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Pilot program examines whether access to public transit improves school attendance

Des Moines Public Schools, United Way of Central Iowa and DART are teaming up to offer free public transit access to Hiatt Middle School students to see if the program improves student attendance. The pilot program began December 19 and will continue through the rest of the 2016-17 school year.

"For many of our students, access to transportation can be a barrier in getting to school," explains Hiatt Middle School Principal Deborah Chapman. "We're optimistic that this free bus service will help more students get to school, especially in these colder winter months."

According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, low-income students are four times more likely to be chronically absent than others often for reasons beyond their control, such as unstable housing, unreliable transportation and a lack of access to health care.

United Way of Central Iowa is covering the cost of the students' fares to improve access to education, and ultimately, improve the long-term success of all students. "One of our goals through the OpportUNITY Plan is to implement strategies that increase the graduation rate of Central Iowa students. DART's new service will make it easier for students to get to school, bringing us a step closer to achieving that goal," said Mary Sellers, president of UWCI.

Any Hiatt Middle School student simply needs to show his or her school ID and will be able to ride DART for free at any time. All Des Moines Public school students currently ride for free after 4 p.m., on weekends, and during school breaks. Students who are not assigned to DART buses for school transportation or are not a part of this pilot may access a half-fare pass for transportation during the day.

The Des Moines Area Regional Transit Authority is the public transportation provider that serves Polk County. DART operates a family of transportation services that makes getting around the Greater Des Moines area easier and more convenient. For more information about DART services, schedules, route changes, or directions to the nearest DART stop, visit the website at www.ridedart.com or call 515-283-8100. The MyDART Tools, Trip Planner and RideTime Transit app are now available at www.ridedart.com.

Since 1917, United Way of Central Iowa (UWCI) has brought together individuals, employers and organizations from every corner of central Iowa to create and implement initiatives focused on producing real results in the areas of education, income and health. UWCI is a "Collective Impact" organization, bringing together nonprofits, businesses, elected officials and community leaders to collaborate and implement solutions to our community's most critical issues.

For over 100 years, Des Moines Public Schools has been educating the students of Iowa's capital city. Today, Des Moines Public Schools is the largest provider of public education in Iowa, with more than 30,000 students and nearly 5,000 teachers and staff at work in more than 60 schools throughout the community. Parenting magazine ranked Des Moines #5 on the list of the best cities in the nation to raise a family, in large part due to great schools and learning opportunities.

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