

New Chicago schools program helps preschoolers get to class

Posted By Rebecca Harris and Dominique Baser On Monday, March 22, 2010

Mornings used to be a struggle for Laketa Goss. Every time she walked preschoolers Shaun and Jada to Brunson Elementary, she also had to bring along her 11-month-old son, Dashaun.

“I couldn’t take them when my baby was sick,” Goss says. “They were [sometimes] missing a couple days of school.”

But now, Shaun and Jada have a more reliable way of getting to school in the morning – a “walking school bus” that has adults employed by CPS walk children to and from preschool each day. Shaun and Jada’s older sister, 8-year-old Ashanti, can tag along too, making their mom’s day easier.

This transit solution was the brainchild of parents in the advocacy group POWER-PAC, a parent group affiliated with the grassroots group Community Organizing and Family Issues. The summer 2009 report “Why Isn’t Johnny in Preschool?” found that a lack of transportation is one reason parents don’t register their children for preschool programs. Several programs are up and running, but funding delays that resulted in parents losing interest have kept the initiative from serving all of the 30 students it has funding for.

Walking school buses can be especially important in poor neighborhoods, where families might not have cars, says Eva Barrera, a West Park Academy “captain” (as the walkers are known). Parents with infants, and some grandparents caring for preschoolers, often don’t want to walk the children to school, especially in the winter.

POWER-PAC’s solution: Pay parents \$10 per shift to walk up to three preschoolers at a time from home to school and back home again. At each end of the trip, someone – a teacher at school or an adult at home – signs to acknowledge the children have arrived safely.

“We don’t know anywhere else in the country where this is operating for preschoolers,” says Kellie Magnuson of COFI.

The program costs about \$530 per student per semester – about two-thirds of the cost per pupil to operate a full-size commercial school bus, according to data compiled by the Ounce of Prevention Fund.

Funding delays hamper program

CPS awarded COFI \$16,000 to run the program, which launched in mid-February

serving preschools at West Park in Humboldt Park, Brunson in Austin and Von Humboldt in West Town. About a dozen students participated. Programs at Jenner on the Near North Side and Woods in West Englewood are expected to start in the coming weeks.

So far, funding is enough for 30 students – only about six at each elementary school, so organizers focus on families who most need help with transportation.

But only about a dozen students are participating right now, and it's unclear when the program will be able to run at capacity. Walkers' background checks have taken longer than expected, and families who were excited about the program in the fall had made other arrangements by the time the program finally got off the ground.

"We were expecting to start this in September, and we started it in February," says COFI program administrator Liliana Velazquez.

Clarissa Watson, a CPS security guard who walks Shaun and Jada to school, says some parents are reluctant to participate because they fear their children will not be safe with the walkers.

Ava Haji, an education support manager for the CPS Office of Early Childhood Education, says the program is "healthy fun with a purpose (and) a great way to lose a few inches for the parents."

"Children can only benefit from school when they go every day," Haji notes.

It is not the only walking school bus program in the district. The Chicago Police Department's community policing program encourages parents to volunteer to walk neighborhood elementary school students to school. But the program is informal, says CAPS director Phillip Hampton, and has drawn little participation from preschool parents.