

'Here comes the bus'

As part of the Clinton School Board's series of informational items to our community, it was my privilege to interview Scott Clark, the new **transportation** director, about how the students get to and from school safely every day. I was very impressed with the thoroughness of the operations of the **Transportation** Department. Let me tell you why.

To start with, there are 41 units of **transportation** including five suburbans, eight vans, 24 65/66 passenger buses, three 84-passenger buses, two 77-passenger buses, two mini-buses, four 25/40 passenger lift buses and one service truck that provide service to all seven schools, Prince of Peace Academy and eight preschool sites.

Mechanic Mark Gluesing has an exhaustive and detailed preventive maintenance and repair program for each and every unit. In addition, a state inspector 'picks apart' every single unit two times per year and does re-inspections. In Mark's words, 'Never does a vehicle leave my yard that is not 100 percent safe.' At any one time there are 43 or more employees. These include 21 full-time drivers, 10 substitute drivers, nine monitors, one mechanic, one assistant director and one director. The Iowa Department of Education has a rigorous driver authorization and vehicle inspection system that requires online certification, a three-hour face-to-face training and a three-hour in-service CEU program. Length of service of the drivers includes being new this year (about seven), 3 years (four), 5 years (seven), 10 or more years (three) and 3 individuals who have 17, 18, and 19 years of service! A unique item is that the gender ratio of the employees is almost 50-50.

The safety protocol for each route includes a 'Pre-Trip' inspection at the beginning of each and every route, meaning the unit may get several pre-trip inspections daily; a 'Post-Trip' inspection with the driver walking through the bus at the end of each and every trip; and the driver then changing to the 'Empty Bus' sign or engaging the 'safety button' on the newer buses to signify the bus is empty. Cleaning and service items are done on a daily basis at this time, also.

A daily routine of the department starts at about 5:30 a.m. to open up for the day in order to be ready for the phones to start ringing, getting messages for the drivers about 6 a.m.. Buses start leaving the bus barn about 6:15 a.m., with most routes in operation by 7:15 a.m. The number of routes can vary, but is about 23 to 25. The new 'Transfinder' software program, newly installed over the summer, geo-codes every student to determine the most efficient way to get all students to their schools in the most efficient time. The director and assistant director are in constant radio contact in order to relay messages to and from the drivers, taking into consideration mechanical issues with each bus, a student not at the pick-up spot, a no-show that day and whatever else comes up.

Once the morning routes are complete, there is only a short window for a break before the noontime routes are then ready to go. These are directly followed by the afternoon routes, the 21st Century After-School program routes and all the activity routes for sporting and music events that occur on a daily basis. During any specific day (including Saturdays), there are class activity trips, early-out routing, and early departure for sporting events and music events.

Look Mom. It's snowing! What happens now is the director does road checks beginning about 4 a.m. and consults with the superintendent of schools and the City of Clinton Public Works Department, making a decision as to whether to postpone the opening or close school for the day.

And just so you know, the department does not take the summer off. Training and continuing education for the employees happens almost daily, and **transportation** activities that are routinely contracted for include Safety Town, summer camps at the Ericksen Center and the YWCA, 21st Century summer camp at Washington Middle School and Jefferson and Whittier elementary schools, summer school at various schools, baseball and softball at Clinton High School and Prince of Peace, and daycare programs around the community.

I guess now you can see why I was so impressed with our **Transportation** Department employees and I want to thank them for a great job in safely getting our kids to and from school every day.

Gregg Obren is a member of the Clinton School Board.