



Los Angeles Unified works with school police to set up stings in bus yards to catch thieves.

## EYES WIDE OPEN

SCHOOL BUS OPERATORS RELY ON CAMERAS, LOCAL PARTNERS TO PROTECT FLEETS FROM SECURITY THREATS

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**A**fter half a dozen yellow buses were stolen from school districts in Florida and Georgia, area law enforcement teamed up and recovered all the vehicles in early November. The case drew headlines because the buses were missing for several weeks, causing speculation about whether they had been shipped overseas or had fallen into terrorist hands.

Gainesville police found six of the missing buses on the property of 95 South Tours and Transportation. The company owner had allegedly used them for shuttling fans to the Georgia-Florida college football game on Nov. 2. When the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office received a tip, deputies immediately contacted the Gainesville Police Department.

Student transportation officials agree that communication and watchfulness go a long way toward preventing crimes like theft and vandalism, which cost school districts and bus contractors thousands each year.

For the transportation department of Alachua County (Fla.) Public Schools, whose two buses were among those discovered in Gainesville, this theft was a wake-up call to add another level of security to its bus lots. The district promptly installed security camera systems in all five of its bus compounds.

"We have cameras on all compounds to watch the places where buses come in and leave," said David Dees,

assistant transportation director at Alachua County. "We were thinking about doing it prior to the theft. Once that happened, we went ahead and installed them."

Shop Manager Joe Lovell said thieves hotwired and stole the two buses at the same time. In his 31 years at the school district, this is just the second time a bus compound has been breached. Each lot is well lit and surrounded by a high, chain-link fence.

"The new cameras have increased the level of security. We also increased the chain size and lock size on every gate, two to three per compound," Lovell said, explaining that the thieves tried to cut the chain on the west side but failed, so they went to the east side.

"We thought we were doing everything right," he added.

### COLLABORATING WITH POLICE

Donald Wilkes, director of transportation at the Los Angeles Unified School District, said regular patrols by school and local police officers have helped curb a recent uptick in theft and vandalism on their lots, especially at the downtown location. Currently the district operates 1,700 school buses and owns 1,300 of them.

"School police actually had to set up stings on the bus lots lasting 24 hours to really target the thieves," said Wilkes, who has been transportation chief since 2011.



“Most districts are starting to look at cameras on the buildings, but not even 50 percent have them. They don’t have automated time controls on fencing or any of the latest technology.”

— Mark Walsh, Transportation Consultant

He noted the escalation coincided with LAUSD purchasing newer school buses, which came equipped with technology for tracking student attendance. The devices resemble tablets, which proved attractive to thieves.

The sprawling urban district has 10 bus lots, and contractors operate four of them. District bus lots feature 24-hour video surveillance and alarms. Selected bus lots have perimeter alarms installed that are activated when a bus rolls over a certain part of the lot. If doors are opened or breached, an alarm will sound. Wilkes said he is notified when this occurs, along with local police.

“Regular patrols come through our lots during the day and after hours, and they increase patrols during holiday breaks,” he continued. “They work closely with us and go out to inspect our lots. They will tell us if we are vulnerable in a certain area.”

To that end, Wilkes said law enforcement and school police are also vigilant about the threat of terrorism and work to raise awareness among drivers.

“Along with the school police, the CHP collaborates with our driver-training staff to train drivers about not just what (criminals) take out of the bus but also what they might leave in there. We talk to our drivers routinely about securing the buses so they cannot be entered,” said Wilkes. “When they are away from their buses for a period of time, we stress the importance of looking under the vehicle and around it to make sure nothing

**LAUSD and local police work closely to inspect bus lots throughout the sprawling urban district.**



was tampered with, for their safety as well as the safety of their students.”

#### MAKING A LIST

Mark Walsh, president of Transportation Advisory Services, said earlier fears about the stolen school buses falling into the wrong hands are warranted considering the very real threat of domestic terrorism. The Department of Homeland Security made recommendations on securing fleets a few years ago, he recalled, because aside from monetary losses, the greater security issue is someone stealing a large bus or truck as part of a terrorist plot.

“This is an issue that fleet owners need to be cognizant of,” stressed Walsh, a consultant and former longtime transportation director. “Most districts are starting to look at cameras on the buildings, but not even 50 percent have them. They don’t have automated time controls on fencing or any of the latest technology.”

Why? It’s expensive and they don’t have money for it, he said, pointing out that even when funds do become available, fleet managers are faced with hard choices such as whether to replace a 10-year-old bus or purchase a video surveillance system for their lot.

When his firm conducts studies on facility security for school districts, Walsh said they look at everything — access points, fencing, lighting, video cameras, restraints on key accessibility and more.

They use a checklist of security questions that he recommends fleet managers use when they visually audit their parking lots. This list might include: Can someone climb over or under the fencing? How is the lighting? Are there motion sensors on the lights? Are the bus doors locked? Are bus keys readily available or stored securely? Are fuel caps locked? Are cameras on a constant loop? If so, how much storage is available?

For example, one school-district client only had a 24-hour videotape, so when vandals struck on Friday night, the footage had been erased by Monday morning.

In addition, Walsh suggests that fleet managers share their emergency contact information with neighbors and ask them to call immediately if they see or hear anything suspicious.

“Shared fuel sites are becoming more common,” he remarked. “It may be a fuel site that (schools) can share with local municipalities. The police and sheriff’s department may come on-site to fill up, drive through the lot a few times a day, and it’s great security for the district.” ●

