

Company to use equipment, training to ensure children's safety

Las Cruces Sun-News (NM) - August 5, 2010 Audience: 23,000 Byline: Christine Rogel crogel@lcsun-news.com Section: News

LAS CRUCES — Sharlotte Tellez, mother of two elementary school children, say her children won't be riding the bus to school this year, because of safety concerns. In fact, they are transferring to a different elementary school, from Cesar Chavez Elementary to Alameda Elementary, so that they can walk home to their grandmother's house when classes end.

Tellez said while riding the bus, her daughter an 8-year-old daughter was slapped across the face and that both of her children were frequently bullied. "It was physical and mental (abuse)," Tellez said. "Kids are supposed to be kids, enjoying life. Not stressing out about riding the buses home."

Bus safety is a major concerns for many parents around the district and a primary tenet of the district's new bus company, Student Transportation Specialists of New Mexico, said Ralph Williams, STS director of operations.

In June, Las Cruces Public Schools entered into a contract for the 2010-2011 school year with Texas-based STS. The company shuttled kids to and from school during the summer and took over from First Student Inc., which attempted to end its contract with LCPS in April, before being ordered by Third Judicial District Court Chief Judge Jerald A. Valentine to finish out the school year.

To help ease parents mind about safety issues, Williams said there are video cameras and radios in each bus and employees undergo drug screening and safety training.

Each bus is equipped with three camer as, one focused on the road, another on the driver and a third on the students. The cameras include a

GPS system, which allows for detailed review of the footage. For example, Williams said they can tell how fast a bus is traveling and when turn signals were used along with the time, date and place of these events. The cameras also function at night when the driver may be transporting student athletes from sporting events.

Additionally, drivers can press a button to mark video footage if an altercation occurs to easily review the incident. A red light will continue to flash until the tape is reviewed.

"We go back and review the film and it's a good safety tool. If the kids are moving around or sticking their heads out the window, we won't put up with it," Williams said in a June interview.

Within the last three years, three or four out of 400 cameras have failed and those were generally on buses traveling rough terrain, Williams said. "They are not prone to failure. When it does fail, it will beep and beep and beep. And, well, that driver will not sit in that bus and ride with it beeping," he said.

STS has purchased 100 new buses already and the company plans to add 50 more used buses, said Williams. Cameras were to be installed on the new buses by Aug. 1.

Radios on the buses allow dispatch full coverage of the district. Drivers can also communicate with each other within a five-mile radius. And every driver will also have a cell phone, said Williams.

The technological additions do little to ease Tellez's mind, however. She thinks that a majority of the safety concerns need to be addressed by bus drivers.

"Bus drivers need to be a little more alert and listen more when kids are trying to tell them something and not just make them sit down and be quiet and same thing goes for teachers," she said. "They need to take it into consideration and figure out what's going on and not blow it off. That's why there is so much bullying - they don't get to the bottom of it."

If a dispute occurs between students, bus drivers are required to file incident reports detailing the events, according to school officials. Copies of the reports are delivered to the schools and the schools are expected to follow up on them. If drivers are unsure about filing a report, they can discuss the issue with a bus safety supervisor. Debra Dallas will be the local safety supervisor.

In addition, Williams said background checks and drug screening are conducted on each bus driver, who will also undergo safety training and student behavior management before school starts. Additionally, as a job requirement, drivers must attend monthly safety meetings. The Brownwood Independent School District in Brownwood, Texas, has contracted with STS for a year now.

"It was a very positive year, we worked through any issues we had with good communication and they were willing to do whatever the district needs. It's been a very positive relationship with STS and Brownwood ISD," said Kevin Gabaree, deputy superintendent there.

Gabaree said in his experience with the company, safety concerns are a high priority.

"The thing that STS has provided our district with is a strong management system through the office staff," said Gabaree. "They are very knowledgeable of the guidelines, rules and regulations and hold their employees accountable."

STS has already hired 25 drivers for summer school and the company planned to hire 55 drivers total before Aug. 1, said Williams.

"Things are going really well, we've got some good people in place here and so I'm feeling really good about this all," Williams said.

Williams also pledged to make himself accessible to parents with concerns and to quickly handle problems.

"Every district that we've had, we've had a long-term relationship with," Williams said. "And that's what we want here. We want a long-term relationship and partnership with LCPS."

The contract commenced on July 1 and runs through June 30, 2011. STS will be paid \$4,194,000, excluding gross receipt tax. The contract is up for negotiation on June 30, 2011.

The bus company is based in McKinney, Texas, but will operate a Las Cruces office. This is STS's first contract in New Mexico.