

Yellow Buses, Red Flags: New York's School Bus Driver Shortage



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I. Introduction

School bus drivers in New York State transport more than 2.3 million children to school and back home each day.¹

Source: New York Association for Pupil Transportation



For the vast majority of students, their bus driver is the first school employee they see in the morning and the last they say goodbye to in the afternoon. Bus drivers have the profound responsibility of getting students to and from school safely and securely 180 days a year.

Unfortunately, many school districts have a hard time recruiting and retaining school bus drivers. According to a recent survey, three-quarters of school transportation directors in New York reported having had unfilled school bus driver positions at some point during the 2017-18 school year.² The same survey found that more than eight in 10 school transportation directors consider driver shortage either their number one problem/concern or a major problem/concern.³ The shortage of school bus drivers in New York appears to be a problem in all regions of the state, although some regions are impacted more greatly than others.

A shortage of bus drivers can have significant consequences for school districts and the children they educate, including: lengthy bus trips as districts consolidate routes; delayed arrivals and departures; cancelled field trips and extracurricular activities; increased costs as a shortage of drivers drives up wages; and, in extreme cases, children and families having to provide their own means of transportation to and from school.

In the Auburn Enlarged City School District, afternoon bus runs took longer than usual and athletic teams were more than an hour late to away games in the first two months of 2018-19 because its transportation provider, First Student, started the school year short seven drivers.⁴

In Fort Edward, school Superintendent Daniel Ward has become a backup bus driver for the district after the school system's 2018-19 proposed budget failed, leading to a revised spending plan containing \$180,000 in reductions, which included not replacing a bus driver. Ward upgraded his commercial driver's license to expand the number of on-call bus drivers after the district didn't replace a longtime driver who retired.⁵

"We don't want kids to not be able to have an educational opportunity like a field trip because we don't have a driver, and that's happened to us in the past," Ward said.⁶

In addition, the absence of school bus drivers jeopardizes the potential of the state's nearly 700 school

districts to explore innovative learning models and school choice strategies which require moving children from one location to another or delivering children to school at various hours in the day. Some require transportation to and from after-school programs or related activities.

In some districts, a lack of bus drivers can become a safety issue. Districts with severe shortages often have to press fleet mechanics into bus driver service, meaning bus repair and maintenance may suffer. According to Josh Turley, the CEO of a national fleet management software firm, shop managers "are trying to make sure that they have enough vehicles to cover the routes, but can't fix the buses because they only have their mechanics for four hours in a day. It puts them in a very difficult position to keep up with not only breakdowns, but routine maintenance and safety checks as well. We've discussed how the technician shortage has impacted fleets, but driver shortage is having just as big if not a bigger impact in maintenance operations."⁷

There are a number of factors that have made bus driving less attractive in recent years. For instance, the improved economy means that many are returning to jobs that they had done prior to the economic downturn. In addition, the process for getting a commercial driver license – including obtaining a permit, training and taking the road test – can be time consuming and expensive. Drivers are also subject to extensive drug tests, background checks and other testing requirements.

Nevertheless, families throughout New York State depend on school districts to provide transportation for their children. This report, a collaborative effort among the New York Association for Pupil Transportation (NYAPT), New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA) and the National Association for Pupil Transportation (NAPT), offers data, analysis and recommendations for state policymakers and local school leaders to address the challenge of ensuring there are enough qualified drivers to carry our state's most precious cargo: schoolchildren.

II. Framing New York's school bus driver shortage

In order to get a clearer picture of the school bus driver shortage in New York, NYAPT, NYSSBA and NAPT conducted surveys of two groups of people. School transportation directors were asked for data on the extent of the shortage in their districts, the factors involved in recruiting and retaining drivers, and other relevant data. The general public was asked for the perceptions of the school bus profession as a whole.

General public

NYAPT, NYSSBA and NAPT contracted with Zogby Analytics to ask three questions on one of Zogby's regular statewide surveys of registered voters in July 2018 to get a sense of the public's views of the school bus driver profession.

Sixty-nine percent of those surveyed said they would not ever consider being a school bus driver. The two most prominent reasons given were the perceived high stress level of the position (cited by 41 percent of survey respondents) and perceived low pay (27 percent).

Of the survey respondents who said they would consider being a school bus driver, 54 percent said it was because they like working with children, which was the reason cited most frequently. Other reasons cited the most include the work hours (46 percent); perceived high pay (32 percent) and perceived low stress (26 percent).

Interestingly, the individuals most receptive to considering being school bus drivers were those between the ages of 18 and 29 years. Nearly half of respondents in that age group said they either definitely would consider it (15 percent) or might consider it (34 percent).

School transportation directors

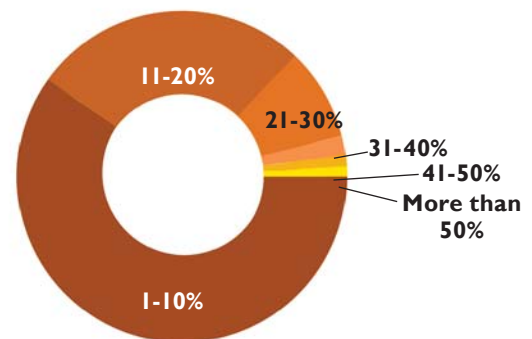
The survey of school transportation directors was conducted between May 15, 2018 and June 13, 2018. Invitations were sent to 284 school transportation directors who were members of the New York Association for Pupil Transportation. A total of 200 responses were received for a rate of 70 percent.

The survey found that nearly three-quarters of school districts statewide (74 percent) had unfilled school bus driver positions at some point during the 2017-18 school year. Six in 10 reported that the percentage of

unfilled positions was between 1 and 10 percent [see Figure 1]. A little more than one-quarter of school districts (27 percent) said they had as many as 11 to 20 percent vacant school bus driver positions. One district reported having more than half its school bus driver positions unfilled at one point during 2017-18.

Figure 1.

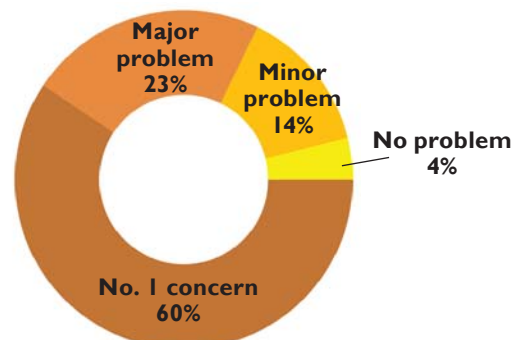
In the 2017-18 school year, what was the greatest percentage of school bus driver positions that were unfilled at any given point?



The survey also found that 60 percent of school transportation directors consider driver shortage their number one problem/concern. Nearly a quarter (23 percent) said driver shortage is not their worst problem, but is still a major problem. Fourteen percent of respondents identified driver shortage as a minor problem. Only 4 percent said driver shortage was not a problem at all [See Figure 2].

Figure 2.

Which of the following best describes the degree to which school bus driver shortage is a problem in your school district?



[Note: Some percentages don't add up to 100 due to rounding]

II. Framing New York's school bus driver shortage (cont'd)

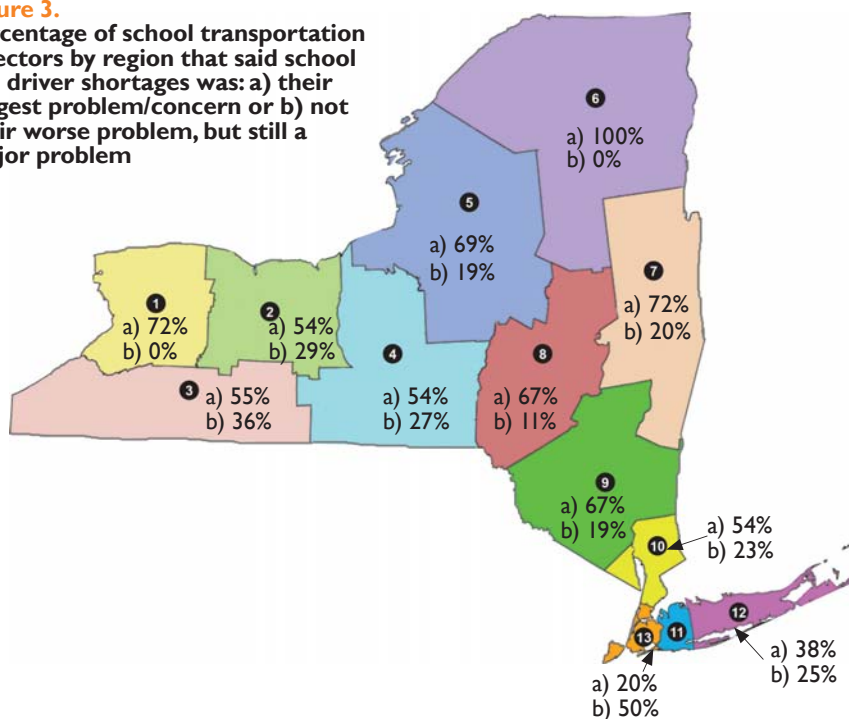
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Significant shortages existed in every region of the state, although the magnitude varied [see Figure 3]. In the North Country (area 6 on the map), every school transportation director responding to the survey said school bus driver shortage was his or her number one problem/concern. Suffolk County (area 12 on the map) had the

lowest percentage of school transportation directors of any region in the state identify school bus driver shortage as their top or major concern. Still, more than 60 percent said it was either their biggest problem/concern (38 percent) or a major concern (25 percent).

Figure 3.

Percentage of school transportation directors by region that said school bus driver shortages was: a) their biggest problem/concern or b) not their worse problem, but still a major problem



An increasing problem

School bus driver shortages appear to have gotten worse in recent years. The survey asked respondents to characterize the school bus driver shortage trend for their school district or transportation companies over the past three years [see Figure 4]. Seven out of 10 said the problem was either “significantly worse”

(38.5 percent) or “somewhat worse” (32 percent). Nearly one-quarter (23 percent) said the problem was “about the same.” Only 6.5 percent of respondents said the problem had gotten “somewhat better” (5 percent) or “significantly better” (1.5 percent).

Figure 4. How would you describe the school bus driver shortage trend for your company/school district over the past three years?

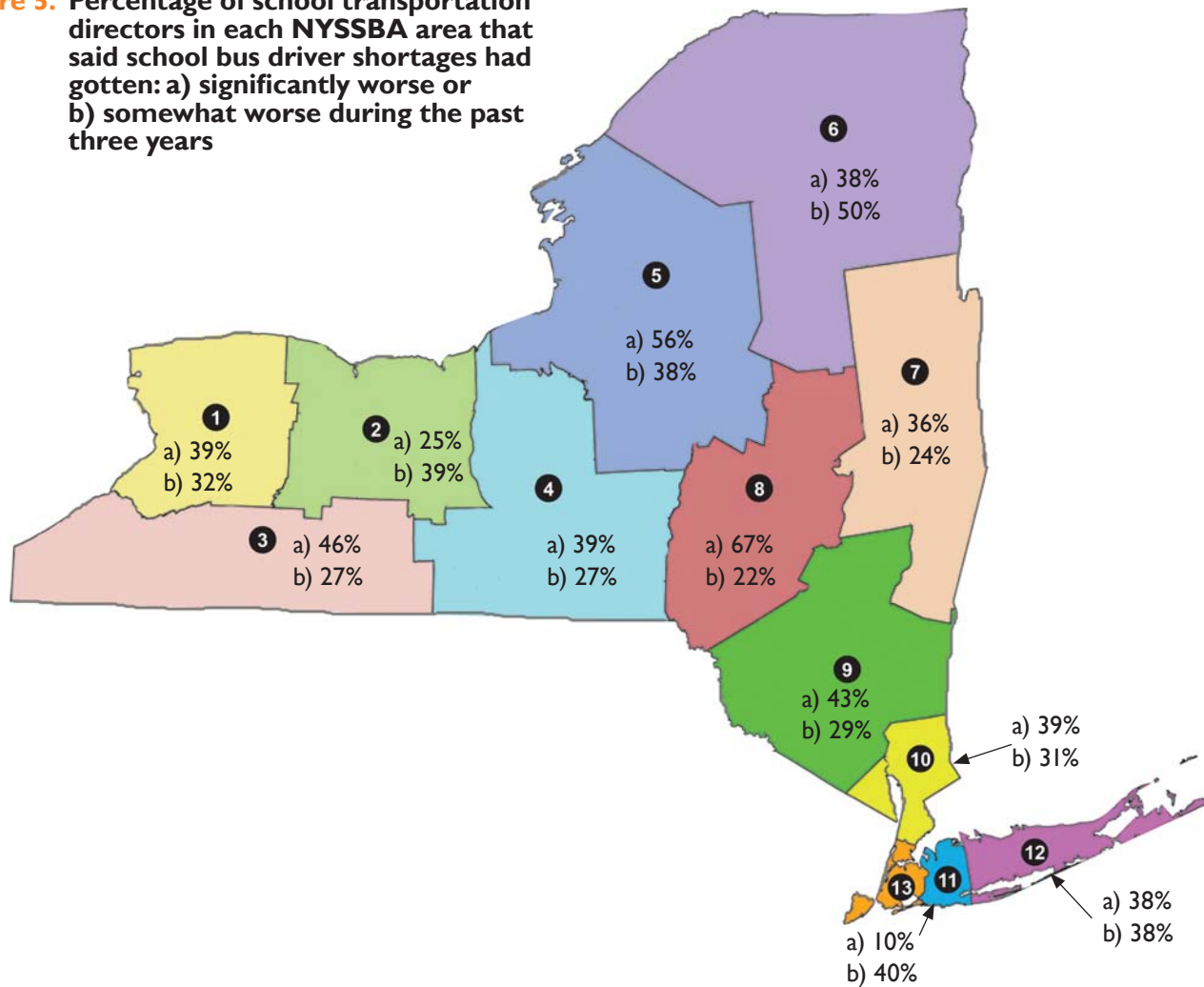
	#	%
Significantly worse	77	38.5%
Somewhat worse	64	32.0%
About the same	46	23.0%
Somewhat better	10	5.0%
Significantly better	3	1.5%
Total	200	100%

II. Framing New York's school bus driver shortage (cont'd)

At least half of school transportation supervisors in every region of the state indicated that the school bus driver shortage had gotten either significantly or somewhat worse over the past three years [see Figure 5]. More than 80 percent of transportation directors in the St. Lawrence-Black River region (area 5 on the map),

North Country (area 6) and Mohawk Valley (area 8) said the school bus driver shortage had gotten worse. In Nassau County (area 11), half of transportation directors said the problem had gotten significantly worse (10 percent) or somewhat worse (40 percent), the lowest of any region.

Figure 5. Percentage of school transportation directors in each NYSSBA area that said school bus driver shortages had gotten: a) significantly worse or b) somewhat worse during the past three years



III. Factors involved in shortages

There are a number of important factors that contribute to bus driver shortages. The biggest factor is the requirement that drivers obtain a commercial driver license (CDL); 61 percent of school transportation directors that were surveyed said that obtaining a commercial driver license was a “major factor” in recruiting and retaining bus drivers. The number of work hours available and rate of pay were the second and third most cited “major factors.”

The U.S. Department of Transportation requires that all school bus drivers have a CDL. This can contribute to a shortage of school bus drivers in two ways:

1) For potential school drivers with no commercial driving experience, the requirement to obtain a CDL can be burdensome. Recently enacted federal law and regulations changed the way the state Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) conducts road tests for licensing CDL drivers, which has made attaining a CDL more costly and time-consuming. For example:

- There are a limited number road test sites across the state, requiring longer travel times for potential candidates.

- The test’s three components – pre-trip vehicle inspection, basic control skills (maneuvering) and on-road or behind-the-wheel performance – are assessed differently at different test sites.
- One element of the road test – the brake check – results in automatic failure if not completed in a precisely prescribed manner.
- The test period is longer than the previous testing regimen, due in part to the more extensive review of the pre-trip functions and additional maneuvers.
- The pre-trip component emphasizes maintenance and structure of the vehicle; however, school bus drivers almost universally are not responsible for vehicle maintenance and are not expected to be able to perform more than basic repairs of their buses in the event of a breakdown.

2) A CDL is a marketable employment credential. Especially in an improving economy, drivers with a CDL can find many forms of employment that address their work desires. This includes driving tow trucks, tractor trailers and non-school related buses. Figure 6 provides a full list of factors that influence the ability of school transportation directors to recruit and retain school bus drivers.

Figure 6. For each of the following, please indicate whether it is a major factor, a minor factor, or no factor in your ability to recruit and retain school bus drivers.

	Major factor	Minor factor	No factor
Obtaining a commercial driver license (CDL)	61%	34%	5%
Number of work hours available	44%	38%	18%
Rate of pay	40%	37%	23%
Obtaining a CDL road test appointment	37%	48%	15%
Benefits/lack of benefits	37%	31%	32%
Public perception of the job	30%	42%	28%
Public perception of school bus drivers in general	25%	44%	32%
Interaction with students	21%	49%	30%
Interaction with parents	18%	46%	36%
Background checks	15%	26%	59%
Drug and alcohol screening	14%	24%	61%
Interaction with school administrators	11%	36%	53%
Driving conditions/traffic	7%	37%	56%
Condition of buses	5%	11%	84%

[Note: Some percentages don’t add up to 100 due to rounding]

IV. Improving recruitment

School transportation directors were asked what solutions or strategies they use on a daily basis to resolve driver shortages. The mostly commonly used strategy was publishing advertisements in the media, cited by 57 percent of school transportation directors. The second most common was publishing ads on social media (44 percent). Four in 10 school transportation directors (41 percent) said they routinely recruit from among other staff to become drivers

The survey also asked transportation directors what long-term steps their school district or transportation company was taking to mitigate the school bus driver shortage [see Figure 7]. Similar to the day-to-day strategies they use to fill shortages, the strategy given most often was publishing advertisements in the media (cited by 48 percent of respondents), publishing ads on social media (41 percent) and recruiting from among staff to become drivers (38 percent).

Figure 7. For the long term, what steps is your company/school district taking to mitigate the school bus driver shortage?

	%
Publishing advertisements in the media	48%
Publishing ads in social media	41%
Recruiting from among other staff to become drivers	38%
Increasing wages for drivers	32%
Posting signs along roadways	29%
Contracting out transportation to alleviate shortage	24%
Increasing hours for drivers	22%
Looking to share drivers	21%
Having buses outfitted with signs	19%
Recruiting from PTA or other groups	18%
Screening for drugs and alcohol	18%
Combining job titles in the district	14%
Offering rewards program	12%
Having “drive a bus” days to promote the job	12%
Increasing benefits for drivers	8%
Sourcing drivers through a regional bank or BOCES	2%
Offering training/free training/paid training	1%
Other	10%

[Note: Percentages add up to more than 100 because respondents could select more than one answer]

V. Recommendations

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There are actions that can be taken at the federal, state and local levels that can help New York State increase the pool of drivers and ensure the transportation of our children back and forth to school.

State level

One key factor involves the requirements for obtaining a commercial driver license, as discussed in Section III of this report. Over the past year, the state Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) has worked closely with NYAPT and other sectors of the industry to review its procedures on a range of fronts. The objective was to address the critical needs of school transportation departments to see if there are ways to make obtaining commercial driver licenses less burdensome without sacrificing safety. The department's efforts, which have been largely successful, included:

- **Expanding the number of testing sites** state-wide which would meet new federal standards;
- **Training and preparing examiners** for the new testing regimen to increase consistency among them and their approach to the test;
- **Identifying areas of inconsistency** and confusion and clarifying them across the state;
- **Further adjusting the availability of testing times** to include weekend appointments.

School districts and school transportation departments have worked with NYAPT and NAPT to make these concerns widely known and to effect a change both at DMV and at the operator level for training and preparation of driver candidates. It is important for all stakeholders to continue working together with DMV and local operators on all fronts at one time.

Local level

There are a number of actions that can be taken at the local level as well that can improve school bus driver recruitment and retention. The following are some actions that school leaders can take:

- **Provide free training.** When new bus drivers join a school district, training may take anywhere from 1-3 weeks (if the driver is licensed) to 6-8 weeks if the driver needs to obtain a CDL. Providing free or paid training during this transitional period can act

as an incentive to attract potential school bus driver candidates.

- **Defray other costs related to obtaining a CDL and/or starting employment.** This would include getting a physical exam, undergoing alcohol and drug testing, applying for a commercial learner's permit, getting certified in first aid, submitting a criminal background check and completing agility training.
- **Promote the profession.** School districts need to convey a message that being a school bus driver is a noble and worthy profession. One in five school transportation directors responding to the NYSS-BA/NYAPT/NAPT survey indicated that the most successful factor in recruiting school bus drivers is "word of mouth" communications from current bus drivers. Existing school transportation staff are often the best promotional tool. In addition, school districts could help get better information about the new testing requirements and procedures to help increase CDL passage rates.
- **Target younger age groups.** The conventional wisdom among school transportation operators has been to focus on recruiting retired or second-career individuals with the assumption that younger persons as a group are generally uninterested in the profession. But nearly half of the general public aged 18 to 29 (48.4 percent) expressed some interest in being school bus drivers, based on data from the Zogby Analytics survey. No other age group expressed greater interest. School districts should consider expanding their target recruitment population to include those who are recent high school and college graduates. It's worth noting, however, that potential drivers must be at least 21 years of age to attain a commercial driver license.
- **Partner with school human resources departments.** School districts and employers typically recruit and hire bus drivers independent of their school districts' human resources departments. Exploring ways to involve and partner with school district human resources departments in the recruitment, training and retention of bus drivers would offer school transportation directors valuable support in overcoming school bus driver shortages.

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