

Program provides free bus passes for West County students

By Shelly Meron
Contra Costa Times

09/14/2009

Getting students to attend school can be a challenge anywhere — many kids would gladly trade a day of solving algebra problems or discussing Beowulf for sleeping in and playing video games.

But in West Contra Costa, students often must overcome more than just their own motivational obstacles.

"Young people were talking about how sometimes they were forced to walk to school when they wanted to take the bus, and had to cross into difficult neighborhoods. There were safety issues," said Contra Costa Supervisor John Gioia, whose district includes much of West County. "We were also hearing about low-income families who, toward the end of the month, had to make difficult choices, and had to trade transportation for food. What we heard was the need to figure out a way to help students get to school."

So, starting in 2001, Gioia teamed with Alameda County Supervisor Keith Carson, then-state Assemblywoman Dion Aroner and local transportation officials to propose a bus pass program for low-income children. Now, after a successful two-year pilot program, the initiative is being rolled out in the West Contra Costa and John Swett school districts; West Contra Costa does not provide student busing, and in John Swett, students must pay for district busing.

The program gives free AC Transit monthly youth bus passes or low-cost WestCAT 15-ride passes to local high school students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunches; they can use the passes to commute to school, after-school and recreational activities, and part-time jobs. Students also can trade in the WestCAT passes for their cash value of \$15 toward a \$40 monthly pass.

Students must apply for the program, and 2,000 kids will be awarded the passes on a first-come, first-served basis. As of Friday, the West Contra Costa district had received about 700 applications.

The bus passes are funded through Measure J, a transportation sales tax approved by voters in 2004. The \$14.5 million in funding for the program should be enough for 25 years. It is being administered by the West Contra Costa Transportation Advisory Committee.

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SCHOOL BUS PASS 2-2-2-2-2-2

School officials say the program promotes better attendance, leading to better education for the students and more state funding for the districts. Kids approved for the program must maintain at least a 95 percent attendance rate to continue receiving the passes.

"Anything we can do to make school attendance easier, we're interested in doing that," said Marin Trujillo, spokesman for the West Contra Costa Unified School District.

Some parents have been disappointed that middle school students are not eligible for the program. But there simply is not enough money for both middle and high school students, said Christina Atienza, executive director of WCCTAC.

"The WCCTAC board looked at who had the highest risk from an attendance point of view, and the ones that floated to the top were high school and alternative students," she said. "We targeted the funds to the highest risk pool. We didn't have funds for everyone."

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Applying to the student bus pass program
Students must be eligible for and complete a Free and Reduced Lunch Program application for the current school year. They must also complete a Student Bus Pass Program application by Sept. 23, and return it to their school cafeteria or front office. Applications are available at school offices and online at www.wccusd.net. They can also be filled out over the phone.

For more information, call 510-307-4527.

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