

People Mover's East High program exceeds expectations

Providing bus passes can help students participate in activities outside school hours.

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Between mid-August and the end of January, the community at East High School boarded People Mover buses nearly 26,000 times. As part of a new pilot program, the Anchorage School District picked up the tab.

Starting this school year, the district distributed roughly 3,000 un-

limited bus passes — in the form of "Smart Cards" — to East High's students, staff and faculty at a \$30,000 cost, said Lance Wilber, Anchorage's transportation director. Wilber presented the latest figures at Thursday's School Board meeting.

By the end of this school year, district administration will decide whether it wants to maintain, expand or eliminate the public transit program for the 2015-16 school year, said Mike Abbott, the district's chief operating officer.

Last year, the district opted to launch the program at East High

because of its strategic location at the intersection of Bragaw Street and Northern Lights Boulevard, roads along which two People Mover routes run. It is also the school with the district's most low-income students, Abbott said.

Transportation outside school hours has long been a problem at the high school, he said. By supplying access to People Mover, opportunities opened up for students to participate in extracurricular activities before school, after school and on the weekends when school buses

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don't run. It can help them get to places where they work or volunteer, he said.

"I am super impressed with the volume of riders," he said. "I think it exceeded our expectations."

Wilber said that when the district and People Mover negotiated a cost this school year, they estimated East High pass holders would ride the bus 30,000

times between August and May — the months that span the school year. The Smart Cards double as school identification cards, Wilber said.

Historically, students make up about 10 percent of People Mover's total ridership. Students pay \$1 a ride and adults pay \$2.

By partnering with the district, Wilber said, People Mover hopes to encourage

students to use public transportation into adulthood.

"It's good for us and it's good for them," he said.

Abbott said the district will continue discussions with high school principals before determining the pilot program's next move.