

**Fiscal  
& Crisis  
Management  
Assistance  
Team**

# **Management Review**

**Pioneer Union  
School District**

**September 13, 2000**

**Administrative Agent  
Larry E. Reider  
Kern County  
Superintendent of Schools**

**Chief Administrative Officer  
Thomas E. Henry**

**Fiscal  
& Crisis  
Management  
Assistance  
Team**

September 13, 2000

Mr. Richard Williams  
Superintendent  
Pioneer Union Elementary School District  
P.O. Box 26  
6860 Mt. Aukum Road  
Somerset, CA 95684

Dear Superintendent Williams:

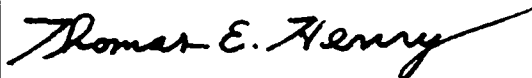
In June, the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) received a request for a management review concerning the Pioneer Union Elementary School District. Specifically, the request asked FCMAT to:

1. Review the district transportation department and provide recommendations for changes, if any, in the areas of:
  - Routing efficiency
  - Departmental staffing level and position assignments
  - Evaluation of in-house maintenance and repair and contracting out of heavy-duty repair and maintenance

FCMAT visited the district in July. This report is a result of that effort.

We have appreciated the opportunity to serve you, and we extend our thanks to all of the staff of the Pioneer Union Elementary School District.

Sincerely,



Thomas E. Henry, Chief Administrative Officer

**Administrative Agent  
Larry E. Reider  
Office of Kern County  
Superintendent of Schools**

Chief Administrative Officer  
Thomas E. Henry

**FCMAT**  
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# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
Executive Summary .....	3
<b>Findings and Recommendations</b>	
<i>Fiscal and Operational Efficiency</i> .....	5
<i>Bus Routing</i> .....	9
<i>Vehicle Maintenance</i> .....	11
<i>Staffing</i> .....	13
<b>Appendix .....</b>	<b>15</b>

# Introduction

## *Background*

Located in El Dorado County, the Pioneer Union School District is a K-8 school district serving approximately 515 students in the foothills near Placerville, California.

The district provides transportation service at its three sites: Pioneer Elementary School, Mountain Creek Middle School, both in Somerset, and Grizzly Pines Elementary School, a necessary small school in the Grizzly Flat area. The district is currently experiencing declining enrollment, a trend that is expected to continue over the next several years.

In June 2000, the district contacted FCMAT for a study to:

- I. Review the district transportation department and provide recommendations for changes, if any, in the areas of:
  - Routing efficiency
  - Departmental staffing level and position assignments
  - Evaluation of in-house maintenance and repair and contracting out of heavy-duty repair and maintenance

## *Study Team*

Barbara Dean  
FCMAT Director  
Bakersfield, CA

Michael G. Rea\*  
Director  
West County Transportation Agency  
Sebastapol, CA

Leonel Martínez  
FCMAT Public Information Specialist  
Bakersfield, CA

\*As a member of this study team, this consultant was not representing his respective employer but was working solely as an independent contractor for FCMAT.

## *Study Guidelines*

FCMAT visited the district July 19 and 20 to conduct interviews, review data and collect information. This report is a result of those activities. It has been divided into four sections:

- I. Fiscal and Operational Efficiency
- II. Bus Routing
- III. Vehicle Maintenance
- IV. Staffing

## Executive Summary

The Pioneer Union School District Transportation Department is professionally operated by employees committed to providing service to students and families. Pupil transportation can be misunderstood because of the complex layers of state and federal laws and regulations that govern pupil transportation. When the transportation department denies a transportation request, it is sometimes characterized as being inflexible. However, these denials are generally due to the highly regulated nature of pupil transportation, which focuses on student safety.

The district operates an efficient, cost-effective and service-oriented pupil transportation program. However, to maintain efficiency and effectiveness in the areas of operational and fiscal effectiveness, the district should:

- Closely monitor pupil transportation costs. If these costs decrease to a level that is less than the district reimbursement, the reimbursement amount will be reduced in subsequent years.
- Explore cooperative ventures with neighboring school districts or a joint powers agreement. Generally, such an arrangement results in more efficient utilization of resources.

District routes are efficient and logical, following standard routing procedures and methodology. In order to maintain its high level of service during a time of decreasing enrollment, the district should:

- Continue evaluating the potential for route consolidation on an annual basis.
- Continue utilizing the routing methodology that requires buses to pick up students who live farthest from the school first in the morning and drop off students who live closest to school first in the afternoon.

Pioneer's current maintenance staffing and productivity level are exceptional. However, even further efficiency could be achieved in these areas. The district should:

- Comply with the state's storm-water requirements as soon as possible. This would allow the district to legally pressure wash its vehicles and wash the exteriors of the vehicles.
- Reassign duties to reduce classified costs.



# Findings and Recommendations

## *I. Fiscal and Operational Efficiency*

The district operates an efficient, cost-effective and service-oriented pupil transportation program. The most recent J-141 report indicates a cost of \$2.92 per mile. This compares very favorably with other small school districts, which often have much higher costs. The district's current annual encroachment of approximately \$18,000 represents an encroachment to the general fund of approximately 7 percent of total transportation costs. The statewide average currently is approaching an encroachment of 60 percent. This low level of encroachment is rare.

In the early 1980s, the state froze the reimbursement for pupil transportation, and the reimbursement amount has rarely been augmented by a COLA since then. Because of increases in salaries, benefits, fuel, tires and parts, most school districts have contributed an ever-increasing amount from their general funds to support pupil transportation. In an effort to control costs, many school districts have increased walking distances, reducing or eliminating service. Pioneer's transportation program is not experiencing the same level of fiscal challenges being faced by most other school districts in the state. However, if Pioneer's pupil transportation costs decrease to a level that is less than its reimbursement, the district's reimbursement will be reduced in subsequent years.

Pioneer's ridership includes approximately 80 percent of the district's student population.

- Currently, the statewide average pupil ridership on school buses is 17 percent. It is common for rural school districts located in areas with little public transit infrastructure and sparse residential development to have high student ridership. In addition, Pioneer is not situated in an area conducive to student pedestrians or bicycle riders due to safety considerations.

The Transportation Department exhibits a high level of professionalism and expertise. The department functions smoothly, works as a team and cares for the safety and welfare of each student. This care permeates beyond the buses, as several drivers also function as classroom or campus aides.

The district has shown support for the Transportation Department in committing to a new facility that will include a one-bay shop, office and restroom. For many years, the department has functioned well despite being housed in a less-than-optimal facility. The new facility should further enhance an already exceptional morale and should increase productivity.

Pioneer's bus fleet is relatively new and well maintained. The district has taken advantage of small school district grants to replace its buses that were manufactured before 1977. A new program authorized by this year's state budget will provide \$50 million for school bus replacement. The Air Resources Board will administer this funding. This program is expected to fund



## 6 FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Fiscal and Operational Efficiency

replacement buses up to the 1987-model year utilizing either compressed natural gas or diesel, as long as emission standards are met. The district could benefit by monitoring this program.

The history of Pioneer's California Highway Patrol (CHP) Motor Carrier Safety Unit inspections reflects a professional and thorough preventive maintenance program. The district has consistently received the CHP's highest rating in its annual terminal grade.

The district's safety record is exceptional. Buses are very rarely involved in collisions. This is a credit to an exceptional driver training program and the long tenure of the professional driving staff. The Transportation Supervisor provides strong leadership and continues to develop managerial skills through a degree program. The district could support the Transportation Supervisor's continuing development by funding this position's attendance at the annual California Association of School Transportation Officials conference and the California Association of School Business Official's annual mechanics' and supervisors' workshop.

To increase efficiency, the district could explore cooperative ventures such as a joint powers agreement with neighboring school districts. Generally, such an arrangement results in more efficient utilization of resources. This may, however, be impractical particularly because Pioneer has such a low encroachment and provides excellent service. Only further exploration of the issue will determine whether this approach is feasible.

Many years ago, Pioneer utilized two separate bell times to assist in maximizing bus use. It is generally considered more cost-effective to stagger bell times and utilize the same bus and driver to cover more than one route. Utilizing this practice, the drivers work more hours, but the district requires fewer drivers. Savings accrue with fewer employees, savings on "dead" time, bus checkouts and clean-ups as well as fewer buses to maintain. It is unlikely that the district would want to pursue this option with such a small encroachment. The district should analyze potential cost savings compared to any ramifications related to community acceptance, employee bargaining issues, and staff morale.

### *Recommendations*

*The district should:*

1. Closely monitor pupil transportation costs. If these costs decrease to a level that is less than the district reimbursement, the reimbursement amount will be reduced in subsequent years.
2. Monitor the new state program that will provide \$50 million for school bus replacement. This program is expected to fund replacement buses up to the 1987-model year utilizing either compressed natural gas or diesel, as long as certain emission standards are met.

3. Fund the Transportation Supervisor's attendance at the annual California Association of School Transportation Officials conference and the California Association of School Business Official's annual mechanic's and supervisor's workshop.
4. Explore cooperative ventures with neighboring school districts or a joint powers agreement. Generally, such an arrangement results in more efficient utilization of resources.

**8** | **FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**  
Fiscal and Operational Efficiency

## II. Bus Routing

Pioneer's current routes are efficient and logical, following standard routing procedures and methodology. Currently, the routes transport approximately 85 percent of their rider capacity. This level is ideal since it allows for some growth on particular routes and allows some extra room inside buses, which is particularly comfortable for larger, middle-school students. The district is experiencing declining enrollment and recently consolidated two routes into one. This has been a source of community displeasure; however, this was the most logical consolidation, and the decision was made with the involvement of all the professional staff. It does not appear that any further consolidations are necessary or feasible at this time. However, it is important for the staff to continue evaluating the potential for consolidation annually.

Since the district is experiencing declining enrollment, it is logical to decrease services. Maximizing bus routing is the prudent action; however, consolidations of service also lengthen riding times for those students who live farthest from school.

In the morning, the most logical routing methodology would be for buses to pick up students who live farthest from the school first. In the afternoon, buses would drop off students who live closest to school first and those who live farthest from the school last. The Transportation Department consistently has considered routing consolidations that maximize district resources and minimize community impact, and the department annually considers consolidations as the student population decreases.

Route Five currently is the product of consolidating two routes. FCMAT evaluated the possibility of moving the Outtingdale Road or Bucks Bar Road extensions to another route, but this is not possible due to student loading factors on all other routes. As the student population continues to decrease, and the Transportation Department further consolidates routes, riding times will increase.

FCMAT also evaluated the possibility of reducing service and concluded that this would not be practical or safe, particularly in the rural area in which Pioneer serves elementary school students. The district provides service that is similar to other rural school districts.

Over the past few years, the Transportation Department has worked diligently with the CHP to reduce the number of approved bus stops in dangerous locations with little visibility. These bus stops are of particular concern on grades with icy conditions. The district also has worked towards elimination of escorted bus stops (red light crossings) particularly on the major roadways to include Grizzly Flat Road. It is always safer to pick up and drop off students on the right side of the roadway rather than risk an escorted crossing. In the future, some bus stops may need to be eliminated due to safety considerations, and there are other locations where bus stops should not be established. Parents will need to transport those students to alternate bus stops rather than allow students to walk along busy roads.

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## *Recommendations*

*The district should:*

1. Continue evaluating the potential for route consolidation on an annual basis. Keep in mind that consolidations lengthen riding times for those students who live farthest from school.
2. Continue utilizing the routing methodology that requires buses to pick up students who live farthest from the school first in the morning and drop off students who live closest to school first in the afternoon.
3. In the future, consider eliminating some bus stops due to safety considerations. Parents will need to transport those students to alternate bus stops rather than have students attempt to walk along busy roads.

### *III. Vehicle Maintenance*

Pioneer's current maintenance staffing and productivity is exceptional. Recent CHP Motor Carrier Safety Unit inspections show a history of exceptional vehicle maintenance. The district has consistently received the highest rating that the CHP can give a carrier for its terminal grade, indicating consistently good preventive maintenance accomplished on a regular schedule, as well as compliance with documentation requirements and adherence to the federal drug and alcohol testing requirements.

Currently, the Transportation Supervisor accomplishes basic and routine preventive maintenance tasks, but more complicated and time-consuming repairs are contracted out to Pollock Pines. The district contracts with a local vendor for tire work, and warranty work or complicated engine work is contracted out to a manufacturer's authorized shop. This arrangement is ideal for a district of Pioneer's size. The labor rate of \$35 per hour with Pollock Pines is excellent. Pollock Pines does not charge a markup on parts. The district also benefits by remaining with its current tire contractor. It is relatively inexpensive for contractors to mount and dismount tires, especially considering the fact that tire work can be the source of many significant employee injuries.

Pioneer still uses some tube-type tires and has only one spare bus with bias ply tires, but the district is moving towards exclusive use of tubeless tires. Although tube-type tires are adequate, new technologies have created a far superior and safer tire. Tubeless tires are less prone to dramatic blowouts. Radial tires enhance the smooth-ride characteristics of the vehicle and generally last far longer than bias ply tires. Utilizing recapped tires on the rear axle of school buses in California is legal and is common practice. They are safe and cost effective.

When the district's new shop is constructed, the Transportation Supervisor probably will not be able to accomplish significantly more maintenance work. It will enhance this position's productivity to be out of the weather and in a clean and well-lighted environment. However, the shop also would benefit from an air compressor and the necessary air tools (air ratchet, air gun and air lug nut gun, all of which are relatively inexpensive, and an air jack or air bumper jack). This equipment would allow the staff to perform better inspections, enhancing safety.

Of considerable concern is the district's noncompliance with the state's storm-water requirements. Pioneer's staff was advised of the requirements, and the state is withholding enforcement in El Dorado County at this time. However, the district must comply with these requirements as soon as possible. The basic requirement is that the district construct a concrete pad, ideally covered, with a three-stage separator or clarifier (local entities utilize either name). This separator or clarifier separates the solid contaminants, oil fuel and grease and sends cleaner water into the septic leach field. The covering would prevent rainwater from entering the system, which could overload the septic field. This would allow the district to legally pressure wash its vehicles and wash the exteriors of the vehicles.

The district fueling system appears appropriate and legal.

The district currently has seven routes and four spare buses that can be utilized for field trips or when buses are receiving regular maintenance. An operation of Pioneer's size generally does not require four spare buses. However, these vehicles could not be sold for much, and they cost little to keep. If the district experienced growth in the future, it would need to purchase new buses at considerable cost. At this point, the older buses could be used to help the district qualify for bus replacement grants.

### ***Recommendations***

*The district should:*

1. Continue using recapped tires on the rear axle of school buses. This is legal and common in California. These tires are both safe and cost effective.
2. Purchase an air compressor and the necessary air tools (air ratchet, air gun and air lug nut gun, all of which are relatively inexpensive, and an air jack or air bumper jack) for the new shop. This equipment would allow the staff to perform better inspections, enhancing safety.
3. Comply with the state's storm-water requirements as soon as possible. This would allow the district to legally pressure wash its vehicles and wash the exteriors of the vehicles.
4. Keep its older buses so that if enrollment increases in the future, these vehicles can be used to help qualify for bus replacement grants.

## IV. Staffing

Because of the current staffing cuts at Pioneer, the district may need to reassign duties in order to reduce classified costs. The Transportation Department clearly needs some clerical assistance. The Driver/Trainer has served as a 1 1/2 -hour clerk for the department, handling route sheets, student rider records, general department clerical needs and driver training records. A School Secretary also provided some assistance on route sheets. The district could redistribute this time so that the School Secretary could provide the assistance necessary to update route sheets and student rider information. This would be generated by the drivers with the oversight of the Transportation Director. The School Secretary also could provide some general clerical support. It remains necessary for the Driver/Trainer to provide some clerical support to the department and to maintain driver-training records and accomplish the classroom and behind-the-wheel bus driver training. This clerical support could be accomplished on an as-needed basis instead of as a regular assignment, and the as-needed work could be paid on the supplemental payroll. This should afford the district the flexibility it may need to reassign these duties.

Since all school transportation providers are finding it difficult to find, recruit and train school bus drivers, the district would benefit from providing some incentives to current and potential drivers as well as providing backup for absent drivers. Currently, some district drivers also function as classroom or campus aides. The district should train one or two more of its employees as substitute school bus drivers. Many school transportation providers are now paying bonuses to new recruits, stipends for training (payable after employment), and funding certification and license costs. Often, it is prohibitive for a bus driver candidate to pay for all of the fees to acquire the license. Specific geographic areas of the state have unique employment characteristics, and it is recommended that the district review its potential pool of employable individuals and determine a recruiting strategy that will maximize exposure and attract qualified candidates.

## Recommendations

*The district should:*

1. Reassign clerical duties in order to reduce classified costs. Redistribute work hours so that the School Secretary provides the assistance necessary to update route sheets and student rider information. This information would be generated by the drivers with the oversight of the Transportation Director. The School Secretary should provide some general clerical support. The Driver/Trainer should provide clerical support to the department only on an as-needed basis, and this work should be paid on the supplemental payroll on overtime.



2. Provide some incentives to current and potential drivers as well as providing backup for absent drivers. The district should train one or two more of its employees as substitute school bus drivers and explore the possibility of utilizing incentives such as providing stipends for training and paying for certification and license costs.



# Appendix

## A. Study Agreement

MANAGEMENT ASSISTANCE TEAM  
STUDY AGREEMENT

June 16, 2000

The FISCAL CRISIS AND MANAGEMENT ASSISTANCE TEAM (FCMAT), hereinafter referred to as the Team and the Pioneer Union Elementary School District, hereinafter referred to as the District mutually agree as follows:

1. BASIS OF AGREEMENT

The Team provides a variety of services to school districts and county offices of education upon request. The District has requested that the Team provide for the assignment of professionals to study specific aspects of the District operations. These professionals may include staff of the Team, County Offices of Education, the California State Department of Education, school districts, or private contractors. All work shall be performed in accordance with the terms and conditions of this Agreement.

2. SCOPE OF THE WORK

A. Scope and Objectives of the Study

The scope and objectives of this study are to:

- 1) Review the district transportation department and provide recommendations for changes, if any, in the areas of:

Routing efficiency

Departmental staffing level and position assignments

Evaluation of in-house maintenance and repair and contracting out of heavy duty repair and maintenance

B. Services and Products to be Provided

- 1) Orientation Meeting – The Team will conduct an orientation session at the District to brief District management and supervisor personnel on the procedures of the Team and on the purpose and schedule of the study.
- 2) On-site Review – The Team will conduct an on-site review at the District transportation office and at individual sites if necessary.

- 3) Progress Reports – The Team will hold an exit meeting at the conclusion of the on-site review to inform the District of significant findings and recommendations to that point.
- 4) Exit Letter – The Team will issue an exit letter approximately 7 to 10 days after the exit meeting identifying preliminary findings to date and memorializing the topics discussed in the exit meeting.
- 5) Draft Reports – Sufficient copies of a preliminary draft report will be delivered to the District administration for review and comment.
- 6) Final Report – Sufficient copies of the final study report will be delivered to the District following completion of the review.
- 7) Follow-Up Support – Subsequent to the completion of the study, the Team will meet with the District as requested by the District to discuss the findings and recommendations of the report

3. PROJECT PERSONNEL

The study team will be supervised by Thomas E. Henry, chief administrative officer, Fiscal Crisis Management Assistance Team, Kern County Superintendent of Schools Office. The study team may also include:

- A. Anthony Bridges, FCMAT Director
- B. FCMAT Transportation Consultant
- C. FCMAT Information Specialist

Other equally qualified consultants will be substituted in the event one of the above noted individuals is unable to participate in the study.

4. PROJECT COSTS

The cost for studies requested pursuant to E.C. 42127.6(e) shall be:

- A. \$400 per day for each Team Member while on site, conducting field work at other locations, presenting reports, or participating in meetings. Study not to exceed \$1,750.
- B. All out-of-pocket expenses, including travel, meals, lodging, etc.

Payments for FCMAT services are payable to Kern County Superintendent of Schools-Administrative Agent.

5. RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE DISTRICT

A. The District will provide office and conference room space while on-site reviews are in progress.

B. The District will provide the following:

- 1) A map of the District
- 2) Existing policies, regulations and prior reports addressing the transportation program
- 3) Current organizational charts of the transportation department and district office, including number of positions and FTE
- 4) Current and prior year's motor carrier inspection reports
- 5) Current year and projected transportation department budget
- 6) Enrollment projections through fiscal year June 30, 2003
- 7) Routing maps and printouts

C. The District Administration will review a preliminary draft copy of the study. Any comments regarding the accuracy of the data presented in the report or the practicability of the recommendations will be reviewed with the Team prior to completion of the final report.

Pursuant to EC 45125.1(c), representatives of FCMAT will have limited contact with District pupils. The District shall take appropriate steps to protect the safety of any pupils that may come in contact with FCMAT representatives.

6. PROJECT SCHEDULE

The following schedule outlines the planned completion dates for key study milestones:

Orientation:	To be determined
Staff Interviews:	To be determined
Exit Interviews:	To be determined
Preliminary Report Submitted	To be determined
Final Report Submitted	To be determined
Six-Month Follow Up	To be determined

7. CONTACT PERSON

Please print name of contact person: Richard Williams, Superintendent

Internet Address

Richard Williams

Richard Williams, Superintendent  
Pioneer Union Elementary School District

6/26/2000  
Date

Barbara Dean  
Barbara Dean, Director of Management Assistance  
FCMAT

June 16, 2000  
Date

Indicate number of copies of report needed 8