

## ENHANCING EDUCATION THROUGH CONTRACTING

### *Xenia Community School District - Xenia, Ohio*

#### *Overview*

Xenia, Ohio is a small city of roughly 25,000 residents. Its school district, however, is one of the largest in the state in terms of land area, and much of it is somewhat rural. The Xenia Community School District stretches across 126 square miles of southwest Ohio's Greene County — nearly double the statewide average size — making reliable, efficient student transportation essential.

Until 2009, the school district was self-operating its bus system along with other services. In that year, Xenia Community School District was faced with a sizable reduction in state funding. Assistant Superintendent for Business Operations Christy Fielding recalls, "We were going through a financial crisis. We had cut over 100 employees and cut \$10 million from our budget." The school district and, ultimately, Xenia Board of Education, had to make many tough choices.

In order to eliminate such a large portion of its budget, the school district determined it had to look at contracting all non-education services — including student transportation. Xenia Community School District was looking for more than a contractor. They were looking for a transportation partner who could provide expertise and professionalism as well as communicate effectively through the difficult work ahead.

#### *Challenge*

The school district could no longer afford to self-operate transportation given the mounting list of needs: drivers were in short supply; inadequate technology was becoming a safety issue; and there was no available capital for replacing aging vehicles. These were major problems that could not be resolved without greater capacity.

There often were gaps in Xenia Community School District's transportation staff due in part to limited recruitment channels. "We did not have the money to advertise in the way we needed to find drivers. We also didn't have the financial resources to do all the proper training that really needed to happen with our drivers and our mechanics," says Fielding.

This left the school district hard-pressed at times to find drivers. This was all too familiar to Superintendent Denny Morrison, who prior to joining Xenia Community School District, had over 15 years of experience in three school districts that had self-operated transportation systems. "It seems like



we [could] never find enough drivers and we [would] have to worry about the substitutes and the quality of the substitutes.”

The inability to strengthen operations with the addition of safety, vehicle inspection and routing technology was also a big concern. “Pre-trip and post-trip [inspections] were required but there was no real way of showing that a driver had done those things,” says Fielding. With an aging fleet, the school district wanted to be more confident potential problems were spotted early and repaired before their school buses left the maintenance facility — especially since they were not equipped with global positioning systems (GPS). Xenia Community School District wanted the real-time monitoring, record-keeping and decision-making that modern technology allows.

### *Delivering the Solution*

The decision to award the contract to First Student was based largely on experience and a collaborative approach. “There was a feeling by [the] administration that First Student was the company that was going to stick by us and solve our problems as they came. And they weren’t going to walk away when things got tough,” says Fielding. First Student went right to work to preserve that trust. Region safety, maintenance and operation managers, routing experts, corporate support and select operations team members from other First Student locations in Ohio were brought together to help the local Xenia team transition operations.

One of the key ingredients in a successful conversion process is retaining as many of a school district’s existing transportation staff as possible. The transition team met with all Xenia Community School District drivers, monitors and facility staff to review First Student’s hiring, training and orientation processes. Many of the school district’s employees were hired on to First Student. Gaps in staffing were filled quickly through a mix of grassroots and traditional recruitment strategies. And though the reach was broader due to First Student’s capacity, the focus stayed local. Our belief is that our people are our advantage and that is why our teams receive the most rigorous training in the industry. First Student Location Manager Jim Hulseley underscores this philosophy, “It starts with great training. We have the best trainers on the planet as far as I’m concerned. Very, very thorough in what they do, very professional.”

Our specialists worked closely with Xenia Community School District to evaluate the existing infrastructure. We identified upgrades that would develop the accountability systems Xenia Community School District wanted to see in its operations. All vehicles were outfitted with GPS allowing inspections to be recorded electronically into a vehicle maintenance system. All buses were outfitted with modern safety features such as the Child Check-Mate System® and high definition video cameras. First Planning Solutions, First Student’s in-house routing specialists, worked with the school district to optimize routes for the upcoming school year.



### *Community Return*

Our financial package made it feasible for Xenia Community School District to purchase 11 new buses — perhaps the most visible initial change from the community’s standpoint. The primary goal for Xenia Community School District was to prevent cuts in the services relied on by students and families. The cost savings were substantial. The school district estimates that approximately \$500,000 is saved annually by contracting with First Student.

By working with First Student, the district was able to acquire added benefit from our experience and broad-reaching network. The school district was also able to find efficiencies in improved routing. “Our routes were absolutely perfect. We had all of our students routed from day one and our drivers had been out on their routes,” says Fielding. And now, if a parent has a concern, the proper documentation is in place to provide an immediate and informed response.

Since operations were so greatly improved, school district officials could once again focus on the core mission of education. “I look at proven results,” says Morrison. “First Student has been able to do that.” In fact, the school district was able to direct some of these savings back into the classroom. “We replaced 7-year-old computers that we had throughout the district. And a good chunk of that came from the savings that we realized [through] First Student,” says Morrison. “First Student has been able to show me the results and that’s why, very happily, we just signed a new 5-year agreement.”

