

Few buses transport students to Catholic schools, costs and geographic spread cited

As a young girl in the late 1960s, Nancy Perlman boarded a school bus near her Rodgers Forge home five mornings a week that delivered her safely to nearby St. Pius X School.

It was a luxury for which her parents happily paid, in addition to the annual tuition for the Catholic education the now 44-year-old Columbia mother and psychiatric nurse received.

Today most Catholic schools within the Archdiocese of Baltimore, including St. Pius X, do not offer bus service, requiring parents to find their own way of transporting their children to and from school.

“Maryvale (Preparatory School, Brooklandville) had buses when the school opened in 1945 through the early 1960s,” said Sister Shawn Maguire, S.N.D. de N., headmistress of the school. “I believe the cost, liability and increase in cars available to families changed this to people using their own transportation. Today one bus comes here each day from Howard County and parents arrange for this service themselves.”

There is also a bus that carries Columbia, Catonsville and Reisterstown students to and from Calvert Hall College High School’s Towson campus, but that is a private contract between the parents and Woodlawn Bus Company, said Louis Heidrick, principal of the school.

The students attending the Catholic schools in Howard County have the option of catching the public school bus if they live on the bus route, but most parents who send their children to the Trinity School, Ellicott City, have chosen to arrange their own transportation, said Sister Catherine Phelps, S.N.D. de N., principal of the school that did provide bus service at one time.

“We no longer use school bus service. This decision was made as a result of fewer and fewer students taking advantage of school bus service primarily because the students were so spread out geographically that the bus ride was excessively long,” Sister Catherine said. “With the addition of before and after care provided by the school and the use of carpools, transportation needs seem to be satisfied at this point in time.”

Most principals say the cost of the service and liability issues involved have made them shy away from offering school-run transportation.

Though most 85 Catholic schools within the archdiocese do not offer bus service, a few do provide transportation to and from their campuses, including Archbishop Curley High School in Baltimore, The Catholic High School of Baltimore – both with annual costs ranging from \$475 to \$950 – and The John Carroll School, Bel Air, which contracts with Scheeler Bus Company with one bus route along Route 1 from the Baltimore Beltway north to the school.

There are currently about 16 bus riders on the John Carroll route at a cost of \$1,000 per rider, but the contract with the bus company is more than double what the parents are billed, said Paul Barker, principal of the school.

“So, we are subsidizing the bus route to the tune of \$18,000 a year,” Mr. Barker said. “Obviously, we continue to do so because we believe it is worth the cost of roughly two tuitions to get 16 tuitions in the door that might not come if we did not provide the bus.”

Like a few other Catholic high schools, John Carroll has its own fleet of buses (two full-size and three mini-buses) it uses to transport students participating in its athletic and other extracurricular programs to off-campus events, he said.

“The large buses are great to have, but it is very difficult to find drivers,” Mr. Barker said. “We are currently doing a cost analysis to see if we are better off contracting for this type of usage.”