

# School Bus Driver Recruitment and Retention Playbook



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**Department of  
Education &  
Workforce**

# Strategies and Supports to Address School Bus Driver Shortages and Other Transportation Challenges

School transportation departments across the state are reporting difficulties in securing adequate numbers of school bus drivers to cover routes. This issue is nationwide and not exclusive to Ohio. Both throughout the country and locally, public districts and schools are being challenged to develop creative local strategies to address transportation challenges and shortages.

## STRATEGIES FOR DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS

Transportation directors from urban, suburban, and rural districts, along with community and nonpublic school representatives across the state, collaborated to share some of the following ideas that districts may consider to address school transportation staffing challenges.

### *RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION*

- **Bus driver employment:** Review bus driver employment data to identify current needs compared to the actual number of bus drivers employed. This information will help districts create an aggressive recruitment plan to fill bus driver openings. Open bus driver positions can be posted on a school district webpage along with testimonials about current bus drivers. Accurately capture the positive benefits of the position. This can help create a sense of value and spotlight current bus drivers for their work and dedication.
- **Leverage association resources:** Organizations such as the Ohio Association for Pupil Transportation (OAPT) may have resources to share driver vacancies and employment opportunities, as well as hiring strategies.
- **Hire a recruitment/marketing firm:** Consider hiring a recruiting firm to assist applicants in the completion of applications for district positions. This typically leads to the recruiting firm using digital marketing to advertise for the positions. In many cases, recruiting firms also can help ensure applicants fully complete the application process, which would allow the district to expedite the hiring process.

Example: A district used a media group that in turn worked with a digital marketing company. This strategy gave prospective bus drivers guidance on how to become a driver for the district. Once the prospective applicant

completed a questionnaire, the marketing company reached out and directed the applicant to complete the district's Driver in Training application.

- **Partnership training:** Partner with an adult education program to assist applicants in obtaining a Commercial Learner's Permit, which is a first step toward obtaining the Commercial Driver's License (CDL) required to drive a school bus and successfully completing the associated tests. The Adult Diploma Program provides job training and an alternate pathway for those ages 18 or older to earn an industry-recognized credential aligned to one of Ohio's in-demand jobs (after passing the WorkKeys, course requirements, and assessments) AND be awarded a state-issued high school diploma. Partners can be located by reviewing the [Adult Diploma program](#).

Example: A district worked closely with an adult education program to teach prospective bus drivers (trainees) the curriculum needed to pass the Commercial Driver's License permit test. In this instance, the adult education program was able to adapt to the learners' scheduling needs.

- **Utilize district personnel:** Explore the option of enlisting the help of other district personnel (such as custodians, cooks, classroom aides, teachers, and coaches). In some cases, personnel are only working part time in their current positions, and they may have both the time and interest in becoming a bus driver. The school district would need to ensure the individual completes all necessary bus driver training and obtains the proper certification and CDL. Look at bus drivers as salaried employees in lieu of hourly employees.

Example: An employee would start at 4 a.m. with building duties, then drive a bus for the morning route and finish an eight-hour shift with building and grounds tasks. The next shift would start at 1 or 2 p.m. with a different employee driving an afternoon route and then finishing the shift with building duties.

- **Retire-rehire:** Consider rehiring retired employees at a higher pay scale rate.

Example: A district could rehire retired bus drivers and bring them in at the rate of pay they were receiving when they retired. Although they would not keep their seniority, the incentive is that these drivers would be at the top of the pay scale while also collecting retirement benefits. In addition, a district may try using mentors to assist new hires with normal routines. This would provide new hires with someone — beyond the trainer or supervisor — available for support. Consider stipends for personnel who bring in applicants.

- **Paid training:** Provide paid training while recruits obtain their school bus driver certifications. Training and support must be in the forefront of all communications

to entice applicants to sign on. This can help lower their anxiety to perform duties. Implement positive changes in duties for new hires by having them start on well-functioning bus routes and pay stipends to drivers who are willing and able to handle the most challenging routes or building tasks.

Example: A district reported that once trainees obtained their permits, the district was able to raise their pay from \$11 per hour to \$18.50 per hour. The increase in pay came during the time the drivers were obtaining their certificates.

- **Ohio Military Veteran Educators Program Recruiting Initiative:** The Ohio Department of Education and Workforce has partnered with the Ohio Department of Veterans Services to offer the Military Recruit Award. Employers may consider hiring military personnel, veterans, or military spouses as school bus drivers. To learn more, visit the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce’s [Ohio Military Veteran Educators Program Recruiting Initiative webpage](#).
- **Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS):** To improve driver retention and recruitment, provide PBIS training to all school bus drivers. This will equip them with the tools and resources to support student behavior. One factor that may deter people from driving a school bus is the behavior of students. Schools are encouraged to implement a team approach to PBIS and include the bus drivers as part of the team.
- **Other incentives:** Districts may want to explore opportunities around attendance bonuses, driver referral incentives, and salary and benefit increases. Consider recognition and rewards for exemplary employees and frequently ensure your drivers feel supported by school and district leadership. Fostering a positive work environment for all staff, including bus drivers, will lead to better retention and recruitment.

## *ROUTE LOGISTICS*

- **Engage a routing consultant:** Engage a routing consultant with expertise in related transportation software to identify options for increasing efficiency. The routing consultant may be able to assist with alternative solutions that perhaps another district was successful with, such as new route/stop boundaries and more.

Example: A school district hired a consulting firm that applied an algorithm to the routing parameters, bell times, and vehicle capacities. The firm ran many different scenarios that gave the district multiple options to improve efficiency.

- **Monetary incentives:** Districts may consider monetary incentives for staff to supervise students who arrive early to school and are picked up from school later.

- **Determining actual riders instead of eligible riders:** Use routing software to determine the students who will use the transportation services. Review transportation registration and determine the actual number of riders for each route rather than the number of eligible riders for each route. This may reduce the number of routes required each day.

Example: Districts may be able to request transportation registration from parents to determine the number of actual riders who will use a bus every day in comparison to all eligible riders. This information may allow the district to lower the number of routes (and subsequently the number of bus drivers) it needs.

- **Route consolidation:** Consolidate routes throughout the district to increase efficiency. Reduce the number of buses providing services for students. This will create more students per bus, but fewer buses are needed to provide the same level of service.
- **Combine building routes:** Combine multiple buildings on one bus or route to reduce the number of drivers needed. If possible, have additional stops assigned to a bus that may be able to drop off students at more than one building, based on the assigned geographical area.
- **Tiered routing:** Determine if a bus driver has time to run a route, drop off students, and then make a second run for the same school building. (A tiered routing system like this may require bell time adjustments.) Buildings may need to open earlier to allow for this.
- **Special education students:** Consider transporting special education students together with other students. Verify that students are being transported in compliance with their individualized education programs and that all requirements are being met. Students riding together may help transportation services maintain a level of efficiency.
- **Central hub:** Utilize a hub (such as an elementary building or intermediate school building). In this model, several buses deliver students to this hub and then the students transfer from there to their destinations. All the buses run routes and deliver students to one location. At this one location, the students transfer to the buses that are assigned to drop them off at their respective school buildings.

## SHARING SERVICES

- **Collaboration with community and nonpublic schools:** Although it is a requirement that the local school district transport community and nonpublic school students to and from school, the district also may explore the opportunity for community and nonpublic schools to provide bus drivers to transport their own students. Community and nonpublic schools could partner with their local school districts for the possible use of a school bus (buses) through a contractual agreement. Contracts should be made in accordance with [Ohio law](#). The community or nonpublic school could identify individuals from the community who would be willing to obtain the proper bus driver training, certification, and license. These individuals would then drive the community and nonpublic school routes only.

Example: A staff member of the community or nonpublic school may be interested in following the appropriate procedures to be certified to operate a school bus. Additionally, the community or nonpublic school could canvass parents about obtaining school bus driver credentials.

- **Shared services:** Share transportation services between districts and educational service centers if the ESCs provide transportation services to make routing more efficient. At times, districts may be able to work with each other to assist in transporting students to other districts. This may be accomplished by using a neighboring district's buses and drivers after the district completed its route(s). The partner district may be able to assist with transporting students to a hub location or the buildings they are attending.
- **Partnerships:** Seek partnerships with local organizations that have employees with flexibility in their work schedules that would allow their employees to assist with busing (for example: fire departments, emergency medical services, county boards of developmental disabilities, churches, houses of worship, towing companies, veterans' associations, and available parents and community members).

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- **Bus purchases:** Purchase buses with driver amenities, such as air conditioning, heated driver seats, power rooftop vent fans, white roofs, tinted windows, and driver assistance features like auto braking, lane departure warnings, and good camera systems, all of which can help retain drivers.
- **Budget considerations:** Determine the costs of a new hire, including compensation and benefits, onboarding, and professional development. Use this data to determine a budget for hiring additional drivers.

In addition to the supports and considerations outlined here, the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce will continue to offer resources as new information becomes available. Please check back often for updated information. Direct any questions to the Office of Pupil Transportation at (614) 466-4230 or [schoolbus@education.ohio.gov](mailto:schoolbus@education.ohio.gov).