



Government Finance Officers Association

Smarter School Spending

Root Cause Analysis on Bus Problems at Traverse City Area Public Schools



Traverse City Area Public Schools solved a problem with late buses by finding the root cause and developing a solution to address it. The case highlights the power of systematic and preventative solutions.



Traverse City Area Public Schools (TCAPS) had a problem with its buses. The Transportation Department was receiving far too many calls from schools about buses that the schools had booked for a field trip that weren't showing up at the requested time. The department's initial investigation into the problem revealed that school bus drivers had forgotten the trip, or had never been aware of it in the first place.

The initial solution was to set up a system to notify the driver and confirm that they knew about the trip. However, the problem continued. Therefore, the Transportation Department gave deeper consideration to the root cause of the problem and realized that they didn't find out about missing buses until after the school called to complain and the bus was already late.

Based on its understanding of the root cause, the Transportation Department designed a new solution wherein drivers were required to report when they were at the TCAPS bus depot to pick up the bus for the trip. This way, if the department did not receive a check-in call by a certain time in advance of the scheduled trip, they knew that there was a high potential for a late bus. They could then take steps to remedy the situation before it developed into an actual late bus.



The buses weren't getting to where they needed to go.

Since this solution was implemented, the buses have been on time, all of the time.

Lessons from TCAPS' Experience

Think about the role of the entire system, not just the people.

TCAPS' initial solution was to simply make sure the people who drove the buses knew about the trip. However, people make mistakes; a successful solution would need to take into account that human error. When the initial solution didn't work, the Transportation Department gave more consideration to its own role in identifying and remediating potential failure situations.

Fix it so that it doesn't break. Root cause analysis can help you find solutions that prevent a problem from occurring in the first place, rather than just remediating problems after they happen. TCAPS' solution of having drivers check in at a point in the field trip process before a problem occurred was an effective preventative measure.



A TCAPS student is ready to go on her trip.

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