procedure for performing risk analyses prior to the start of any new project
  - Create a checklist that includes potential blind spots and contingencies to be used during risk assessments
  - Develop comprehensive contingency plans with key stakeholders to address potential risks
  - Make plans and findings available to the appropriate departments by documenting them
- Mitigate high-level projects by identifying, defining, and implementing performance milestones.
- Determine and specify important performance benchmarks that are in line with the project
- Create a list of measurable benchmarks that serve as progress indicators
- Monitor progress against established benchmarks
- Streamline Communication Protocols. HCPSS leaders have established efficient protocols for communicating among themselves. The School Start Time Initiative served as a reminder that there is potential for improvement in such protocols. Improving these structures includes identifying ways and means to:
  - Develop additional communication protocols aimed at ensuring timely, accurate, and purposeful information exchange among stakeholders across school system departments. This includes crafting standardized operating procedure (SOP) documents for the annual start of the school year as well as inclement weather protocols to streamline processes
    - Communicate the purpose of senior leadership planning meetings to all participants, emphasizing the importance for proactive problem-solving, and discussions about potential unforeseen events.
    - Promote the interconnectivity of departments by providing agendas that allow for deliberate, unhurried, purposeful interactions wherein participants understand the role their voice has in the process, the importance of interacting with other departments, and the necessary steps they must take

- to ensure the agenda items have been personalized to each participant's department.
  - Expand on questions asked during leadership meetings to include think time and identification of vulnerabilities on agenda topics
  - Test, confirm, and validate all assurances
- Develop and test contingency plans with various scenarios to ensure preparedness for unforeseen challenges.
  - Conduct a Post-Event Analysis with members of the Superintendent's Cabinet to review the command structure during the events of the opening day.
  - Develop a checklist of Identified roles and responsibilities during a system-wide critical incident and practice such roles in a table-top critical incident exercise.

### Questions For Further Inquiry

- In prior years, walking distances were adjusted in small insular areas. Policy 5200 modification made adjustments system-wide. What key departments/areas should have been involved in trouble shooting the wholesale nature of this change to prevent the underestimation of impact that occurred?
- Is there a new timeline for the rollout of the Radio Frequency Identification? Who will be included in both the planning, communication, and rollout of this initiative?
- How will the mandatory registration policy be enacted for SY24-25?
- Redistricting exemptions impacted the need for buses. What guardrails can be placed around the criteria used to determine exemptions?
- What onboarding was completed with the new vendor?
- The Transportation office not only grew with new members but also members assumed new roles. What percentage of staff were new to the department or new to a role (new - within 1 year) What training did staff have? What adjustments were intentionally made for staff given the major change that was proposed with school start times? Was there adequate staff?
- An 8/31 BOE report indicated, "Staff continues to be hired to complete the updated organizational model for the expanded Office of Student Transportation." One would infer that the office was not fully staffed. What plan exists to fill the positions yet unfilled? Is this a priority?
- Has a plan been defined and explored for the use of vans?
- How was the pre-service training monitored? Were training records and materials provided and collected?

- The Versatrans software has not been maximized. To date, some recurring costs have not been noted as was anticipated. What has been un-utilized in this software? What was completed according to promise?
- The former Director of Transportation was available to consult on the rollout of the School Start Time Initiative. What prevented OST from reaching out to him sooner?
- The school start times were changed to remove slack. This resulted in lack of turn-around time for buses to adequately and efficiently complete routes. The start times were then readjusted. What went wrong to cause two adjustments given the new technology used, the use of a consultant, the increase in the transportation budget, the new vendor, and all the planning that occurred - What was missed or assumed?
- How are transportation issues reported, tracked, and communicated within the transportation department?
- How are transportation issues reported and tracked by schools to the transportation department?
- How are transportation issues reported, tracked, addressed and communicated within the transportation department to the superintendent?
- What training was involved for HCPSS staff in readiness for the rollout of all systems?
- Zūm provided data of conflict times and provided an analysis for minimal changes. What data does HCPSS have access to and uses?

## Conclusions

The Howard County Public School System is a well-known, respected school district recognized for its dedication to high-quality education, creative teaching methods, and creating a diverse and welcoming atmosphere. HCPSS believes in continuous improvement, as indicative of the School Start Time Initiative. This initiative aimed to respond to the transportation needs of the district's diverse and growing student population, within strict financial parameters.

During the planning of the School Start Time Initiative, several events and initiatives encountered setbacks and planning difficulties. These challenges stemmed from the service delivery plan, which formed the basis of the School Start Time Initiative that relied on having enough bus drivers and proper staffing levels, as suggested in the Office of Student Transportation's organizational chart. However, on August 28, 2023, the initial school day, neither of these crucial elements was fulfilled.

Furthermore, a primary cause of these planning difficulties was the continuous and simultaneous demands placed on the Office of Student Transportation (OST) staff. These demands included various tasks, such as approving the bell schedule, mediating proceedings,

granting redistricting exemptions, handling walk zone appeals, responding to demarcation line decisions, and onboarding a new contractor. These requests were presented without sufficient supervision or opposition from any stakeholder group, leading to a lack of pushback against the entities making these demands.

As HCPSS prepares for the upcoming school year (SY24-25), it is essential to consider current and persistent factors in the planning process for effective preparation and execution. These factors include:

- **Routing.** To optimize the routing process, it is necessary to assess both the capabilities of available technology and the proficiency of HCPSS staff in effectively utilizing it.
- **Redistricting Exemptions.** To accommodate the redistricting exemptions, additional buses will be required to facilitate this change.
- **Appeals.** To respond to the expanded non-transportation areas, sustained allocation of both physical and financial resources will be required. This stems from the necessity of providing specialized transportation for students in these areas who now require bus services
- **Demarcation Line.** To implement the current boundary decision, five buses and two vans will be necessary to accommodate this change.
- **Mandatory Transportation Registration.** To utilize this initiative and understand what is working well and what needs improvement requires some form of evaluation to identify its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis)
- **Zūm Services, Inc.** To fully utilize the services of this vendor, seamless planning for transporting HCPSS students requires collaborative engagement and mutual involvement in the planning process
- **Pre-Service Driver Training Program** To continue with this initiative and assess its effectiveness requires on-going monitoring and evaluation of its results.
- **New Bell Schedule.** To implement the Board’s October 23,2023 directive to the Superintendent of Schools to revert to an 8:00 AM start time for high schools in SY24-25, requires an analysis of the events that unfolded on August 28, 2023, Day One of school. Unpacking the events and understanding the implications of the start time change on August 28, 2023, can assist in making informed decisions about reverting to the previous schedule for the subsequent school year. To implement a change in bell schedules for the SY 24-25, several considerations are required:
  - A definitive and timely decision regarding the parameters surrounding the changes in bell times. This requires outlining the specifics of the schedule adjustments, including the start and end times for each tier of schools.

- A determination of whether the bell schedule changes apply to all three tiers of schools (elementary, middle, and high schools) or if it is targeted specifically for a particular tier, such as tier 1 schools only.
  - An examination of the impact of shifting school start times for all three tiers of schools. This means the shifted mid-tier times would have to be pushed 10 minutes later as well as the latest tier would have to be pushed 10 minutes later. By pushing the last tier of schools 10 minutes later there is the potential of students walking home from school in the dark.
  - An examination of the impact of shifting school start times has on contracts. The shift may add costs as bus contracts pay for a 5-hour minimum.
  - Re-evaluation all routes and tiers
  - An assessment of the costs for additional bus contracts if the bell schedule change is inclusive of Tier 1 schools only
  - A period of at least 6 months to issue an RFP and get contracts awarded if the bell schedule change is inclusive of Tier 1 schools only
  - An understanding of the impact on bus contractors for the need of additional vehicles
  - An understanding of the impact on bus contractors to attract, hire, and train additional drivers for the additional vehicles that would be needed if the bell schedule change is inclusive of Tier 1 schools only
  - Planning to address the impact on various school system departments and affiliated such as Special Ed, Transportation, Food Services, Athletics, Howard County Education Association, Howard County Association of Supervisors and Administrators, custodial, and Instructional Technology, if the bell schedule change is inclusive of Tier 1 schools only
- The system will be well served if the Board understands and examines the instructional, procedural, and structural insights learned to enhance the likelihood of successfully implementing this change.

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This Internal Action Report has been reviewed for accuracy and completeness.

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