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New GPS system routing buses for Denton public school district

09:21 AM CDT on Wednesday, August 18, 2010

By Britney Tabor / Staff Writer

Transportation officials with the Denton school district anticipate initiating its student card access program as early as September.

The initiation is the second phase in the district's effort to implement a computer-based bus tracking program that allows district transportation officials to track the location of district buses in real time every 10 seconds, the vehicle's speed, if it's on schedule and whether a student has loaded or unloaded district school buses.

Gene Holloway, the Denton school district transportation director, said he anticipates that parents will receive notices of informational meetings to learn more about the new tracking program around Labor Day or the first few weeks of September.

It's the transportation department goal that the student card access system will be phased in between September and December, he said. The district intends to distribute the cards in groups in which cards will be issued the primary and secondary schools that feed into one another, Holloway said.

"We see this as a huge tool to assist us in taking care of and seeing to the welfare of our students," he said in an earlier interview. "Safety and security is the primary, No. 1 priority, and second is our ability to utilize the system to be as efficient and proficient as we can in offering the best services to our students and families."

Voters in 2007 approved the system as part of \$4 million designated for school buses in a \$282 million bond package.

The district began the first phase of the GPS project in March.

Since then, transportation officials have been able to track the movement of the district's 200 or so drivers as they travel routes - receiving information through an antenna installed atop each bus.

When drivers start the engines, a "constant data link" is established, Holloway said, allowing transportation officials to track functions down to when bus doors close and open.

"It's much like an air traffic controller in a control facility to see where the buses are in real time," Holloway said.

Costs for the program, including all software, hardware and student cards total about \$485,000, which was completely funded through 2007 bond money, Holloway said.

It will add no cost to the 2010-11 fiscal budget, he said.

This fall, students riding district buses will begin receiving encrypted cards that, when in proximity to a scanner at the top of the stairs of

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each bus, will account for the students who enter and exit buses.

The data transmitted through the student-issued cards is encrypted so that only transportation officials can receive it. It doesn't include information about where students live, Holloway said.

The first card is free to students, he said, and any replacement cards will come at a charge.

Students who attempt to board a bus without a card can be checked in by the bus driver, who will have a roster of all students designated to his or her bus, Holloway said. The roster information is available through a mobile data terminal - a device located next to the driver's dashboard that will also provide bus route instructions.

Students not assigned to the buses will be unable to board, Holloway said.

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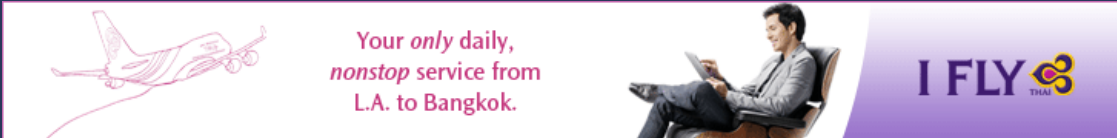
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