

Tips for School Bus Driver Retention



Chris Darling, IPTA Executive Director



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 work and cooperation from administration, but it is an achievable goal.



To get what we've never had, we must do what we've never done!