

'Bus Boss' makes getting to school easier in G'burg

■ **Gettysburg Area School District uses new computer program to deal with transportation problems.**

By SARAH MAUSOLF
Evening Sun Reporter

Designing bus routes for 3,346 students is no easy task.

Especially when there's snow, ice and fog.

Especially when school officials hope to keep a student on the bus for no more than an hour.

And especially when that district must bus 258 students who attend non-public schools.

Enter the "Bus Boss," new computer software designed to make Gettysburg Area School District's transportation department operate more smoothly.

The software was installed in July and maps out bus routes and helps the district redirect buses in

an emergency, said transportation coordinator William Bowling.

It performs those tasks much faster than the district's old software, he said.

Because the old program dates back to 1991, it was outdated and slow, he said. School officials could only view one screen at a time, forcing them to store most transportation information on paper, he said.

When parents or students called in with a problem, it took a long time for the district to locate the information and respond, Bowling said.

Another inconvenience: Bowling was the only person who had access to the old software because it was only compatible

with one computer.

About eight people will have access to the new software on multiple computers, allowing the district to respond to concerns quickly, Bowling said.

Additionally, the old software did not offer problem-solving services in the event of a computer shutdown.

"It as an older program and they no longer provided support for it," he said. "If that program decided to crash, we were done."

The "Bus Boss" software cost about \$18,700 said business manager Brad Hunt. School officials can print out routes for bus drivers or type in a student's new address using the software.

It also helps the district cope with emergencies. For example, school officials could use the digital maps to re-route a bus in the event of an accident, Bowling said.

The new software is the "boss" of a larger operation. The district contracts with 13 companies to provide transportation, including 35 buses, six vans and one mini-bus. Last year, the buses serving the district traveled more than 849,000 miles.

Challenges arise because the district must bus students who live inside the district, but attend private schools within 10 miles of the district's boundaries. Some of those schools are located in the New Oxford or Chambersburg area school districts.

That complicates bus routes because the public and non-public schools schedules don't match, Bowling said. Snow days are difficult because the district must keep track of cancellations for 13 different schools.

Plus, the cost of busing those students adds up. In 2003-04, the

district spent about \$307,000 to bus students who attend non-public schools.

The district spent about \$2,071,000 total in contracted transportation services last year. The state reimbursed the district for about \$1.49 million last year, bring the net cost to about \$585,000.

Hunt said the district budgeted \$2,175,000 in contracted transportation costs this year. He estimates the district will receive slightly more state aid than last year, somewhere in the neighborhood of \$1.5 million. That would bring the district's net cost for contracted services to about \$675,000.

Bowling said the new software is working well and the district has fielded fewer calls about buses compared to last year.

Contact Sarah Mausolf at smausolf@eveningsun.com.