

Understanding the LSTA: A Comprehensive Overview

What is the LSTA?

The Lakewood Student Transportation Authority (LSTA) is a privately managed entity created through state legislation to oversee school transportation in Lakewood. The LSTA contracts with local Board of Education (BOE) to fulfill the state's requirement of providing free busing for mandated students (aside from an \$80-\$90 annual service fee—explained below).

The LSTA was originally established through the efforts of Lakewood rabbonim and askonim, with the support of Agudath Israel of America (Agudah), to address Lakewood's unique and growing busing challenges.

As Jackson's student population grew, thousands of children were left without free busing. With pressure from Jackson residents and advocacy from local askonim and Agudah, the legislation was later expanded to allow the LSTA to operate across New Jersey. This extension led the Jackson BOE to contract with the LSTA, ensuring Jackson students attending school in Lakewood could receive free busing.

This year marked the first year of LSTA operations in Jackson, with 4,800 students receiving free busing. Toms River joined as well, providing busing for 2,020 students, and Howell is set to join next year.

How Does the LSTA Work and Provide Free Busing?

To understand how the LSTA operates, it's important to first understand the state's mandated busing system.

The state of New Jersey mandates that all eligible private school students must receive either busing or an "aid-in-lieu" (AIL) payment if no bus company is willing to provide service.

- The BOE offers bus routes twice for bidding at a set rate of \$1,177 per student.
- If no bus company accepts the bid after two rounds, the BOE issues a \$1,177 AIL payment for each affected student.
- Prior to the LSTA, many students in Lakewood-neighboring townships (Jackson, Toms River, Manchester, etc.) had no bidders, resulting in parents supplementing costs for private transportation.

The LSTA's Role

The LSTA steps in by pooling together the \$1,177 per student, leveraging its buying power to negotiate more efficient and cost-effective routes.

- The LSTA consolidates bus routes across multiple municipalities, making contracts more attractive to bus companies.
- With 55,000 students across 155 schools and three different start and end times, the LSTA can offer bus companies multiple consecutive trips (known as tiered runs).
- A bus company running three routes per morning can now earn three times the standard rate, making these routes financially viable for them.

This scale and efficiency allow the LSTA to provide free busing to thousands of students who would otherwise rely on costly private transportation.

Would Joining the LSTA Guarantee My Child a Bus?

No, The LSTA aims to maximize the number of students receiving free busing, but some routes will still go unclaimed during bidding.

- Students from unclaimed schools will continue to receive the full \$1,177 AIL payment—just as they would without the LSTA.
- AIL payments through the LSTA are typically distributed at the beginning of the school year, rather than at the end of the year, which is a benefit for parents.
- In most cases, schools that currently share private transportation will be grouped together, increasing the chances of a successful bid.

Why Does the LSTA Charge a Fee if It's Government-Funded?

New Jersey law currently allows the LSTA to collect an \$80 per child administrative fee. Instead of deducting this amount from the \$1,177 per student, the LSTA collects it separately to ensure that the full \$1,177 is offered to bus companies, increasing the likelihood that routes are picked up. This fee is going up to \$90 for the coming year.

This fee is used exclusively for LSTA operations and does not reduce state funding allocated for busing.

Can I Opt Out of the LSTA and Request AIL Instead?

Only if your child's route is not picked up for busing.

- If the LSTA successfully secures busing for a route, parents cannot opt out and take the AIL payment instead, even if parents are unhappy with the timing, location, or any other reason.
- AIL payments are only provided when busing is unavailable.

What About Parents Still Paying the Price of Private Busing While in the LSTA?

The LSTA offers an additional option for students whose schools are not picked up for free busing.

- If a school is not picked up through the bidding process, at the \$1,177 rate, parents can opt into private busing facilitated by the LSTA. This is known as Option 2.
- Parents pay the private transportation cost, while the LSTA assists in coordinating routes.
- Any family opting out of this service will still receive their AIL check as usual.
- Once opted in, parents can no longer opt out for that school year, regardless of the location of your assigned stop. Stops are assigned only after parents opt in.

Will My Child Have to Walk or be Driven Far to a Bus Stop?

New Jersey law defines how far a student can be required to walk or be driven to a bus stop:

- In Lakewood, stops must be within one mile of a child's home.
- In Toms River and Jackson, there is a 20 mile legal limit. It seems Manchester is the same. (That is the state limit)

That being said, in practice, LSTA routes aim to be reasonable, however parents should understand that:

- Routes are designed to accommodate multiple tiers and efficient scheduling.
- Some students may need to travel a short distance to reach a designated stop.
- In the beginning of the year, especially when creating new routes, the LSTA may play it safe and combine more stops until they see that everything is running smoothly before making changes.

Will the LSTA Adjust Stops Based on Feedback?

Yes, in many cases.

- While early-year adjustment needs are common, the LSTA actively works to refine stops, especially when there is a safety concern. However these changes many times will not happen immediately and it will require some patience until everything is addressed. (As a general policy of the LSTA, changes not based on real safety concerns, will start being addressed 4-5 weeks into the year).
- In Toms River, a volunteer liaison coordinates with the LSTA to optimize stops and address concerns. As per this volunteer, the vast majority of all requests and issues in Toms River were dealt with satisfactorily. This was offered by the LSTA as an option for Manchester as well. There is someone in Manchester who has offered to fill that role as well.
- Parents can submit requests for stop changes through the LSTA website. This opens around 4-5 weeks into the year.

- Inevitably, there will be situations that a stop is not ideal, such as, for example, if there are only a few children spread out in a full area, going to a school that can't be combined with other schools, their stop location may need to be combined (assuming they are picked up in bidding), and the children may need to walk or travel a distance to their stop. Keep in mind the lack of sidewalks and lighting in our area.

Does the LSTA Combine Schools on Routes?

Yes, but generally with consent from school administrations.

- The LSTA will group schools together to improve route efficiency.
- Schools generally have input on whether to share buses with other institutions, but this is not guaranteed.

Why Would the BOE Agree to Contract with the LSTA?

The LSTA benefits both parents and school districts:

- The BOE no longer has to process thousands of individual AIL payments.
- The BOE writes a single check to the LSTA, simplifying administrative work.
- Parents receive more organized transportation services with fewer logistical burdens.

What Are the Financial Benefits and Route/Stop Viability Specifically for Manchester?

The following are a sampling of various amounts that different private vans and buses currently cost in Manchester. For clarity, the \$1,177 received in AIL was calculated as well. These are annual amounts per child.

Cheder/Ohr Shraga (regular) - \$1,980- \$1,177 = **\$803**

Cheder/Ohr Shraga (minyan) - \$2,470-\$1,177 = **\$1,293**

Bnos Devora/Bais Tova - \$1,850-\$1,177 = **\$673**

Bais Faiga-\$2,290-\$1,177 = **\$1,113**

Bnos Orchos Chaim/Moreshes- \$1,840-\$1,177 = **\$663**

Shiras Chaim-\$1,800-\$1,177 = **\$623**

Nesivos Hatorah (regular) - \$2,760-\$1,177 = **\$1583**

Nesivos Hatorah (minyan)-\$2,730-\$1,177 = **\$1553**

Bnos Yaakov-\$2,850-\$1,177 = **\$1673**

Chein/Meoros - \$1,800-\$1,177 = **\$623**

Talmud Torah - \$2,720-\$1,177 = **\$1,543**

While not every school will get free busing on day one, more routes will be added over time as the community grows. However, some routes may still not be picked up, leaving those students to receive AIL or opt into Option 2.

Regarding routes and stops, it is the **expectation** of the individuals in contact with the LSTA, based on the layout of the neighborhoods, and the fact that Manchester will have its own liaison(s) to assist with the routes, that the experience will be similar to Toms River. While it's expected to be less than perfect on day one of the school year, as explained above, the issues and requests can be dealt with and hopefully resolved satisfactorily. (This does not mean that everyone will have door stops or even corner stops, as that wouldn't be viable for the bus companies, but within a reasonable distance for the vast majority). Keep in mind that it is likely that on day one of new routes, many stops may be combined to be on main streets for the first 4-5 weeks "settle in" period.

It is also worth noting, that a big factor which plays a role in a route being viable for the bus companies is its time duration. The route needs to allow for 3 tiers to be viable and as such, this limits the maximum time a route can take.

Where Does Manchester Stand in Regard to Joining the LSTA?

With Jackson and Toms River already part of the LSTA, efforts began with the knowledge and consent of the Rabbonim to introduce Manchester's BOE to the program.

- A productive meeting between the LSTA and the Manchester BOE outlined the potential benefits.
- However, concerns arose from some residents regarding issues experienced in Jackson and Toms River.
- In January, the rabbonim decided based on community sentiment, that more public input was needed before proceeding, and the BOE was asked to pause on joining.
- Should the decision be to join the LSTA there is still a chance that the BOE can sign on this month and Manchester will be part of the routes of the LSTA for next year.

A vote is now being held to determine community interest in Manchester joining the LSTA.

Each family is welcomed and encouraged to do their own research into the pros and cons before voting.

Manchester Community Vote: Make Your Voice Heard

In the coming days a link will be posted to choose from the following options:

Yes – I support Manchester joining the LSTA.

No – I do not support Manchester joining the LSTA.

I Don't Know – I do not have a strong opinion either way.

For further questions, please contact:

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