Special Education Transportation Task Force Report

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Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives

Dear Colleagues:

For the past several years, the Massachusetts Legislature and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education have funded initiatives designed to support cooperative transportation of special education students to out-of-district placements. The fiscal year 2010 grantee, the Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives (MOEC), is the lead organization of a statewide Task Force made up of representatives from numerous educational organizations. MOEC is submitting this report to summarize the activities and outcomes of the Massachusetts Special Needs Student Transportation project. There have been significant accomplishments:

- As a result of this initiative, now in its fifth year, a total of $7,345,000 in student transportation cost savings have been reported by Educational Collaboratives and student transportation networks. Additional savings are expected as more students are transported from already participating districts and as networks add additional districts.
- The student transportation infrastructure has become considerably more sophisticated.
- The quality of special education student transportation continues to improve.
- Transportation networks have begun expanding services to other areas with similar potential for savings.
- The Special Needs Student Transportation Task Force will continue to serve as an important influence and advocacy group in efforts to reduce costs further and improve student transportation services.

MOEC and the Task Force wish to thank the Legislature and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for their support of this worthwhile project. We believe that this and similar initiatives that encourage regional collaboration on student transportation and other education activities are both educationally sound and fiscally responsible.

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Massachusetts Special Needs Student Transportation Project

Executive Summary

The Massachusetts Special Needs Student Transportation Task Force has been engaged in a several-year initiative designed to address the rising cost of special needs student transportation. The Task Force is led by the Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives (MOEC) and includes representatives of the Administrators of Special Education (ASE), the Massachusetts Association of School Business Officials (MASBO), the Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC), the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS), the Massachusetts Association for Pupil Transportation (MAPT), and the Massachusetts Association of 766 Approved Private Schools (maaps).

Between fiscal years 1995 and 2003, the costs for special education transportation grew by 89% compared to a 50% cost increase for regular education transportation. Transportation costs for these students became one of the fastest growing budget items for school districts. The state legislature created a task force to address the issue. As a result of their efforts, the Massachusetts Special Needs Student Transportation Network project was funded to explore strategies to:

- Reduce the high costs of out-of-district transportation
- Improve the quality of transportation services
- Avoid route overlap, congestion, and long delays at site pick-up and drop-offs

Project Overview and Background

Representatives from participating professional educational organizations established the Task Force to address concerns about the rapidly increasing costs of special education transportation. Over a two-year period, they developed a pilot model proposal. Three Educational Collaboratives agreed to serve as regional grantees and assist in efforts to extend transportation services to other Collaboratives. They were:

- ACCEPT Education Collaborative in Natick
- Assabet Valley Collaborative in Marlborough
- Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative in West Springfield

Each of these Collaboratives had an extensive history of providing high quality, cost-effective transportation services to their member districts. In addition, several other Massachusetts Collaboratives coordinated student transportation to hold down costs for their member districts. See the appendix for a list of these Collaboratives and their member districts. This information is also available on the MOEC website: www.moecnet.org.

The objective of the grants was to extend cost-saving services to regions of the state not already served**.** Initially, grant funds were used to organize the state into several Inter-Collaborative Transportation Networks. The development of these networks and the services they provided is detailed in a study conducted by the Donahue Institute of the

University of Massachusetts. The report supplies extensive documentation of participation levels and an analysis of the issues, and can be accessed on the MOEC website: www.moecnet.org.

The Massachusetts multi-year student transportation initiative has produced some notable outcomes:

The total reported savings over the five-year grant period is $7,345,000.
These savings were the result of increased communication and cooperation among districts and with transportation providers, greater competition among providers, improved cost transparency, and lower per-pupil costs resulting from shared ridership. The accrued savings would be substantially greater if cost avoidance were included in the total. Cost avoidance is the reduction in transportation costs from the cost baseline established for the year prior to the start of networked transportation.

The quality of special education transportation has been improved.

- Many networks and Collaboratives have purchased and used routing software.
- Improved vehicle communication capabilities have been established.
- Most vehicles are now equipped with global positioning systems.
- Child Find monitoring devices are being installed in many vehicles.
- Monitoring of drivers and monitors has been increased.
- Improved driver training expectations and standards have been established.
- Additional materials have been prepared; more drivers and monitors are being trained.

The student transportation infrastructure has been substantially enhanced, and the improvements are projected to last well beyond the life of the project.
Previously existing Collaborative and network transportation providers will continue to provide cost-effective service to member districts while the newly created networks will expand service to additional member districts.

Networks have begun expanding services to other areas with potential for savings.
In addition to providing out-of-district transportation for special needs students, networks are also researching opportunities to provide regular school transportation and cooperative purchasing of transportation-related items such as fuel, as well as addressing the possibility of transporting homeless students.

The Special Needs Student Transportation Task Force will continue to serve as an important influence and advocacy group.
The Task Force serves as an information dispenser and an advocate to ensure the efficient and cost-effective transportation of special education students. Its continuation as an entity will provide an excellent structure for uniting various interests and constituencies to work effectively together for a common goal.

Networks have become recognized as viable agents for multi-district cooperation and as a means for reducing expenses.
In an April 2009 survey of school business managers, 82% of more than 100 respondents indicated that they had been made aware of the transportation network in their area. 95% of the business managers reported that they saw potential benefits in joining such a network.

Continuing Challenges
Efforts to establish multi-student ridership across school districts have encountered several challenges that have made it difficult to increase network participation. These challenges have also had an impact on the ability to provide multi-district, shared transportation at a reasonable cost. Issues that hinder the use of shared transportation include:

- Challenges assigning students to vehicles
  - Behavior disorders
  - Significant age differences
  - Medical conditions
- Challenges including districts in networks
  - District satisfaction with their current service and prices
  - Parental concerns that restrict some districts from using a multi-district model
  - Multi-year vendor contracts that preclude participation in a network at this time
  - State-mandated ride time of no more than an hour
  - Districts that employ their own drivers to operate their own vehicles

Summary of 2009-2010 Task Force Statewide Activities and Accomplishments

In fiscal year 2010, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education continued to support the transportation initiative by providing MOEC with $100,000 to sustain the progress of the Special Needs Student Transportation Task Force initiatives. These grant funds were to be used to provide staff training and technical assistance to networks and individual Collaboratives that met the following criteria:

- Provided significant evidence of a commitment to participate
- Appeared to have a reasonable chance to succeed
- Produced an action plan that included specific steps, a timetable, and outcomes
- Developed a strategy designed to generate sufficient income to support the required ongoing administrative services

Several proposals were submitted, and awards were granted. The grants were made to the South Coast Network, the Southern Worcester County Educational Collaborative/City of Worcester, and the Bi-County, Blackstone Valley, and FLLAC Collaboratives. The following outcomes summarize the project's accomplishments during 2009-10:

- Organized new networks
- Heightened awareness of the need to reduce costs and improve special needs student transportation services
- Collected and disseminated relevant data
- Provided a forum for discussion of related topics
- Advocated for participation by additional districts
- Addressed regulatory and legislative issues and other concerns that impact the quality and cost of special education student transportation
- Maintained communication with the legislature, state agencies, and professional organizations relating to pupil transportation
- Monitored network activity to ensure compliance with grant terms and conditions
- Established cost baselines that were disseminated to districts to help them compare transportation costs, negotiate with vendors more effectively, and attain cost savings
- Supported the further development of existing and new transportation networks
- Assisted networks to expand the number of participating districts
- Provided training and technical assistance to the networks by developing and disseminating information on driver training, safety policies and procedures, cost sharing, billing models, and examples of best practices
- Responded to network requests for other training and technical assistance
- Facilitated inter-network information exchange and cooperation
- Served in an advisory role to networks on state mandates and Registry of Motor Vehicle pupil transportation requirements
- Worked with private schools to develop mechanisms to monitor services and assist in training drivers and monitors

- Maintained communication with state agencies and professional organizations relating to pupil transportation by participating in meetings, circulating documents and information, and developing and facilitating interagency cooperation.

Summary of Transportation Activities and Accomplishments by Region or Network

The following are brief descriptions of each transportation region and a report of the significant activities and accomplishments of FY 2010, together with future plans.

The **Metro Boston** region includes member districts of the LABBB, EDCO, and CASE Collaboratives. The Metro Boston Transportation Network was organized, with LABBB serving as the Network's lead Collaborative. The Arlington, Belmont, Burlington, Lexington, Watertown, and Waltham districts are participating. The Metro Boston Network has completed its third year of providing out-of-district transportation. It is fully self-sustaining without the need for outside funding as it continues to grow and improve its system. Since its inception, estimated savings of $720,000 have been reported by participating districts. In FY 2011, the Metro Boston Network is transporting 328 students.

The **MetroWest** region includes districts from the Bi-County, ACCEPT, SPOKE, and TEC Collaboratives. This region contains 32 school districts with 874 students enrolled in public or private out-of district programs. In FY 2010, matching grant funds were provided to the Bi-County Collaborative to contract with a consultant for routing and cost analysis and to extend transportation services to the TEC districts that were already using the same transportation vendor. The Attleboro, Dedham, Franklin, Foxboro, King Philip Regional, Mansfield, Needham, Norfolk, Plainville, Walpole, and Wrentham districts are participating. The districts have entered into a new three-year contract that will save a minimum of $400,000 over the life of the contract. The participating districts have allocated funds to retain the services of a part-time transportation coordinator.

The **Southeast Transportation Network** is in its fourth year of operation, serving member districts of the North River, South Shore, and Pilgrim Area Collaboratives. In FY 2011, North River Collaborative will provide Network transportation for 14 member districts (Abington, Bridgewater, Cohasset, East Bridgewater, Freetown Lakeville, Hanover, Hingham, Kingston, Norwell, Pembroke, Rockland, West Bridgewater, Weymouth, and Whitman-Hanson)**,** transporting 233 students to 51 private schools and programs. Since its inception, this Network has saved its participating districts approximately $929,000.

The **Northeast Network**, managed by the SEEM Collaborative, contracts for transportation of more than 700 special needs students from member districts of SEEM, Greater Lawrence Educational Collaborative, Shore Collaborative, Northshore Education Consortium, and the Merrimack Special Education Collaborative. The Andover, Chelmsford, Chelsea, Danvers, Dracut, Everett, Lawrence, Lowell, Lynnfield, Malden, Marblehead, Masconomet, Methuen, Nahant, North Andover, North Reading, Newburyport, Peabody, Pentucket, Reading, Salem, Stoneham, Swampscott, Revere, Topsfield, Triton, Wakefield, Wilmington, Winchester, and Woburn districts are participating. This Network covers 61 school districts with 3,177

students enrolled in public or private out-of district programs. Since its inception, the Network has saved its districts over $3,100,000, with savings continuing in FY 2011.

The **Central Massachusetts** region includes member districts of the FLLAC, CAPS, Assabet Valley, Southern Worcester County, and Blackstone Valley Collaboratives, plus the City of Worcester. It encompasses 58 school districts with 1,508 students enrolled in public or private out-of district programs.

In FY 2010, the Blackstone Valley Collaborative used grant funds to develop multi-district transportation, resulting in a savings of approximately $230,000. The Bellingham, Mendon-Upton, Hopedale, Milford, Northbridge, and Uxbridge districts are participating.

Grant funds were also provided to Southern Worcester County Educational Collaborative to extend its transportation services to additional districts. Presently 35 students from Southbridge and the City of Worcester are participating at a savings of $426,000.

Grant funds were also provided to the FLLAC Collaborative in northern Worcester County to organize multi-district transportation for interested member districts. These include Ashburnham-Westminster, Clinton, Gardner, Leominster, and West Boylston. In FY 2011, six students are being transported to FLLAC programs at an estimated savings of $45,000.

The **South Coast** region includes district members of the READS, Southeastern Massachusetts, and South Coast Collaboratives. The region covers 22 school districts that enroll 688 students in public or private out-of district programs. FY 2010 grant funds were used to develop a South Coast Student Transportation Network. The funds also allowed the Southeastern Massachusetts Collaborative to expand its current transportation program. The expanded program now serves the Acushnet, Fairhaven, Mattapoisett, Marion, and Rochester school districts. The projected savings for the additional routes established for FY 2010 is $70,000. Transportation is provided only to Collaborative programs.

Conclusion

Since the inception of the pilot program and the implementation of statewide networks, substantial savings have been documented in the cost of special education transportation for the Commonwealth's school districts. In regions where networks have been able to attract widespread district participation, there have been remarkable levels of cooperation. Each year of the project there have been increases in the number of participating districts, student ridership, and transportation cost savings.

Despite these impressive results, significant opportunities remain to include additional districts and expand the networks. The Task Force intends to continue to support the networks, sustain their viability, promote cost efficiencies, and create opportunities for greater participation for every district in the Commonwealth.

Appendix

Several other Collaboratives, although not participating in networked transportation and therefore not included in the above report, also provide student transportation. They have extensive transportation experience and produce significant savings for member districts. The following is a list of these Collaboratives and their member districts.

ACCEPT Collaborative: Ashland, Dover, Dover/Sherborn, Framingham, Franklin, Holliston, Hopkinton, Medfield, Medway, Millis, Natick, Sherborn, South Middlesex Regional Vocational District, Sudbury

Assabet Valley Collaborative: Assabet Valley Regional, Berlin, Bolton, Boylston, Berlin-Boylston Regional, Hudson, Lancaster, Marlborough, Maynard, Nashoba Regional, Northborough, Southborough, Northborough-Southborough Regional, Shrewsbury, Stow, Westborough

Cape Cod Collaborative: Barnstable, Brewster, Bourne, Cape Cod Regional Vocational Technical School, Chatham, Dennis/Yarmouth Regional, Eastham, Falmouth, Harwich, Martha's Vineyard Regional, Mashpee, Nauset Regional, Nantucket, Orleans, Provincetown, Sandwich, Truro, Upper Cape Cod Regional Technical School, Wareham, Wellfleet

CASE Collaborative: Acton, Acton/Boxborough Regional, Bedford, Boxborough, Carlisle, Concord, Concord/Carlisle Regional, Harvard, Lincoln, Lincoln/Sudbury Regional, Littleton, Maynard, Sudbury

Lower Pioneer Valley Collaborative: Agawam, East Longmeadow, Hampden-Wilbraham Regional, Longmeadow, Ludlow, Southwick-Tolland Regional, West Springfield

Merrimack Special Education Collaborative: Billerica, Chelmsford, Dracut, Groton-Dunstable, Nashoba Valley Regional, North Middlesex Regional, Tewksbury, Tyngsborough, Westford, Whittier Regional Vocational Technical School

Southern Worcester County Educational Collaborative: Auburn, Dudley-Charlton, Grafton, Leicester, Millbury, Northbridge, North Brookfield, Oxford, Quaboag Regional, Southbridge, Spencer/East Brookfield, Sutton, Tantasqua Union 61 Regional, Webster

These Collaboratives provide multi-district shared transportation but only to their own programs:

CAPS: Ashburnham-Westminster Regional, Athol/Royalston Regional, Fitchburg, Gardner, Mahar Regional, Narragansett Regional, Orange Elementary, Petersham Center School, Quabbin Regional, Winchendon

LABBB: Arlington, Bedford, Belmont, Burlington, Lexington

Northshore Education Consortium: Beverly, Danvers, Gloucester, Hamilton-Wenham, Lynn, Lynnfield, Manchester-Essex, Marblehead, Masconomet, Nahant, North Reading, Peabody, Reading, Rockport, Salem, Swampscott, Triton, Tri-town Union

Southeastern Massachusetts Educational Collaborative: Acushnet, Dartmouth, Fairhaven, Marion, Mattapoisett, New Bedford, Old Rochester Regional, Rochester

TEC: Canton, Dedham, Dover, Dover/Sherborn, Framingham, Holliston, Hopkinton, Medfield, Millis, Natick, Needham, Norwood, Sherborn, Walpole, Wayland, Wellesley, Westwood

Greater Lawrence Educational Collaborative: Andover, Amesbury, Boxford, Georgetown, Greater Lawrence Tech., Hamilton-Wenham Regional District, Haverhill, Ipswich, Lawrence, Lowell, Methuen, Middleton, Newburyport, North Andover, Pentucket Regional, Topsfield, Triton Regional

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