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HOT

Bus drivers wanted: New rules causing transportation trouble for Burlington County school districts

By Kelly Kultys, staff writer 4 hrs ago



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Maurice Mariano has been a school bus driver for 12 years, and assistant transportation coordinator for the Burlington Township School District for the last four.

"I didn't think I would be a bus driver this long," Mariano said with a smile.

For the most part, Mariano's duties, which include assisting the transportation coordinator, mentoring drivers, putting together their schedules, and handling any questions or comments from parents and staff, keep him off the road.



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This past year, however, Mariano has had to drive more often because of a shortage of certified bus drivers not only in Burlington Township, but across Burlington County, and even the state.

In neighboring Burlington City, Superintendent Patricia Doloughty said the district is down two bus drivers, from five to three, and has had little to no luck in finding substitutes.

"We can't find a bus driver," Doloughty told the Board of Education in April.

The school district has been forced to move at least two athletic events because it was unable to get transportation to the games, according to Doloughty.

Edgewater Park Superintendent Roy Rakszawski said his district is supposed to be contracted for eight bus drivers, but it has had only six since September.

Many school districts believe these problems stem from new commercial driver's license requirements and testing procedures the New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission put into effect in July 2015. These new requirements were federally mandated, and states were required to update their standards or risk losing federal funding.

The new standards created longer and more in-depth tests, increased wait times to set up a test, and dissuaded people from wanting to even take the test, according to a letter from officials at First Student bus company, which is used by many districts in Burlington County.

With the new requirements, prospective CDL candidates had to undergo significantly longer tests, both on the road and in a pre-trip inspection, where a driver is required to look under the hood and successfully inspect the mechanical parts.

"The under-the-hood components as well as the rest of the pre-trip inspection requires driver candidates to use a more detailed narrative when describing what they were inspecting," the letter reads.

Mariano said these requirements alone caused some people to fail, as even lifting the bus hood is heavy for many.

According to Ed Thomas, founder of Trans Ed, a school bus company based in Passiac, Passaic County, this drastically limits many of its usual prospective applicants, such as retirees.

"No driver will get into the engine compartment or under the bus in order to ascertain the problem, so why does DMV expect this new rule to change or make better the situation?" Thomas said in an email.

He said drivers are told to call a mechanic if a bus breaks down, so this part of the testing process doesn't make sense to him.

Besides the pre-test, the actual road test is longer for drivers and requires some difficult maneuvers, such as parallel parking, according to Mariano.

There is also a significant delay now in scheduling tests, according to First Student, partially due to the extended time inspectors must spend with each candidate taking the test.

In Burlington Township, the district was told by First Student that there was someone ready to schedule a test in April, but wasn't able to get a date to take it until September. In Burlington City, the district wanted to get some of its employees to take the test in case of emergencies, but said the wait was about six months.

First Student reported that this has been about average, as the company has seen wait times fluctuate from two to seven months since the new standards were implemented.

Another problem is that during the wait time, many people cannot earn money on the job as a driver since they are not qualified yet. This has dissuaded many from even taking the test in the first place or, if they do and fail, from retaking it again.

"The time for the scheduled test has increased significantly, and our understanding is that when someone fails, they are not given results in a meaningful way that allows them to understand what portion they failed, only that they lost points," the letter from First Student reads.

Limited number of routes

Many of the school districts affected by the lack of drivers have had to condense the number of routes their buses run or tier their routes so each vehicle can make multiple runs.

In Burlington City, the district cut down from four main routes to three. In Burlington Township, the district has over 30 routes per day that run in four tiers from the high school to the middle school to the elementary schools to a late run. It has added stops to each trip to help reduce the number of routes, but this can often cause more issues, according to interim Superintendent Mary Ann Bell.

"We've already combined routes where we've added kids," Bell said. "We used to try to keep it so that we didn't have maybe more than 35 kids on a bus, because it's just better for discipline, it's better for the driver, shortens the run. We've had to combine runs and make them much larger, which of course is also an inconvenience to both the kids and the parents."

The tiered system helps save many districts money, if they have the same bus and driver doing multiple runs during their shifts. However, if one is late, it can throw off the system.

Rakszawski said Edgewater Park students often are forced to have longer waits for their buses both at the beginning and end of the day.

Most recently, Burlington Township had multiple delays the first week of May, which Bell called the "worst week" of transportation.

It prompted her to send a four-page letter to parents to "address the ongoing issues and frustrations associated with transportation to and from school."

"These factors result in every district needing buses and drivers during the same time, and the resulting constraint is the number of qualified bus drivers," her letter reads.

Since the majority of students have to be picked up between 6:15 and 9:15 a.m., and then brought home between 1:30 and 4:30 p.m., there are a limited number of drivers available to work those hours.

If a driver calls out, it can cause even more issues. Rakszawski said that he's had one or two drivers call out on the same day, and that often there are no substitutes available. This means further condensing of routes or working with other school districts to get coverage.

Burlington City has partnered with other districts in case a driver calls out at the last minute.

Joanne Kotelnicki, transportation supervisor for the Bordentown Regional School District, said her district has been pretty stable despite the new regulations, but it has been contacted by other districts when they're stuck.

Bordentown Regional owns its own bus fleet; Burlington City, Edgewater Park and Burlington Township contract out to companies like First Student or Trans Ed. So Kotelnicki has a little more control over her 29 drivers, whom she has sent to other districts, particularly for after-school events and activities.

Financial burden

Even shared services cost a school district in need more money. Kotelnicki said the other districts pay for the rate of the driver and fuel costs. This isn't to turn a profit, she said, but to help defray the costs.

Doloughy said her district has contacted the county's educational service unit to help get substitute drivers, but the rate has increased drastically, up to \$23 per hour, because of the demand.

Burlington City projected that it will spend \$857,737 for transportation in 2016-17, up from \$807,846 this school year, because of the lack of available drivers. Edgewater Park also increased its budgeted transportation amount to \$731,662, up from \$656,077.

In Burlington Township, Bell said the district is planning to discuss possibly rebidding some routes at the next Board of Education meeting on May 25. While it could cost more money, Bell hopes it will give the district more flexibility in case one company is short on drivers. Still, the rebid would cover only six to eight routes.

"We've got to find a way of solving this or helping this situation somehow," Bell said.

Burlington Township also pays each contracted driver an additional \$3 per hour as a bonus for perfect attendance on a weekly basis to encourage drivers not to call out.

Edgewater Park has had to pay teachers and staff members to stay after school to supervise children on days that buses have been held up.

School officials from multiple districts stated that they are worried these additional transportation expenses could cause cuts in other places if they continue to rise.

Bell said she and her staff have been actively working to try to find ways to bring in new drivers to at least help offset the problem for the next few years.

"This has been the worst year, and we're in the business of solving problems so that our families can be assured that their kids are safe and they're coming to school and getting a good education. That's what our job is," Bell said.

Some of their efforts have included reaching out to retired police officers and veterans associations to recruit drivers, hosting job fairs to encourage possible candidates to apply, and asking those who are being trained to take the CDL to act as aides on buses so they can be paid while training.

In the meantime, Burlington Township has been using text messages, emails and robocalls to alert parents as early as possible if a bus is running more than 15 minutes late.

"In the morning, (parents) have jobs to get to. They need to know their kids are going to get picked up and are going to be safe," Bell said.

Riverside Superintendent Robin Ehrich said her district has not experienced any trouble this year. She credited a shared-services agreement with Cinnaminson.

Others, such as the Northern Burlington County Regional School District, said they have been lucky as well in missing out on some of the busing issues. The regional district provides transportation for its own students as well as three elementary sending districts.

Some districts are hoping their current bus drivers can help spread the word to recruit more candidates to apply for their CDLs.

"Our bus drivers themselves are professional people. They care greatly for our kids. A lot of them live in this community. There's just not enough of them," Bell said.

Mariano said the reason he continues to drive is because he loves working with the children. He shared a story about a girl who hadn't driven in over three years and who was on his route the other day for the first time.

"She said, 'Mr. Maurice, I want you to know you've always been my favorite bus driver,' " he recalled.

He said she gave him a high-five as she left the bus, and that put a smile on his face.

Still, Burlington Township and other school district officials don't expect the issues to go away for the next school year.

Bell said since the state is expected to possibly modify high school and middle school start times and mandate that they begin later, her district's bus schedules and routes will have to be altered again.

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