

# Understanding School Driver Shortages

By Chris Darling, IPTA Executive Director



School districts in the 21st Century are facing many challenges, but one of the fastest-growing problems in modern school administration is the matter of having enough bus drivers on staff. There is a very real school bus driver shortage facing the nation, and it is a problem which is only getting worse as time goes on. School Bus Fleet Magazine has conducted multiple surveys across the country over the years, tracking the state of school bus fleets. In 2015, 71 percent of districts said they had a lack of drivers. By 2020, that statistic had grown to 92 percent, and with roughly one-fourth of respondents describing their situation as either “severe” or “desperate.” The numbers were similar for private bus contractors. Ninety-four percent reported a driver shortage, with 30 percent of those describing it as “severe” or “desperate.”

What can your district do to help with driver recruitment? There are many possible factors to consider, including: Low pay/benefits, difficult working conditions, too little support from management on disciplinary issues, too many conflicts with parents, too much paperwork or other regulatory requirements, lack of on-the-road support or assistance options, outdated or antiquated buses and other equipment, inaccurate or outdated routing report information.

The problems this shortage is causing for school districts is obvious, and statistically speaking probably already affecting your school district. Many schools are being forced to “double up” their routes, sending buses out in two waves until all students can be transported. This, however, often forces schools to delay the start of classes. It also creates disciplinary problems, particularly among students forced to wait an hour or more after the end of school. Other districts are being forced to increase bus fees, or even cut services to some areas entirely. Both of these measures can severely impact lower-income families, or potentially even create situations where children are unable to attend school. School Districts that want to keep their buses moving on-time and on-schedule will need to be creative and dedicated to ensure necessary staffing of their bus routes.

To begin with, we will start by turning the issue around: Looking at school bus driving from the perspective of potential drivers, and understanding why so many are reluctant to sign up.

## Understanding What Drivers Are Looking For:

It's easy to focus on one's own problems in hiring, but in a situation where demand for labor is greatly exceeding the labor supply, it's a good idea to take a broader view. Why is it that good bus drivers are becoming so hard to find? Obviously, some factors here are unavoidable. Bus drivers must possess a commercial driver's license (CDL), as well as being able to pass extensive background checks along with other factors such as drug tests. While many districts provide extensive CDL training, and 3rd party Entry Level Driver Training (ELDT) licensing assistance as part of school bus driver recruitment, not all drivers qualify. These issues alone will limit the pool of available drivers and they cannot be changed, nor would anyone want to! However, there are other factors, specific to the drivers themselves and their perception of school bus driving work, which are further limiting the labor supply. Let's take a look at some of those.

1. Unusual hours: School bus driving requires a very unusual schedule for its workforce. They may only be on the clock for three or four hours per day, and they're doing so at extremely inconvenient times. A bus driver running a morning route will probably be waking up at something like 5 a.m., then driving for a couple hours, and then have to be back for the afternoon drive around 2 p.m. Then they will be going to bed extremely early, probably around 9-10 p.m., to be well-rested for the next morning's run. The problem is this: Hours like that are purely part-time in terms of work, and also make it extremely difficult to hold down additional employment. This greatly limits those who are in a position to take such a job.
2. Relatively low pay and benefits: Estimates for average bus driver wages can vary wildly, undoubtedly due to the wide disparity in districts' ability to pay. However, a number around \$15 to \$20/hour seems reasonable, based on numbers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and other sources. While not excessively low, this is not enough for many drivers to make a living on, particularly given the difficulty they would have supplementing their income with another job. Additionally, few if any drivers would qualify for health, dental, or other benefits that come with a full-time job unless they were employed by the district in another capacity as well. (custodian, food service, para, etc.)



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3. The stress of the job: It is no understatement to say that bus drivers are responsible for carrying the most precious cargo in the world. No traditional truck driver would feel as much stress over a load of produce, or even sports cars, than they would over being responsible for the lives of dozens of children. There is a genuine psychological toll which has to be considered. Plus, of course, should they ever be involved in an accident, the liability issues would be personally numerous. On top of the “big picture” stresses, there are day-to-day stresses as well, particularly in dealing with disciplinary issues and parents. It’s all too common for bus drivers to find themselves in conflicts with parents over their children’s behavior. Worse, many school districts are so concerned about lawsuits that they will almost always side with the parent, leaving the bus driver with very few resources or allies.



The Conclusion: There are other options on the table for prospective applicants to earn a livable wage. Further, if someone were interested in taking a job that requires obtaining a commercial driver’s license, there are other alternatives, such as truck driving where CDL training is also frequently part of the recruitment package. From the perspective of a potential driver, there often is very little to recommend school bus driving over other forms of commercial vehicle operation. This is what modern school districts are up against. To be able to recruit bus drivers, they need to be able to provide compelling reasons for why someone would want to sign up. There is no “magic bullet” solution for this problem, and all the common recruitment options have their strengths and weaknesses.

- **Online Ads:** Online advertisements placed on major employment sites like local newspapers, Monster, Indeed.com, and CareerBuilder are some of the most common methods of school bus driver recruitment. Most of these sites are either free or extremely inexpensive to use. The major benefit is that these services are inexpensive to utilize and ads can run indefinitely. The big problem is that if your advertisement is too successful, you could end up with a lot of low-quality applicants which need to be manually screened out.
- **Job Fairs, and other advertising:** Job fairs are excellent for face-to-face meetings and, in the right circumstances, can help discover a number of high-quality applicants. The main issue is that they are significantly more expensive to arrange than other outreach forms, including the costs of on-site staff. Radio Ads in most markets is good because radio is hurting for advertising money and will usually be able to offer very good airtime rates. Air the ads at the same times of day your bus routes run. If someone’s sitting around listening to the radio, there’s a good chance they could be a candidate. Outdoor Ads are inexpensive, places like billboards, park benches, and yard signs are great eye catchers. Handouts that go home to parents are effective ways to advertise. Also, don’t forget about any community or district electronic signs inside or outside of school buildings, gymnasiums, and football fields. A parked school bus can be used to encourage interested drivers to contact the district directly.



- **Social Media:** Social media sites like Facebook and LinkedIn are increasingly used for bus driver discovery. If your school district is already well-networked, this can be a surprisingly effective recruitment technique since many parents may know good candidates, or even be interested themselves. However, this is also an untargeted, scattershot approach which may or may not bring results. Look to target the posts, such as posting to LinkedIn groups specifically for commercial drivers. Plus, social media is absolutely free, which makes it a great option for budget-conscious districts.
- **Other Free Sources:** Beyond social media, there are many other free outlets online for promotional efforts school districts can take advantage of. Your district’s own website is always a good choice, particularly if it seems likely parents in the district might be interested in becoming drivers. Colleges and Technology training centers may have students looking for part-time jobs that are available between classes. Also, schedule talks with local groups like Kiwanis, Rotary, Moose, Lions clubs, Chamber of Commerce, or other local organizations in your community.



Finally, never neglect to have extensive background checks. No matter how badly a school district needs drivers, they should never use that as an excuse to skimp on due diligence. The risks are simply too high. So, once you’ve recruited your school bus drivers, how do you hang onto them?

# Tips for School Bus Driver Retention



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It's one thing to successfully recruit school bus drivers; it's another thing to then hang onto them. For years, bus driving has seen higher than normal turnover rates, a problem which only contributes to the overall issue of driver shortages. Annual turnover varies greatly from district to district, but rates anywhere from 10 percent to over 20 percent have been reported in recent years. For schools which already have too few bus drivers, even one or two drivers quitting can cause significant hardships for the entire district. In many cases, there is simply no safety net. There have even been reports of schools having to cancel classes due to drivers shortages. So it's no exaggeration to say that one of the primary concerns of a transportation coordinator should be the retention of existing drivers.

## Tips For Improving Driver Retention:

1. **Payment and Benefits:** Compare your pay rates to nearby districts. Pay raises are difficult to budget, but it may be necessary if you aren't competitive. Consider offering *medical\ dental benefits* to drivers with a few years' loyalty and experience. Allow investment into retirement programs. Offer drivers other employment opportunities in the district, (custodian, food service, para, etc.) particularly during non-driving hours and over the summer, even if these roles aren't driving-related. Review and when you can rewrite job descriptions to include school bus driving, that way team members can qualify for full time benefits. Consider any food service staff that could cover drivers that are needed for afternoon and evening sports and field trips. Consider having one custodian open two buildings in the morning so one could drive an am school bus route. Look at district paras to see if schedules could be changed so they could drive a school bus and work in the classroom. In this new market full time employees are much easier to retain than a mobile part time staff. Make it possible for substitute drivers to be promoted to full driver status if need arises.

2. **Rewards and Recognition:** As a rule, bus drivers tend to sometimes feel unappreciated. Almost any rewards and/or recognition will improve morale. Make branded attire such as logo shirts, hats, or jackets free or inexpensive. They also make good prizes/awards. Offer driver referral bonuses, either as cash or merchandise. Offer job-related perks such as preferential parking as rewards for good performance. Give occasional free dinners for drivers such as BBQ or pizza. Consider giving awards for things like safety record, non accidents, perfect attendance, etc. Make names for your awards like "*Going the Distance*" or "*Spot Light On Success*". Post the awards somewhere prominent, and include the driver's photo to make it even more personal.



3. **Information and Awareness:** Do community outreach. Encourage the public, particularly parents, to be appreciative of their school bus drivers. Promote your department within the school district, you might even find more interested drivers that way. Set up student programs to encourage and educate proper bus safety. Create safety videos to play during special events, assemblies, parent-teacher night, etc. Contact City Hall and/or the Mayor's office to see if they'd be interested in doing an officially sponsored school bus recognition or safety program for the community. Participate in a community parades by having your drivers ride in a nice clean bus. Perhaps consider not using your newest bus since it may give the impression the district has too much money since it can afford a new bus.



4. **Community Building:** In general, work to eliminate the drivers feelings that they are "*out of the loop*" or not "*real*" district employees. Include them in anything other district employees are involved in. Be willing to stick up for your drivers in disputes with parents when the driver's actions were reasonable. Driver morale will plummet if they're expected to maintain discipline with unruly children, yet are always overruled (or even disciplined) if the parent complains.



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Encourage drivers to connect with each other and other district employees based on shared hobbies/interests. Have informal chat-lunches with them. Set up official avenues of communication, an open door policy, monthly team meetings, safety training, or simply donuts and a conversation type meeting so that drivers always feel they have the ability to talk to those higher-up. Always be on time when setting meetings with drivers. Their job is intensely time-focused and they'll appreciate reciprocation. If the drivers have a common room, do something to spruce it up every year, even if it's something simple like new chairs or new paint. Create a Transportation Advisory Council which is intended to let drivers bring concerns or complaints to higher administration in a structured fashion. Be sure drivers have access to district resources like computer labs. Don't forget retirees! They could still be called upon for occasional substitution or field trip work.

5. **Ongoing Education and Development:** Look to implement systems that allow you to monitor driver performance, morning ride-a-longs, and offer coaching opportunities using bus videos, etc. Offer paid update training and reimburse training costs for any mandatory training sessions, look to optimize them and reduce the time drivers have to spend in classrooms. Create cross-training opportunities for non-drivers who may be interested in driving but can only train for it in their spare time. Have periodic ride-a-longs from building administrators which are intended to be educational, not judgmental. Learn what drivers are dealing with to help train them in practical ways of handling situations.



6. **Listen:** No matter what else you do to incentivize your drivers and help keep them happy, be sure to always listen to their ideas and suggestions. Their time spent on the road, dealing with their routes on a day-to-day basis, are going to give them insights worth considering.



Retaining drivers is very important, as it cuts down on the cost of hiring and training new staff, and will provide your school district with an experienced and safe school bus driving team over many years. Finally, when a driver does leave the district, always try to conduct an exit interview to find out why, and incorporate that into your future planning.

In short, the better you treat your drivers, or any staff member, the more likely they are to remain with the district for many years. Having a group of happy drivers creates real security within the transportation system, which can pay off throughout the year in both tangible and intangible ways.

Even though there is an industry-wide problem finding enough school bus drivers, that doesn't mean your district has to suffer. All too often, problems districts have in recruiting and keeping drivers have to do with their own unwillingness to recognize their drivers' contributions and reward them appropriately.

A combination of effective outreach, driver friendly policies, higher pay and benefits (if possible), can easily make your district one of the most attractive to bus drivers in your area and around the state. Getting the best drivers definitely requires proactive



## BUS SAFETY UPDATE!

If a school bus is equipped with lap/shoulder belts, students must wear those belts at all times while the bus is in motion. State law now requires all new school buses to have these



You never have to throw seeds to grow weeds. You do need to throw seeds to plant positivity!

## The Four Characteristics used for Student Management

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School district transportation departments in Iowa place high expectations on school bus drivers to act as role models, ambassadors, and protectors of the children assigned to their daily care. For drivers one of the most challenging skills to learn is the responsibility for managing the conduct of the students behavior while riding the school bus.

The driver must be the leader and set the tone for their bus much the same way that teachers set the tone for their classrooms. Many students bring baggage other than their backpacks when they board the bus in the morning or head home after a long day.

Both a.m. and p.m. routes are opportunities for inappropriate behavior, but the tone of your bus could make a significant difference. It is a **best practice** to greet every student with a smile while boarding the bus in the morning and in the afternoon. Get to know students names as soon as possible, and set an example on your bus of courtesy and friendliness.

When you as the driver look at your own student management style, the first question that needs to be answered is, "**Are you the leader on your school bus or are you just along for the ride?**" The correct answer is: You must be the leader, and the person that students can look up to, trust and respect. No matter what your situation, **leadership, trust and respect** is something that can only be earned by your own actions over time.

As a school bus driver it is a good idea to learn and focus on the four elements of leadership that you may already possess. The characteristics that define leadership basically can be broken in to four elements:

1. **Characteristics** - Define what is the situation...what do we both want?
2. **Communication** - Use effective strategies when communicating with children.
3. **Consistency** - Maintain a standard approach with all children.
4. **Conflict Resolution** - Positive Correction, Consequence and Follow up.

**Number (1), Characteristics**, define what is the situation...what do we both want? That sounds simple enough, but it takes a four part answer:

- **Who am I, the bus driver.**
- **Who are they, children (ages 5-17 years old) that want a fun, and safe ride to school.**
- **What do I want them to do, follow the bus rules.**
- **Why, to increase student safety and keep the school bus drivers eyes on the road.**

**Number (2), Communication**, there are only two goals:

- **To get students to HEAR, which includes understanding the Board approved bus rules.**
- **To get students to LEARN, which includes following the Board approved bus rules.**



In order for communication to exist there has to be a sender and a receiver working together. If either one is not working successfully together then communication does not exist.

One of the **best practices** is to use the student's first names and make sure that you have the student's attention. It is important to make sure that they are listening to you before reviewing the bus rules or safety instructions. When you are done, it's very important that you ask them if that sounds reasonable, and if they understand your instructions. Having students respond to your questions ensures that they have clear understanding of the behaviors you are looking for on the school bus.





When communicating with students there are some very important **don'ts** that all school bus drivers need to remember: Never yell at students, argue, or call students names. Never use profanity, verbally escalate the situation or get physical.

These types of mistakes will destroy a school bus driver's relationship with bus riders, and very quickly eliminate any chance in building a respectful relationship on the driver's assigned school bus. When working with children it is a **best practice** to build a good working relationship over time through friendly and respectful conversations. If you don't invest the time it becomes, you vs them. That is a forty plus to one disadvantage that only leads to frustration for both sides.

We have reviewed the don'ts and now let's move on to the **Do's** in Communication, they begin with simply thinking before you speak, giving polite directives, using a calming tone of voice. Clearly state the expectations and this is very important, **quote only School Board approved bus rules.** Clearly state consequence for inappropriate behavior and present students a choice. The driver can present options to the student such as; apologize to another rider, moving seats to resolve a situation or an assigned seat for a reasonable amount of time. The assigned seat (learning seat) is nothing more than an opportunity for the student to deescalate and relax a little. Drivers can change the perception that the student has of being relocated by using a few kind words like, *"it's going to be all right, but we both have to figure out how you can be successful riding the bus."* When you have a student deescalated ask them, *"why are you in the (assigned or learning) seat?"* Remind them what rule they apparently did not understand and try to resolve the problem. Consider it an opportunity to get to know the student better, and for them to get to know you the driver a little better.



Good **communication** is another **best practice** and the most effective tool that a school bus driver has for teaching and maintaining the bus rules. Use positive communication to ensure a proper relationship with your riders, be an *"Active" communicator, and listener.* Value their input, think before you speak and include positive reinforcement on a daily basis.

**Number (3), Consistency** - Maintain a standard and fair approach with all children. This part of leadership is an especially important component, and may be the most misunderstood by drivers. The first step to consistency is the understanding that it's the only path to building trust between the school bus driver and students. The two components that drivers have to balance are the student's **perception** of how the driver is enforcing the bus rules, and if they feel that there has been **inconsistency** by the driver or by other drivers.

To each bus driver the general rules may be very clear, Remain Seated, Speak with an Inside Voice, Keep Your Hands and feet to yourself and Be Nice. Your school district will have a list of school board approved rules, and district drivers have attended the same in-service training together, they have read the same transportation handbooks, however they may still interpret the basic rules differently. **How can that be?**

Let's call it **generational perception** for defining the rules. Take the rule, *"Speak with an Inside Voice"* it's clear and to the point. There should be no **inconsistency** or **perceived** favoritism by any student with this rule because it states clearly, *"speak with an inside voice."*

Unfortunately the board approved bus rules are not as clear as one would think if you factor in generational perception. Your district has school bus drivers from 18 to 70 plus years old and they were all raised in different generations, by different parents, and with differing childhood expectations. The more senior drivers may be from a time when children were expected to be *"seen and not heard"* or *"speak only when spoken to by an adult."* The less senior driver is from a generation where children are far more expressive and they are, *"seen and heard."* In regards to this one rule senior drivers in many cases (*not all*) have higher expectations, to maintain a quieter bus than younger drivers. That means that due to this generational perception, school bus drivers all could perceive this one rule, and other rules with different levels of expectations.

The basic rules have remained the same, however the rules are being interpreted differently due to realistic generational factors. All the students see is the inconsistency or perceived unfairness, and riders can and will direct their frustration back at the driver. Inconsistency in how a driver interacts with students produces the loss of creditability, and builds lack of trust between bus riders. This is a challenge for all transportation directors and school bus drivers, school bus rules need to be implemented the same by all school bus drivers on the driving team.



Drivers can regain trust and build good communication by enforcing the districts standard set of bus rules equally from bus to bus. Everyone on the driving team should only, say what you mean, and mean what you say, all while keeping a professional attitude and using positive redirection.

**Number (4), Conflict Resolution** - This may be one of the more challenging aspects for the school bus driver due to the limited amount of interaction time available during the course of a normal school bus route. Cameras on the bus have helped school bus drivers, and transportation supervisors can clearly see conflict and the bullying behavior between students riding the bus. However the bus cameras can only document the problem for viewing later, the driver must deal with the problem in real time keeping all of the passengers safe.



Drivers face a plethora of behavioral issues everyday, from the mundane to the extreme. The driver must always remember that they are *the professional*, and the *only adult with authority on the bus*. When conflict occurs or a fight breaks out, while stopping the bus in a safe location, it is best to **give verbal instructions, using clear direct commands**. After the bus is secured continue to **give verbal instructions to stop!** When addressing the situation or when students that are fighting, directives should be given in a calm, assertive tone. Let directives be clear and specific and remember to try and call riders by their name. Many times when students are involved in an argument or a fight, they are so lost in the moment that they cannot even hear the outside world. This is a technique often used to help get the students attention. In most situations saying their names along with verbal interaction will resolve the problem followed by changing seating locations. Physical contact should only be used when the driver has no other option.

**Physical contact should only be used as a last resort!** The school bus driver should only **physically intervene to stop students from hurting each other, themselves or the driver.**

*For the complete use of reasonable and necessary force refer to: 281 - 103.5(256B,280) Use of reasonable and necessary force.  
Also refer to: Your local School District Board Policies.*

When you are able to get the students attention and they stop arguing or fighting, make sure to separate the individuals and continue to monitor their behavior. Assess whether or not there are any injuries and decide whether first aid is needed. Contact dispatch and give them an update of your situation. After dealing with a defiant unruly student, extreme bullying, or a fight on the bus, it is the drivers responsibility to report the incident in writing. These types of incidents need to be addressed immediately, advise the transportation director and depending on the severity of the incident, contact building principal and the students parents.



Implement these four characteristics that define leadership as a **best practice** in your daily interactions with bus riders. There are two ways for students to get attention, **positive and negative**. Most students generally choose positive ways of getting attention; they sit quietly and respond to directions appropriately. Keep this in mind, you cannot really change the way somebody behaves, but you can change how you react to that behavior. The way you react may influence how the student chooses to behave in the future.

Student management takes practice and experience. Understanding the four characteristics used for student management provides you useful techniques, and basic strategies for maintaining positive communication on any school bus. Keep this in mind, leaders do not force people to follow, they invite them on the journey. Send out your leadership invitations to your riders daily, every morning and afternoon.