

Keeping Your Bus Fleet **Fully Staffed** Despite Driver Shortages



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I. The Challenge: Overcoming the School Bus Driver Shortage

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's fleets. In 2010, 71 percent of districts said they had a lack of drivers. By 2015, 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."

Why is there so much trouble with driver recruitment? Many possible factors have been suggested, 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- Outdated or antiquated buses and other equipment
- Inaccurate or outdated routing reports



I. The Challenge: Overcoming the School Bus Driver Shortage *continued*

The problems this shortage is causing for school districts is obvious and - statistically speaking - probably already affecting you. 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 disadvantage lower-income families, or potentially even create situations where children are unable to attend 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. This eBook has been created specifically to help school districts and bus contractors achieve these goals. In it, we will take a deeper look at the problems surrounding bus driver recruitment and retention, while suggesting hard actionable ideas for improving your own driver staffing. In addition, we will also look at recent technological advances which have been shown to significantly improve driver experience, reduce fleet costs, and enhance student safety.

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.

II. 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 areas provide CDL training and 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.

II. Understanding What Drivers Are Looking For *continued*

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/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.



II. Understanding What Drivers Are Looking For *continued*



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 ruinous.

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.

II. Understanding What Drivers Are Looking For *continued*

4. A lack of tools to improve the job.

Many districts are still using the same pen-and-paper record keeping methods that they have used for decades. Drivers have to hand document everything about their run, from fuel use to disciplinary reports, while also having to keep track of all their passengers manually.

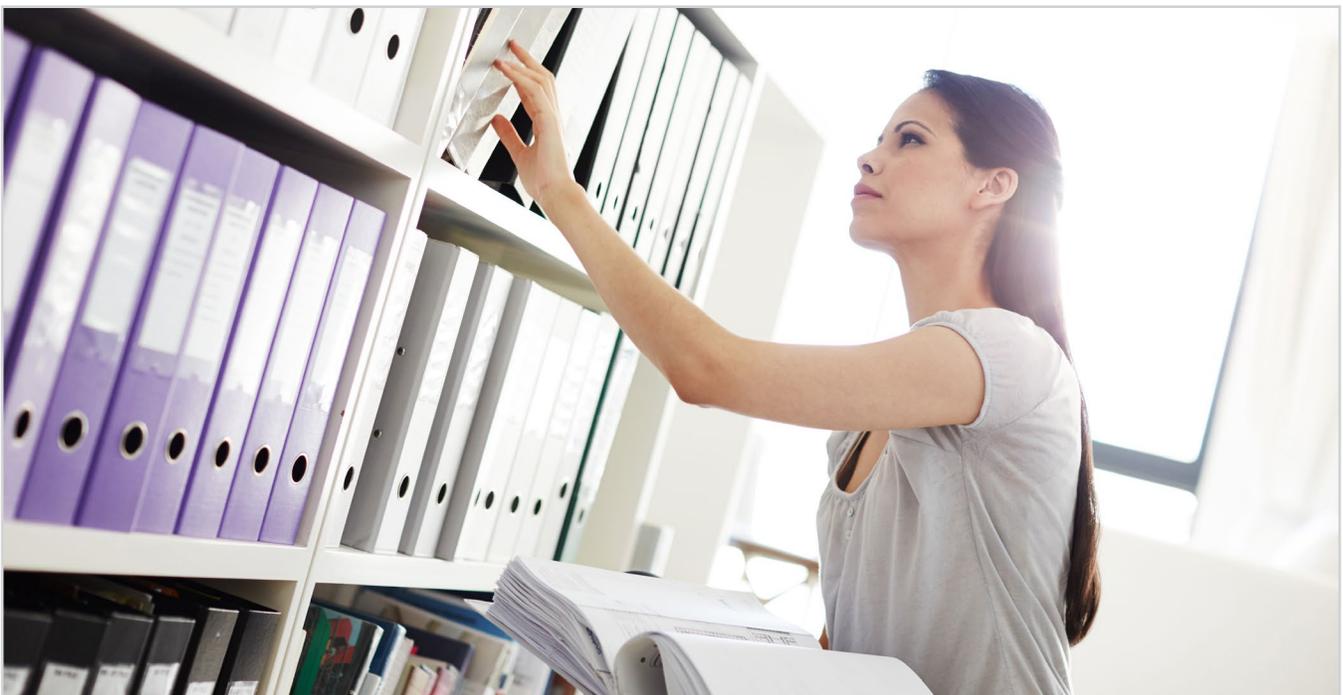
This can add significantly to the time burdens of the job, as well as making it unpleasant to deal with.

The Conclusion: There Are Better Options On The Table

Simply put, there is often very little compelling reason for a person to go into bus driving when it can be such a stressful job that also makes it difficult 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. Smart utilization of recruitment resources is also necessary, to find good prospects who can meet these criteria.

In the next section, we'll discuss avenues of recruitment and how to improve your potential pool of drivers.



III. Utilizing Effective Recruitment Outlets and Techniques



To hire great bus drivers, you need to find great bus driver applicants. As we discussed last chapter, that can be difficult given the many perceived problems many see with school bus driving. This means that school districts who want to recruit top candidates are going to need to be creative and be willing to explore a variety of outlets for finding those candidates.

There is no “magic bullet” solution here, and all the common recruitment types have their strengths and weaknesses. First, we’ll look at some of those.

1. Examining Common Bus Driver Recruitment Methods

Online Ads

Online advertisements placed on major employment sites like Monster, CareerBuilder, and Indeed.com are one 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.

III. Utilizing Effective Recruitment Outlets and Techniques *continued*

Job Fairs

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, 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 then, there's a good chance they could be a candidate. Plus, you can pre-screen listeners based on the market the radio station targets. The downside is that, like online ads, you'll likely get a large number of junk responses.

Outdoor Ads

Billboards are expensive, but ads on places like park benches usually aren't. Also, don't forget that your own school bus could be a rolling ad. Use the side of the bus to encourage interested drivers to contact the district directly.



III. Utilizing Effective Recruitment Outlets and Techniques *continued*

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. Their 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, look to state and local industry groups such as your state Association of Pupil Transportation or Association of School Business Officials.

2. Other Important Factors in Recruitment

No matter what form of outreach you deploy, get creative with your messaging. Be aware of the objections we discussed in Chapter 2, and look for a more positive spin which could make the position seem attractive. For example, one set of creative ads we've seen on the sides of buses used messages like, "As long as kids get evenings and weekends off, so will you!" and "You'll never take your work home with you. In fact, it's illegal."

That sort of positive spinning will go a long way, particularly when pitched as an alternative to more traditional 9-to-5 jobs.

Likewise, when interviewing bus drivers face-to-face, be reassuring and try to emphasize the highlights of the job. Make sure to note any and all benefits that accompany the job, such as CDL training, which might make it more attractive to them. Be prepared for them to raise some objections like the ones we've discussed and have responses ready. In fact, it could potentially be a red flag if they have no objections at all.

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? In the next chapter, we'll examine best practices for bus driver retention.





IV. Keeping Your Drivers Happy

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 quitting.

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, particularly during non-driving hours and over the summer, even if these roles aren't driving-related.
- Be willing to offer premiums for summer driving.
- Offer equalized 12-month pay schedules, like teachers can receive, to compensate for the potential lack of summer employment.
- Make it possible for substitute drivers to be promoted to full driver status if need arises.
- Remember the "give'em the pickle" principle, which can also apply to employee morale. If a driver makes a request which would be cheap or easy to fulfill, it's usually better to let them have it than to risk them becoming disgruntled over a minor matter.

IV. Keeping Your Drivers Happy *continued*

2. Rewards and Recognition

As a rule, bus drivers tend to 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 and gas usage.
- Have clever names for your awards like “Going the Distance” or “Spot Light On Success” to make them seem more special.
- Post the awards somewhere prominent for everyone to see. 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 parade by having your best drivers ride in and next to a nice clean bus. Do not use your newest bus since it may give the impression the district has too much money since it can afford a new bus.

IV. Keeping Your Drivers Happy *continued*

4. Community Building



- In general, don't make your drivers feel like they're "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.
 - Assign or elect driver representatives for local organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce or Rotary Club.
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- Encourage drivers to connect with each other and other district employees based on shared hobbies\ interests. Have a bulletin board (online or offline) for setting up groups based around hobbies.
 - Take some personal interest in your drivers. Send out birthday cards. Have informal chat-lunches with them.
 - Set up official avenues of communication 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. Send them birthday cards to stay in touch.

IV. Keeping Your Drivers Happy *continued*



5. Ongoing Education and Development

- Look to implement systems that allow you to monitor driver performance, such as reducing fuel consumption, and offer coaching opportunities.
- Offer paid training, or else reimburse training costs from reputable trade schools, colleges, or universities.
- For any mandatory training sessions, look to optimize them and reduce the time drivers have to spend in classrooms. Consider learn-at-your-own-pace online learning systems.
- 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-alongs from 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.
- Consider adding technological solutions that can reduce driver burdens, such as student-monitoring systems.
- If adding technology, be sure to always have resources available to train drivers on their use. Some may not be overly familiar with computers and similar systems.

IV. Keeping Your Drivers Happy *continued*

Above All: Listen To Them

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. Plus, it will make them feel welcome and help keep their morale high.

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, the more likely they are to remain with the district in years to come. 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.

Next, in the final chapter, we'll be looking at how improvements in technology can help you optimize your fleet while improving safety, with solid long-term returns on the investment.



V. Technological Solutions for Improving Drivers' Experiences *continued*



Finally, let's talk about modern technology. School buses have not changed very much over the years. There are new technologies available which can significantly enhance your bus drivers' experience though, and bring significant cost savings to your district as well! In many cases, investment in these technologies can turn into a true win-win-win scenario. They can keep students safer, make your drivers happier, and reduce your own overall operating costs.

There are two main types of technology going into school buses today, which can either be used together or separately: GPS navigation systems and RFID-based student tracking.

V. Technological Solutions for Improving Drivers' Experiences *continued*



Major Technologies Which Improve Your Transportation System and Bus Driver Experience

1. GPS Systems in Buses Make Sense

We see GPS navigation systems are standard in many kinds of vehicles, yet their usage in school buses is lagging behind - probably due to upgrade expenses. This is unfortunate because they almost inevitably pay for themselves, and often in a very short amount of time. When combined with

software in the administration office which receives and tracks the GPS signals in real-time, the benefits are numerous:

- Never lose track of your buses. Ever.
- Should a bus ever deviate from its planned course, or stop by the side of the road (such as for a flat tire) you're notified quickly.
- Drivers facing obstacles, such as thick rush-hour traffic or unexpected construction, can calculate and follow new routes.
- Onboarding new drivers is expedited since the GPS Navigation System can guide them through their route without memorization.
- Monitor your drivers' safety performance. Are they really coming to a full stop at train tracks? You'll know every time.
- Monitor bus performance, such as gas mileage. This can often alert you to minor maintenance issues with the bus early on, before they become costlier breakdowns.
- Calls from parents asking where their child is can be answered more quickly and with greater precision when you can track every bus.

V. Technological Solutions for Improving Drivers' Experiences *continued*

Additionally, the software can collect on-the-road data which is where you can really start optimizing, particularly if you feed your bus's own maintenance data into the system. You can compare routes not just in terms of time, but also in terms of matters like fuel costs or tire wear. You can even use the data to recalculate your bus routes - potentially cutting entire routes without sacrificing any stops, in some cases.

2. Onboard Cameras Protect Everyone

Another highly popular system to install on buses is video surveillance cameras. Depending on the setup, they can either record locally or - when connected to a sufficient mobile Internet connection - can beam their feeds directly back to the office.

The benefits here are obvious, particularly when it comes to disciplinary issues or conflicts with parents. You have video records of everything happening on the bus, so there's simply no doubt as to whether a child did or did not do something. They can also be good for coaching bus drivers, as the video will almost always catch events that the bus driver overlooked.

Or, for live-feed cameras, the bus driver could even radio back to base and ask for help with a situation, and you'll be able to see exactly what's happening.

3. Onboard Tablet Systems Have Many Uses

We're beginning to see tablet computers all over the place, and fleet vehicles are no exception. Depending on the software loaded, tablets can serve a wide variety of auxiliary functions which take a lot of stress off the driver.

Providing navigational data is one of the most popular uses when paired with a GPS system, particularly since they provide better visibility than many of the smaller handheld GPS units which are typically installed. Other, more specialized software systems can function as electronic log books - tracking maintenance, gas mileage, ridership, and more. Advanced systems can even tie directly into the bus's engine computer, collecting diagnostic data or sending information on performance problems straight to the office.

All these functions make buses safer on the road, while reducing the number of things a driver has to manually manage. Allowing them to focus as much of their attention as possible on driving should always be a priority when installing new technology.

V. Technological Solutions for Improving Drivers' Experiences *continued*

4. Electronic Logging Devices Are an Inexpensive Way To Track Drivers

In an increasing number of areas around the country, it's becoming mandatory to electronically log the identity and road-hours of all large vehicle drivers. That's exactly what Electronic Logging Devices (ELDs) do. In many cases, these devices can also handle telemetry and maintenance-tracking as well.

They aren't as robust or full-featured as some other options - such as full tablet navigation and telemetry systems - but can be an affordable option for districts who want to improve their driver tracking and reporting.

5. Electronic Inspection Devices Speed Checkups and Improve Maintenance



Another aspect of bus driving which can be burdensome for both drivers and maintenance crews is the need for frequent, thorough inspections of the buses. Electronic Inspection Devices (EIDs) are what can address this problem.

They work alongside RFID tags embedded within the school bus, with each RFID tag attached to a "zone" which should be inspected.

Your drivers and/or maintenance crew simply move along the bus with their EID in hand, making notes on the condition of all important elements in each zone. These are logged electronically, with timestamps.

EIDs make pre- and post-route inspections far more thorough, and can often speed up the process by automating as much of it as possible. Additionally, they can allow for a huge range of reports and maintenance problems alerts - far more than a typical clipboard can hold. There's far less chance of a maintenance issue going overlooked or unaddressed, and your reporting of issues will be much more accurate.

V. Technological Solutions for Improving Drivers' Experiences *continued*



6. RFID Student Tracking Brings Peace of Mind

RFID-based tracking chips in student IDs remain a controversial idea in some places, but they're slowly coming to be accepted. The huge safety benefits outweigh minor privacy trade-offs. This is particularly true considering that the RFID systems can't track students anywhere outside your campus and buses. Students on-campus really don't have any reason to think their movements should be private.

When it comes to school buses, the big advantage is that you will always know which students are on and off your buses. When they're tracked entering and leaving the bus, you always have a solid record of ridership. This can help with attendance tracking, and improve your state funding thanks to more-accurate reporting with hard data behind it.

Plus, you can even notify their teachers in advance that they won't be attending.

7. Parent/Staff Mobile Apps Share The Information

Finally, don't forget about the other people in your district with a need to keep track of your buses and their schedules! There are a number of app-based systems a school district can subscribe to which allow parents, faculty, and other authorized personnel to look up the status of buses on their routes.

They simply tie into your existing GPS or similar systems, while restricting the information provided to what that particular person needs to know (i.e., if a parent has children on Bus 3, they only see the status of Bus 3).

Besides giving parents real peace of mind, this can vastly reduce calls to your office inquiring about the status of school buses. With location information and frequently-updated ETAs, parents can check for themselves to find out where their bus riding children are.

V. Technological Solutions for Improving Drivers' Experiences *continued*

How These Systems Improve Bus Driver Experiences

Beyond improving student safety and opening up huge new opportunities to optimize your own transportation systems, a combination of technological upgrades will do a lot to make your district attractive to drivers. They can be a legitimate selling point during recruitment!

- Onboard maps and directions make navigation far easier.
- Field trips and other drives to unfamiliar locations are less stressful with computer-assisted navigation.
- Drivers with good safety or legal records can be recognized and rewarded for their skills.
- Drivers have more means of communication with the office, and more avenues for getting help in unusual circumstances.
- Video cameras are an excellent way of ensuring drivers have sufficient protection in disputes with parents over disciplinary issues.
- Reliable electronic tracking of students takes one more burden off drivers. They aren't solely responsible for tracking ridership.
- Better tracking of maintenance issues, both in the garage and on the road, help them feel more secure about the machinery they're handling.
- Digital records-keeping is almost always easier and faster than doing them on paper.
- In general, electronic tracking or video presents facts whenever a "he said/she said" situation develops on a bus, such as over whether a student rode or if a driver is properly following the law.

Drivers know that districts which are willing to invest in their fleet for the sake of safety and efficiency are likely to take their drivers more seriously as well. On top of all the real-world, day-to-day improvements these systems bring, that by itself can convince a driver you're worth working for.





VI. Conclusion: Full Bus Staffing Is Truly Obtainable

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 (if possible), and technological improvements to your buses can easily make your district one of the most attractive to bus drivers around the state. Getting the best drivers definitely requires proactive work and cooperation from administration, but it is an eminently achievable goal.

BusBoss wants to help you on your journey towards optimal bus staffing! To learn more about how to optimize your routes and make driving easier for your drivers, we invite you to receive up to 10 free bus route optimization tips in 10 minutes! Our expert staff will give you a free consultation on how to effectively improve your own routing, no strings attached.

Or to find out more about how modern technology can significantly improve your transportation systems across the board, simply visit BusBoss.com for more information.



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