



# Special Education Transportation Task Force Report

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**AUGUST 2009**



**Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives**

In accordance with legislative mandate, MOEC, on behalf of a statewide Task Force made up of representatives from several educational organizations, respectfully submits its final report of the 2008-09 Special Needs Student Transportation project.

Much progress has been accomplished during the three years of the project:

- \$5,240,000 in transportation cost savings can be directly attributed to the initiative as reported by the student transportation networks.
- The quality of special education student transportation has been improved.
- The student transportation infrastructure has been substantially enhanced, and the improvements will continue into the future.
- Transportation networks have begun expanding services to other areas with similar potential for savings.
- The Special Needs Student Transportation Task Force will continue to serve as an important influence.

The Task Force wishes to thank the Legislature and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for their support of this worthwhile project. We encourage continued backing of this and similar initiatives that encourage collaboration on student transportation and other education activities on a regional basis.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Special Needs Student Transportation Task Force

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# Massachusetts Special Needs Student Transportation Project

## Executive Summary

The Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives (MOEC) submits this report on behalf of a statewide task force that includes representatives of the Administrators of Special Education (ASE), the Massachusetts Association of School Business Officials (MASBO), the Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC), the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS), the Massachusetts Association for Pupil Transportation (MAPT), and the Massachusetts Association of 766 Approved Private Schools (maaps). It culminates a several-year initiative designed to address the rising cost of special needs student transportation.

Between fiscal years 1995 and 2003, the costs for special education transportation grew by 89% compared to a 50% cost increase for regular education transportation. The cost of transporting these students became one of the fastest growing budget items for school districts. The Special Needs Student Transportation Network project was funded to explore strategies to:

- Reduce the high costs of out-of-district transportation.
- Improve the quality of transportation services.
- Avoid route overlap, congestion, and long unnecessary delays at site pick-up and drop-offs.

In FY 09 the legislature supported the implementation of the Network project initiatives by appropriating \$450,000 to support 10 transportation networks and \$100,000 to the Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives to provide administrative support and technical assistance to the networks. As a result there have been significant outcomes:

- **\$5,240,000 in transportation cost savings may be directly attributed to the initiative.\*** (See individual network reports.)

These include:

- \$4,360,000 of direct savings in special education transportation costs.
- An estimated \$500,000 saved as a result of other vendors reducing their bids.
- \$380,000 of savings in the cost of regular education transportation.

\*It is expected that additional savings will be documented during the summer of 2009 when final FY 10 transportation services bids are awarded.

- **The quality of special education transportation has been improved.**
  - Many networks and Collaboratives have purchased and utilized routing software.
  - Improved vehicle communication capabilities have been established.

- Most vehicles are now equipped with global positioning systems.
  - Child Find monitoring devices are being installed in many vehicles.
  - Monitoring of drivers and monitors has been increased.
  - Improved driver training expectations and standards have been established.
  - New training manuals have been written, and drivers and monitors are being trained.
- **The student transportation infrastructure has been substantially enhanced, and the improvements will last well beyond the life of the project.**

Newly created networks will continue to serve member districts. Previously existing Collaborative transportation providers will continue to provide cost-effective service to member districts.

- **Networks have begun expanding services to other areas with similar potential for savings.**

In addition to providing out-of-district special needs transportation, networks are addressing transportation of homeless students and researching opportunities to provide regular school transportation and cooperative purchasing of transportation-related items such as fuel.

- **The Special Needs Student Transportation Task Force will continue to serve as an important influence and advocacy group.**

The group serves in an advocacy capacity to ensure the efficient and cost-effective transportation of special education students. Its continuation as an entity will provide an excellent structure for uniting various interests and constituencies to work effectively together for a common goal.

- **Networks are now recognized as a viable agent for multi-district cooperation and as a means for reducing expenses.**

In an April 2009 survey of school business managers, 82% of the more than 100 respondents reported that they had been made aware of the transportation network in their area. 95% of the business managers reported that they saw potential benefits in joining such a network.

## Challenges

- **Efforts to establish multi-student ridership across school districts encountered many challenges.**

These made it difficult to increase network participation and also had an impact on the ability to provide multi-district shared transportation at a reasonable cost. Several issues complicate the option for special needs students to share rides:

- o Behavior disorders
  - o Significant age differences
  - o Medical conditions
  - o Satisfaction in some districts with current service and prices
  - o Parental concerns restricting some districts from using a multi-district model
  - o Multi-year vendor contracts that preclude participation in a network at this time
  - o Mandated ride time of no more than an hour
  - o Districts with their own vehicles and drivers
- **Not all networks will continue at their current levels of operation.**
    - o At the present time, it appears unlikely that all of the western Massachusetts networks--Franklin County, Berkshire County, Hampshire County, and Hampden County--will remain fully operational.
    - o During the first two years, these networks were successful in negotiating multi-year contracts with their respective and predominant contractors. These contracts, now in effect, require the contractor to provide multi-district routing and scheduling and split billing to those participating school districts.

## Conclusion

Since the inception of the pilot program and the implementation of statewide networks in FY 09, substantial savings have been achieved in reducing the cost of special education transportation to the Commonwealth's school districts. In regions where networks have been able to attract widespread district participation, there have been remarkable levels of cooperation. Each year of the project there have been increases in the number of participating districts, student ridership, and transportation cost savings. Despite these impressive results, significant opportunities remain to include additional districts and expand the networks. We intend to continue to support the networks, sustain their viability, promote cost efficiencies, and create opportunities for greater participation for every district in the Commonwealth.

## **Project Overview and Background**

Representatives from several professional educational organizations established a task force to address concerns regarding the rapidly increasing costs of special education transportation. Over a two-year period, they developed a pilot model proposal. Three Collaboratives -- ACCEPT in Natick, Assabet Valley in Marlborough, and Lower Pioneer Valley in West Springfield, all of which had extensive histories of providing high quality, cost-effective transportation services to their member districts -- agreed to serve as grantees and assist in efforts to extend transportation services to other Collaboratives. For the first two years, grant funds were used to organize the state into inter-Collaborative transportation networks. A detailed study of the development of the networks and the services they provide was issued by the Donahue Institute. The report provides an extensive documentation of participation levels and an analysis of the issues. A link to this report may be found on the MOEC website: [www.moecnet.org](http://www.moecnet.org).

In FY 09 the Legislature recognized the success and potential of the pilot model and funded ten networks to maintain and grow services, and MOEC as the statewide organization to provide technical assistance and administrative support.

### **2008-09 Statewide Activities**

The statewide Special Needs Student Transportation Task Force met regularly for the past several years and accomplished much. It has:

- Created a heightened awareness of the need to reduce costs and improve services of special needs student transportation.
- Collected and disseminated relevant data.
- Provided a forum for discussion of related topics.
- Advocated for participation by additional districts.
- Addressed regulatory and legislative issues and other concerns that impact the quality and cost of special education student transportation.
- Maintained communication with the legislature, state agencies, and professional organizations relating to pupil transportation.

The Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives (MOEC) used its funding to:

- Monitor network activity to ensure compliance with the terms and conditions of the grants.
- Establish cost baselines that permitted districts to compare transportation costs and disseminate this data to districts to help them negotiate more effectively and realize cost savings.
- Support the further development of the transportation networks.
- Assist networks to increase the number of participating districts.
- Provide training and technical assistance to the networks by developing and disseminating information on driver training, safety policies and procedures, cost sharing, billing models, and examples of best practices.

- Respond to network requests for other training and technical assistance.
- Establish a technical service hotline to make available information and documents to districts or Collaboratives.
- Facilitate inter-network information exchange and cooperation.
- Serve in an advisory role to networks with regard to state mandates and Registry of Motor Vehicle requirements for providing pupil-transportation-related services.
- Work with the private schools to develop mechanisms to monitor services and assist with driver and monitor training.
- Provide staff support to the State Transportation Task Force.
- Prepare reports for the Task Force, DESE, and the Legislature.
- Identify and assist the Task Force in efforts to address regulatory and legislative issues and other concerns that impact the quality and cost of special education student transportation.
- Maintain communication with state agencies and professional organizations relating to pupil transportation by participating in meetings, circulating documents and information, as well as developing and facilitating interagency cooperation.
- Evaluate the impact on the quality and cost of special needs transportation resulting from efforts made under this grant.

### **Individual network project activities and accomplishments**

Following are brief descriptions of each transportation network and an account of significant activities, accomplishments, and future plans.

Information from the Massachusetts DESE October 1 Report for network participants states that 9,116 students attended special education programs outside their respective school districts in FY 09.

#### **Metro Boston Network** (LABBB and EDCO Collaboratives)

LABBB serves as the lead collaborative for the Network that is completing the second year of providing out-of-district transportation. The network covers 9 school districts with 483 students enrolled in public or private out-of district programs.

Currently LABBB leases vehicles to transport 73 students to its own collaborative programs.

- The Network transported approximately 100 students from five LABBB and EDCO districts to 24 program destinations in FY 09.
- The projected cost savings and/or cost avoidance for these five districts was approximately \$323,000.
- A sixth district has joined the Network for FY 10.
- The six districts of the Network have bid 2010-2011 transportation services for about 380 students to be transported to about 95 program destinations.
- This contract has a possible extension through FY 12.
- As part of this network, several districts are exploring the transportation of children to school from homeless shelters.

**MetroWest Network** (BICO, ACCEPT, SPOKE, and TEC Educational Collaboratives) The Network covers 32 school districts with 874 students enrolled in public or private out-of-district programs. MetroWest Network's lead agency, BICO Collaborative, has several years of experience organizing and overseeing out-of-district transportation provided by a single vendor for most of its own member districts.

- The Network has obtained Transfinder software and is working with the vendor to build a multi-district student transportation database.
- ACCEPT Education Collaborative has coordinated special education transportation services for its member districts since 1979. Currently, ACCEPT transports over 400 students to over 90 locations each day. ACCEPT has over 90 vehicles in its fleet and hires and trains its own drivers. To build capacity for FY 09, ACCEPT contracted with a private company to cover some of its routes. Cost savings to member districts is estimated at over \$750,000 per year for the ten participating member districts.
- Both BICO and SPOKE assisted their members to contract for student transportation.
- The three Collaboratives together manage or contract services for over 900 students.
- The Network has collected student transportation data from several districts not currently participating in the existing collaborative-managed transportation programs. These data are being used to develop model routes to determine whether cost savings can be realized by including more districts in an expanded transportation system.
- The Network is exploring the transportation of homeless students.

**Southeast Network** (North River, South Shore, Pilgrim Area, and Cape Cod Collaboratives) The Network covers 43 school districts with 1,019 students enrolled in public or private out-of-district programs. The North River Collaborative (NRC) provides special needs student transportation to districts belonging to the three Collaborative members of the Network.

- In FY 09, NRC transported over 80 students for the Network, an increase of over 130% from its first year.
- The cumulative two-year savings has exceeded \$200,000.
- NRC hired its own drivers and purchased vehicles with GPS installed.
- NRC created driver and student/parent manuals.
- NRC sent customer satisfaction surveys to parents, school districts and private schools after its first year. The returns were extremely positive, as evidenced by the increase in students transported.
- Plans are underway to increase the number of students next year to 215 students for an additional savings of over \$300,000.

**Northeast Network** (SEEM, Greater Lawrence Educational Collaborative [GLEC], Shore, North Shore Consortium, and the Merrimac Education Center [MEC]) The Network covers 61 school districts with 3,177 students enrolled in public or private out-of-district programs. Four of the Northeast Network member Collaboratives have had previous involvement in transportation.



- Northeast Network or one of its Collaboratives are transporting over 700 special needs students.
- SEEM Collaborative manages vendor-supplied special needs student transportation for the Network using routing software that permits the network or districts to monitor routes.
- 650 students are currently being transported by the Network provider.
- A recently negotiated 3-year Network contract saved \$550,000 in 2008-2009 and is expected to save an additional \$1,000,000 in years two and three.
- The Northeast Network is working with additional districts that have expressed an interest in participating next year; four additional districts have agreed to contract out-of-district transportation to the Network for FY 10 with an expected additional savings to those districts of over \$400,000.
- The Network is currently providing transportation for homeless students.
- Additional savings occurred when vendors serving two Northeast districts reduced their cost by \$500,000 to match the Network bid price.

**Central Mass Network** (FLLAC, CAPS, Assabet Valley, Southern Worcester, Blackstone Valley Collaboratives, and the City of Worcester) The Network covers 58 school districts with 1,508 students enrolled in public or private out-of district programs. Assabet Valley and Southern Worcester County Collaboratives provide transportation for member districts.

- The Network coordinated transportation services for several members of the Blackstone Valley Collaborative at a cost savings of \$350,000 for FY 10. Efforts are underway to expand services to the remaining districts.
- Assabet Valley Collaborative coordinates transportation services for nine member districts and transports over 350 students at a negotiated per-vehicle price well below the state average. They utilized routing software and achieved a \$500,000 savings in the first year of their contact and expect an additional \$500,000 in each of the remaining two years. Currently Assabet Valley provides transportation only for its own member districts.
- Southern Worcester Collaborative transports students mostly to their Collaborative classes. Routing software has been purchased, and efforts are underway to evaluate and propose out-of-district transportation to other districts including the City of Worcester as well as working with Southern Worcester County to expand their current operation.
- Several FLLAC and CAPS districts contract with the Montachusett Regional Transit Authority (MART) to provide transportation services. The Network is working with MART to increase district participation and review cost advantages.
- A secure portal website for exchanging transportation data has been established.
- Meetings have been held and districts have committed to continuing the project.
- The Network may assist with the transportation of homeless students.

**South Coast Network** (READS, Southeastern and South Coast Collaboratives) The Network covers 22 school districts with 688 students enrolled in public or private out-of district programs.

- 25% of the South Coast member districts own and operate their own vehicles.
- Southeastern and South Coast Collaboratives transport students to their programs.
- All three Collaboratives have committed to participation in the Network.
- Computer routing and scheduling software are being used to propose optimal routes.
- Potential cost avoidance could be significant if all districts participate and agree to multi-district routing and split billing.
- Efforts are being made to increase ridership within district-owned operations.

**Franklin County Network** was established through the Franklin County Technical School to explore transportation for the 17 districts in the County. The Network covers 26 school districts with 97 students enrolled in public or private out-of district programs. There is no educational Collaborative in the county. The Network recently merged with the HEC Collaborative for administrative services for their Network.

- 48 students traveling to out-of-district locations from 8 districts have been identified.
- Computer routing and scheduling software is being used to propose optimal routes.
- 4 vendors are currently contracted by local districts to provide transportation services.
- The predominant contractor has agreed to participate in multi-district routing and scheduling and to split bill participating school districts.
- Franklin County Technical School conducted a County-wide bid for regular school transportation services resulting in savings of over \$300,000.

**Hampshire County Network** was established through the Hampshire Educational Collaborative. (HEC). The Network covers 30 school districts with 244 students enrolled in public or private out-of district programs.

- Project funds were used to employ a Network coordinator to research and prepare inter-district routes for 13 districts in the county.
- 192 students traveling to out-of-district sites from 10 districts have been identified.
- Computer routing and scheduling software is being used to propose optimal routes.
- The Network notified all districts of its ability to review regular education routing.
- Potential savings for 2009-10 as a result of the Network merger should be significant since preliminary data show new opportunities for combining routes.
- A preliminary study of regular education busing in the district of South Hadley revealed considerable potential savings utilizing routing software.
- HEC is developing a website portal to enable authorized users to communicate transportation changes and requests easily and to publish basic network route data for parents.
- The predominant contractor has agreed to participate in multi-district routing and scheduling and to split bill participating school districts.
- Negotiations continue with the major transportation provider in the area.

- The Network is exploring the transportation of homeless students.

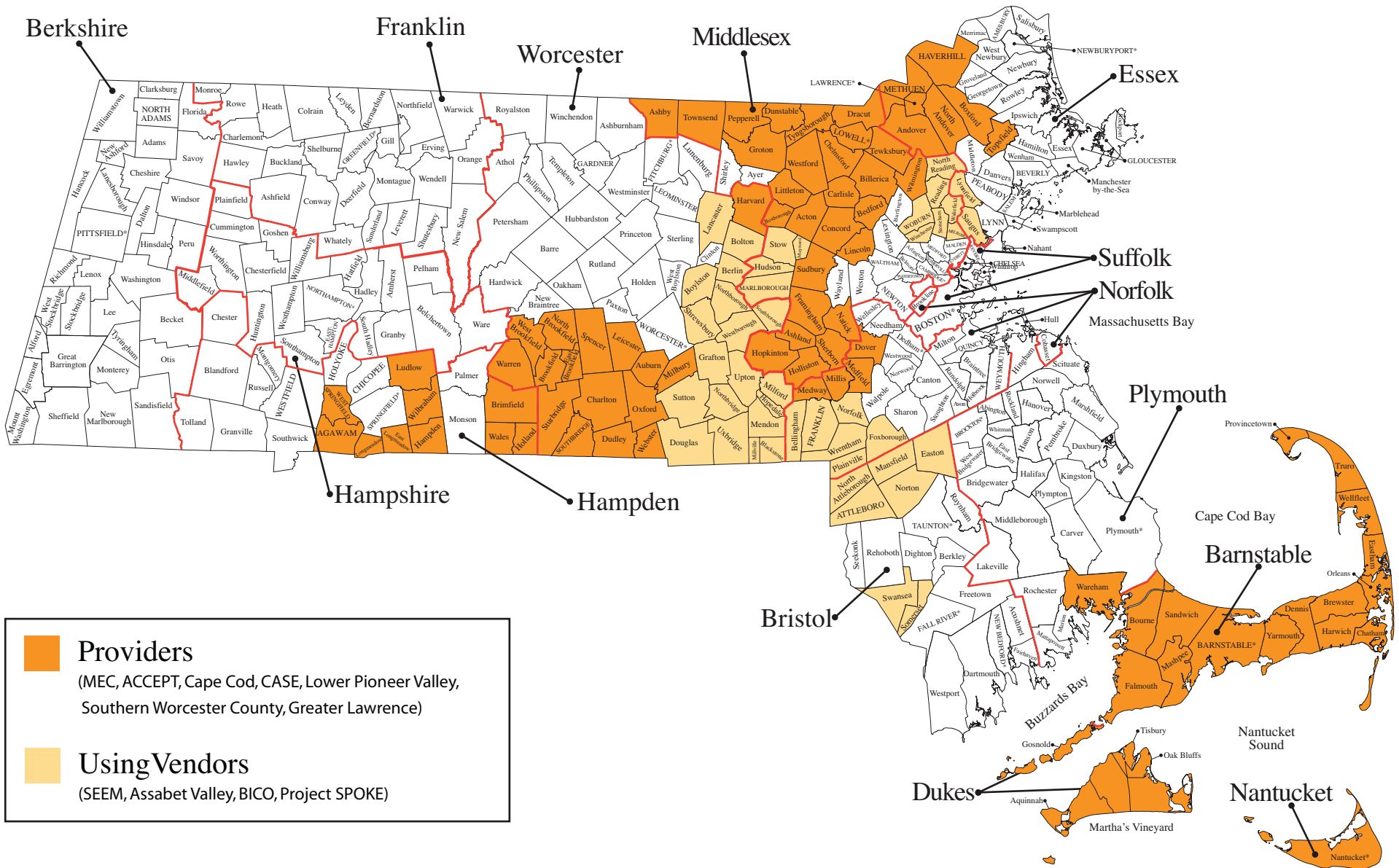
**Berkshire County Network** The South Berkshire Educational Collaborative has hired a part-time coordinator. The Network covers 39 school districts with 91 students enrolled in public or private out-of-district programs.

- 15 students traveling to out-of-district destinations have been identified.
- During the last two years over \$150,000 of savings have been achieved by multi-district routing for out-of-district students.
- Utilizing the resources of the Network, the South Berkshire Educational Collaborative was able to review and consolidate regular transportation routes for 2 of its districts, which generated a savings of over \$200,000 this year.
- The South Berkshire Educational Collaborative is using the Network to conduct a county-wide bid for regular school transportation services. The result is a continuation of the incumbent contractors with improved contract language, at a reasonable first-year cost with 2.5% annual increases.
- Utilizing the resources of the Network, Central Berkshire Regional School District was able to reconfigure current regular education bus routes and save \$80,870 for FY 10.
- As a result of county-wide collaboration, the Berkshire County school districts are continuing to work towards the development of a county-wide educational Collaborative.
- The predominant contractor has agreed to participate in multi-district routing and scheduling and to split bill participating school districts.

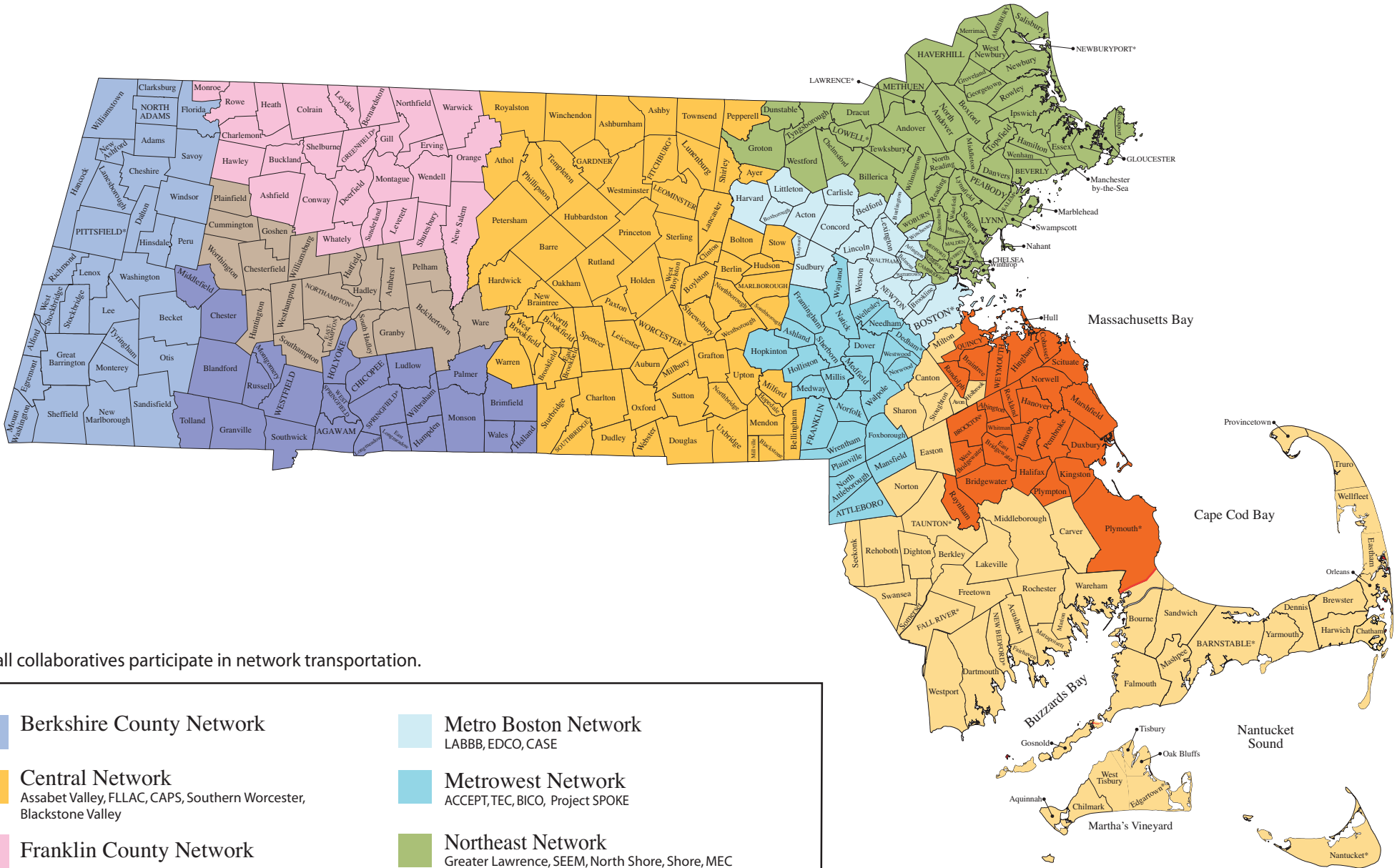
**Hampden County Network** services are managed by Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative (LPVEC). LPVEC has many years experience providing transportation for both regular and special education students and was one of the original three grantees. The Network covers 23 school districts with 935 students enrolled in public or private out-of-district programs.

- 173 out-of-district students have been identified from non-LPV districts in the county.
- Other large districts in Hampden County were able to achieve significant cost savings by using technical assistance from the Network in restructuring their bids and utilizing the Network's multi-district contract template.
- The predominant contractor has agreed to participate in multi-district routing and scheduling and to split bill participating school districts.











# Map 1: Collaboratives providing transportation to out of district programs other than their own programs in FY 2006



# Map 2: FY 2009 NETWORKS SHOWING ASSIGNED COLLABORATIVES



\* Not all collaboratives participate in network transportation.

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|---|--|
|  Berkshire County Network   |  Metro Boston Network<br>LABBB, EDCO, CASE                              |
|  Central Network<br>Assabet Valley, FLLAC, CAPS, Southern Worcester,<br>Blackstone Valley |  Metrowest Network<br>ACCEPT, TEC, BICO, Project SPOKE                  |
|  Franklin County Network  |  Northeast Network<br>Greater Lawrence, SEEM, North Shore, Shore, MEC   |
|  Hampden County Network   |  South Coast Network<br>READS, South Coast, Southeastern Mass, Cape Cod |
|  Hampshire County Network   |  Southeast Network<br>South Shore, North River, PAC, CHARMS             |



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