

REGION 14 PARENTS FURIOUS

## **Credibility crashes in busing fiasco**

It would be an understatement to say Region 14 leaders had strong motivation to bring off the first day of the elementary school reconfiguration without a hitch. Parents had been complaining for months about the prospect of small children taking long bus rides. Two of them even filed a lawsuit seeking to halt the reconfiguration.

School leaders insisted the rides could be kept down to a maximum of 45 minutes.

Plainly, the best way to silence opponents was to prove them wrong right out of the gate. Or, as a sports fan might say, to come through in the clutch.

On Wednesday, the first day of school, the best intentions of school officials and bus-company executives succumbed to Murphy's Law.

In the morning, parents all over Woodbury and Bethlehem were driving their children to school because some of the buses never came. Wednesday afternoon was worse.

Children spent as long as two hours on buses; a few of them wet their pants because they had no access to bathrooms. Some were put on the wrong bus or left at the wrong stop.

In what had to be the lamest remark of the day, Superintendent Robert D. Cronin said, "The important thing is every child got home safely."

Could he have set the performance bar any lower?

The excuses came thick and fast. The Region 14 supervisor for Laidlaw Transit, the district's bus company, quit less than two weeks ago.

The substitute supervisor apparently changed some of the routes without telling anyone in the school administration. Some drivers used the new routes and some used revised routes.

One can't help but wonder if the first supervisor quit because he or she realized the 45-minute goal was beyond reach. As of Thursday, Laidlaw officials hadn't returned reporters' phone calls.

Whatever the cause, the fiasco Wednesday was a crushing defeat for Superintendent Robert D. Cronin and the Board of Education members who supported his reconfiguration plan — not because the reconfiguration is likely to be reversed, but because their credibility is at a low ebb.

Six months from now, Region 14 will ask voters to authorize \$26 million in bonds for school renovation and construction. If the vote is preceded by six months of seamlessly competent management, the referendum may pass. But that is the least of the benchmarks Region 14 leaders will have to achieve to regain the public trust.