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TODAY'S TOP STORIES

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A Kennedy Elementary School community group has launched a fundraiser for a van to transport students facing housing and transportation instability to and from school this fall.

With a high percentage of students experiencing homelessness and lagging student attendance rates, Kennedy parent Megan Ross, Kennedy social worker Bridget Cremin and Elizabeth Crummy, a ministry support specialist at Messiah Lutheran Church, created the **Kennedy Family Support Network** nonprofit and launched an \$80,000 fundraising drive this year.

The effort started four years ago as the Give Kids a Lift partnership with Messiah Lutheran Church via a grant the church received and donations from church members, until both the grant and van service ended.

Ross became worried about transportation after watching a school bus pass the Salvation Army's family shelter on Milwaukee Avenue without stopping. She thought it was likely an accidental missed stop that could be fixed with a quick call to the district. Then she learned from the school district it was a more complicated issue, due to district policy on transportation distances from school.

Adding a special route or extra stops for Kennedy would violate district policy, Vanessa Cruz, the district's assistant director of transportation and logistics, said. The policy dictates that students within 1.5 miles from their school are generally expected to walk, unless there's a serious hazard.

The Salvation Army's family shelter is a 0.7-mile walk from Kennedy.

Special transportation could create an unequal situation elsewhere in the district, Cruz said.

"If we somehow grant an exception in one area, then how is that fair to other families around the district that may not get that same exception, right?" she said. "Exceptions can be really dangerous because it creates more inequity that way by allowing some people to have something extra that's outside of the rules that other students don't have access to."

Ross said, "We're looking at hundreds of advocacy hours on this one issue, that in some ways felt like it was going to be as simple as the bus stopping and opening its doors and continuing one more mile to school," she said. "In some ways, it seems a little outsized, right, that we're here \$100,000 later."

On any given day, the Madison School District coordinates transportation for roughly 300 homeless students, Cruz said. The transportation department tracks where each of those students are each day and pays for their transportation to their assigned school, whether they are just a few blocks away or staying somewhere outside of Madison's boundaries.

"The students that are most mobile, we don't know from day to day where they're going to be," Cruz said. "Sometimes at the end of the day, they might be going to different places, so maybe they come in from one address, and then in the afternoon they're going home to a different address."

Reliable transportation is only one piece in supporting attendance, said Scott Chehak, the district's senior executive director of building services, citing family involvement and safety perceptions as other factors.



From left, Messiah Lutheran Church ministry support specialist Elizabeth Crummy, Kennedy parent Megan Ross and Kennedy social worker Bridget Cremin have created a new nonprofit and fundraiser for a van to bring homeless students to and from school.

TEAGAN KING

What's been done so far

The group plans to raise enough to cover the purchase of a van and the costs of gas, insurance and maintenance for its first three years of operation. As of Friday, the group has raised \$53,765, enough to purchase the van before school starts in September.

Messiah Lutheran Church is continuing its popular fundraiser through which people donate to cover transportation costs for one or more school days, with costs averaged across the year, as part of the network's fundraiser for the van. The church uses large posters and a fabric bus to represent the number of donations.

"This whole partnership around Give Kids a Lift, the whole time has been such a breath of fresh air when you're constantly being met with bad news," Cremin said. "I think overall, I'm feeling very excited for the first time, rather than strictly angry."

The importance of transportation?

The Kennedy Support Network nonprofit will buy a nine-seat van and is deciding the routes for this fall, though it will likely focus on the nearby Salvation Army family shelter and replacing a seasonal bus route in the Vernon Avenue area that has been removed.

During previous iterations of the van project, Kennedy recorded major improvements in attendance, said Cremin, who herself tracked attendance numbers of the students relying on van transportation.



Elizabeth Crummy, a ministry support specialist at Messiah Lutheran Church, has kept track of the church's fundraising efforts using a fabric bus filled in to represent the number of donations. The Kennedy Family Support Network is raising \$80,000 to cover the van's purchase, gas and maintenance costs.

TEAGAN KING

Before using a van, students staying at the shelter had 78.8% average attendance, but after they started transportation, that rose to a 91.4% average, Cremin found. Some individual students' attendance rates also rose above the school's average.

Kennedy's chronic absenteeism and schoolwide attendance rates lag behind the state average, according to 2024-25 school year data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. The school had a 26.9% chronic absenteeism rate, above the statewide rate of 17.3%. Its attendance rate was 90.2%, below the 92.6% statewide rate.

Beyond school transportation, Ross' group also will use the van for getting to after-school events elsewhere in the district, visiting food banks and picking up donations.

"The list becomes endless of ways that you can actually use the van to support the kids, their families, our whole community," Cremin said. "It's not just sustainable in terms of getting kids to school, but let's get their families involved."

Ross also hopes the van can help students feel like they belong at school and set an example for other places for how to support one another.

"I think so much about belonging," Ross said. "How do all kids get to school and know they belong? Because we know that's fundamental to a good education is that belonging, so I think that this is one small part of that. I think a great way to say that you belong is that we help you get there."

The Madison School District has met with Ross' group but is not collaborating with them, Cruz and Chehak said.

"We've had some conversations with them, and I wouldn't say we don't support them, but we don't actively work with them on that fundraising effort," Chehak said. "It's unfortunate how it works that way, but also our job as our transportation is to uphold our policies and hold the line of equity."