



## Walker Partnerships discusses **the costs** of transporting students with serious **emotional disabilities**

*Interview with Dr. Gerald Mazor, Senior Education Specialist for Walker Partnerships, as well as a Director of Special Projects for the LABBB Collaborative.*

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Dr. Gerald Mazor is the Senior Education Specialist for Walker Partnerships, as well as a Director of Special Projects for the LABBB Collaborative. He has decades of experience in the field of special education, and has initiated two collaborative special education transportation networks, which is why we have asked him to discuss the impact that transporting children with serious emotional disabilities has on school districts and on the students themselves. Here are his thoughts on this important subject.

### **How do school districts, without the capability to provide special education services for children with social, emotional, behavioral needs, manage transportation required for assignments in out of district placements?**

According to the Massachusetts Department of Secondary and Elementary Education over 6% of special education students attend programs in public or private day schools. Most of these programs are located in districts outside of the community of residence. Many of these "out of district" schools/programs specialize in educating students with emotional and social challenges. Under the law, all these students are entitled to transportation provided by the public schools. This type of transportation is typically contracted out to private vendors. The costs can vary quite a bit-the further the distance one has to travel from their home to the school they attend, the greater the costs.



Maximizing the vehicle load can reduce these costs. We have been seeing a trend among districts to work together through an educational collaborative to provide transportation for students in need. Conversely, going it alone can be extraordinarily expensive-in some instances it can exceed the cost of the tuition to the receiving school. There are districts that own their own vehicles and hire their own drivers to transport students, but they rarely analyze whether their costs can be reduced by going out to bid or by joining together with other districts that are sending students to the same school.

The Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives, on behalf of a statewide Task Force made up of representatives from various educational organizations, has released several special education transportation reports that highlight the value of creating multi-district routes. These reports note the cost effectiveness of this approach, as well as the ability to provide high-quality service. The most recent effort of this task force has been to develop a way to collect and analyze student data to assist districts to provide special education transportation. As a long-time member of this task force, I can attest to its continuing effort to provide cost-effective, high-quality transportation. However, I'm often dismayed that school districts have to put so much time and effort into matters like transportation rather than into the work of educating students.



### **In addition to the costs incurred by school districts, how does daily, to and from, transportation affect students?**

The Massachusetts special education regulations highlight that the maximum time a student can be in a vehicle is one hour - I would imagine a one-hour ride every day in a van each way could be a challenge for many children. It's certainly fair to say that their school day begins when they enter the van and doesn't end until they're dropped off in the late afternoon, making an already long day even more drawn-out. The other problem that folks often bring up is that when a student attends a school in another town they miss many of the neighborhood connections they would have if they didn't have to spend so much time outside their community. That's difficult for any child, but it can be especially tough on children with special needs.

### **High costs to school districts and added pressure on students are twodownsides associated with out of district transportation; in your experience working with scores of schools, have you observed any advantages?**

I remember a parent telling me that once they got over the hurdle of having their child attend an out of district program, they were amazed that when they went to a supermarket or a store in a neighboring town, their child would see other kids they knew. This is because other children from other towns would also attend their child's out of district program. One might say that getting to know children who are not from your town could be considered an advantage, but it's really not that big of one, particularly when you factor in the strain on students, and on school district budgets.

### **How has Walker Partnerships helped all impacted parties cope with these issues, and what benefits have been gained?**

As noted earlier, all special needs students attending out of district programs are entitled to have transportation provided by the public schools. I also stated that it would be better if the costs to the school districts and the added pressure on students could be lessened. The mission of Walker Partnerships is to keep students in their own town and school, in other words, in the least restrictive environment by building the district's capacity to serve these students. This minimizes transportation costs, and is in line with the federal and state special education statutes, but most importantly, it helps lessen the burden that excessive travel



places on children.

Walker Partnership has, for many years, evaluated special education programs and services in public school districts throughout the Commonwealth. Special education transportation, most certainly, can be part of these studies. These studies often focus on the cost of special education service, but rarely measure the negative impact it has on students. At Walker Partnerships we strongly believe that, given the appropriate support, the vast majority of students can be successfully educated within their own district. By adhering to our mission, we help keep students where they belong-in classrooms that are in their communities.

### About Dr. Gerald Mazor

Dr. Gerald Mazor spent twenty-nine years as Executive Director of the CASE Collaborative. He spent the next four years as Interim Executive Director of the LABBB Collaborative. In these positions, Mazor worked closely with over 150 Superintendents and Special Education Administrators. These experiences provided him with a unique opportunity to partner with some of the truly outstanding educational leaders in Massachusetts. Dr. Mazor is currently Director of Special Projects for the LABBB Collaborative, as well as a Senior Education Specialist for Walker Partnerships. He is a past President of both the Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives (MOEC) and the Massachusetts Chapter of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). For six years, Mazor was a member of the Board of Trustees of the Metro-West Community Health Care Foundation. In addition, for over a decade, he served as a Finance Committee Representative in his local community, the last two of which were as Vice Chairman. Mazor is currently on the Board of Trustees of the Morse Institute, the public library in Natick, Massachusetts, and he is the Chairman of the Board of Directors of ITNGB, a non-profit organization, which focuses on providing transportation for senior citizens and visually impaired individuals.

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## About Walker Partnerships

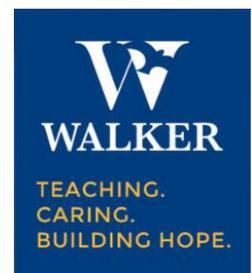
Since 1994 Walker Partnerships has been providing comprehensive services to school districts throughout Massachusetts to help them increase their capacity to include students with serious emotional disabilities. Walker Partnerships' model of service delivery focuses on increasing student participation in general education, reducing barriers, restructuring policies, teaching best practices, and shifting culture. Walker Partnerships is fully committed to finding better ways of including students who are at risk of marginalization or exclusion.

[Learn More](#)

## About Walker

Walker is a nonprofit organization that provides supportive environments for children, teens, and families through an array of academic programs and therapeutic services. Each year, Walker directly serves more than 2,000 children on the Needham and Watertown campuses, impacting an additional 33,000 children and families through trainings and consultation services.

[Learn More](#)



Please contact Walker Partnerships to learn more about the organization and the services it provides to assist school districts in serving their populations of students with social, emotional, behavioral needs.

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